Strength-based School Counsellors' Experiences of Counselling in New Zealand

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Abstract

This article presents New Zealand school counsellors' narratives of counselling adolescents from a strengths-based perspective. Strength-based counselling encompasses several counselling modalities including positive psychology, narrative and solution-focused brief counselling and promotes adolescents' strengths to enhance wellbeing. Using semi-structured interviews, eight secondary school counsellors with a strengths-based practice focus were interviewed. Narrative analysis drawing on a categorical-content mode of reading across participants' narrative data showed that the school context plays a significant role in shaping counsellors' practice. Metanarratives of both strength and deficit, and metanarratives of the school context were identified as having an impact on counsellors' strength-based practices. Dominant deficit metanarratives were juxtaposed with metanarratives of strength. Implications of how counsellors negotiate counselling in a school context are discussed.

Keywords: School counsellor; strength-based counselling; school context; counselling in schools

Research into strength-based counselling approaches in schools: Rationale and significance

Strength-based counselling encompasses several counselling modalities that have a focus on individuals' strengths and resilience. In a school context these modalities aim to promote adolescents' strengths and enhance wellbeing. The strength-based counselling modalities that are the focus of this research, and for which an overview will be provided, include positive psychology counselling, narrative counselling and solution-focused brief counselling.

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; Seligman, 2003, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Clonan, Chafouleas, McDougal and Riley-Tillman (2004) suggest that schools, with their access to children, families and staff resources, are ideal institutions for promoting youth development using

strength-based approaches, and counselling modalities with a strength-based focus could form a part of this.

Most research into strength-based counselling approaches focus on the wellbeing of adults demonstrating the building of self-esteem and self-efficacy while at the same promoting autonomy and empowering clients to be actively involved in making decisions; little attention is however given to the promotion of positive outcomes among youth and how these outcomes are achieved (Geldard et al., 2016; Park & Peterson, 2008).

Evaluating and researching what school counsellors, who work to promote the health and wellbeing of young people, do is imperative if we are to further educate counsellors and continue to advance the counselling profession (Crowe, 2006, 2014; Education Review Office, 2013b).

As part of this it is important to consider the nature of school counselling, and the potential challenges faced by counsellors in the school context. The school context is a unique environment with distinctive challenges that has implications for counsellors irrespective of the counselling approach they use. Furthermore, the school context is entrenched with metanarratives of both deficit and strength that may influence counsellors' practices. Metanarratives may be seen as the story "underneath" the story that may be recognised in the narrator's words, situated within a specific context (such as schools), often without his or her awareness. In this research the metanarratives identified in counsellors' narratives about their practice and the school context, provide important insights regarding strengths-based counselling practices in schools.

Counselling and the school context

Developmentally, adolescence may be viewed as a challenging time of the lifespan (Musa, Meshak, & Sagir, 2016), since young people have to navigate developmental changes, possible mental health concerns, and a heightened potential for engaging in risky behaviours, such as substance abuse. The Education Review Office (ERO) (2000, 2016) and the Ministry of Education (2021) suggest that to negotiate these challenges adolescents need a safe emotional school environment. ERO is the New Zealand government's external evaluation agency for education and is granted authority by the Education Act (The Act)1989, Part 28, sections 325-328 to initiate reviews, investigate, report and publish findings on the provision of education to learners in New Zealand schools. The New Zealand Ministry of Education is the government's lead advisor on the

education system and provides direction for educational agencies and contributes to the government's goals for education.

Both these agencies report that a safe emotional school environment is one which is positive and stable and fosters strong, caring connections between school stakeholders and students. Furthermore, a positive school environment should provide sound support for students that includes guidance and counselling systems that promote student wellbeing. Students should feel valued and their unique and varied personalities should be nurtured.

School counsellors play an important role in promoting such a safe emotional environment, and their support may include one-on-one counselling as well as school-wide initiatives to promote the health and wellbeing of all students, and may be remedial, specialist, developmental and/or preventative in focus (Crowe, 2014; Education Review Office, 2016). Thus, the role of the counsellor in the school environment is varied. Crowe (2006) explains:

> Each school day, in most… secondary schools, … counsellors 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. (p. 16)

Counsellors are uniquely positioned in the school, as they have the potential to be visible and accessible, may be the first adults in whom young people confide about their challenges and be the first avenue through which student issues are identified (Ministry of Health, 2016). Early targeted support and intervention, including appropriate referral, may thus be more likely (Straus, 2017). Given the nature of their role, counsellors may also act as a liaison between families, community agencies, the school, and students.

Education stakeholders and the school community need to be educated about the role of the school counsellor and the importance of counselling in the educational context (ERO, 2013a, 2013b, 2016) which may include increased student engagement across ethnicities, improved attendance, retention and student achievement, increased self and peer referral, reduction in suspensions and significant incidents, and overall improved student wellbeing and education outcomes.

Research demonstrates the importance of improving student wellbeing in developing social, emotional and academic competence and in preventing youth depression, suicide, self-harm, anti-

social behaviour (including bullying and violence) and substance abuse; the facilitation of which school counsellors are trained for (NZAC, 2017a).

Challenges of counselling in a school context

While the potentially positive contributions of school counsellors have been acknowledged, several challenges have also been identified. These include workload as demand for counselling in New Zealand has risen (Crowe, 2006, 2014) as well as increasingly complex presentations, including family problems, sexual abuse, depression, and suicide attempts (Crowe, 2006, 2014; Manthei, 1999, 2006). These further compound workloads and heighten the pressure of accountability in high-stress situations, especially when resourcing is limited (Crowe, 2014; Education Review Office, 2013b, 2016). Counsellors may confront social and economic issues outside of the scope of their practice and beyond the control of their clients, such as household poverty, severely distressed young people, lack of employment, family dysfunction, and increasingly violent community, bullying, relationship issues, and drug and alcohol issues (Crowe, 2006, 2014; Manthei, 1999, 2006).

Counsellors may lack resourcing, not have appropriate access to or response from external agencies and support services (ERO, 2013a) and spend more time on non-guidance administration than on counselling. Furthermore, an ERO 2013 survey highlighted a need to review counselling policies, procedures, and job descriptions, further professional development for counsellors, enhanced access to professional supervision, the development of partnerships with parents and a shift from a reactive/punitive model to a preventative/pastoral model of counselling, especially in boys' schools. These challenges imply that counsellors may not be able to be as proactive as school leaders and counsellors might like and thus their role in supporting student wellbeing could be enhanced.

> Crowe (2014) states that overcoming the challenges confronted by counsellors is dependent upon a whole school ethos of care that values positive and caring relationships, has strong leadership, a shared understanding of 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 professional development for counselling staff (including paid supervision),

> and the building of positive relationships with external agencies are necessary components of strong counselling services. (p. 213)

This importance of having counsellors in schools, and supporting them adequately, is thus apparent, as is the need for school environment which places wellbeing and positive relationships as its core. A strengths-based approach to adolescent wellbeing may be called for to achieve this ethos of care, and strengths-based school counsellors may be able to make important contributions in fostering positive relationships between stakeholders.

Strength-based counselling

Strength-based counselling approaches are a selection of counselling modalities that promote clients' strengths rather than focusing on their limitations and problems (Jones-Smith, 2014). They pose the questions, "What are people's primary strengths?" and "What strengths has someone used to overcome adverse life circumstances?" (Franklin, 2015). Individuals are regarded as resilient and able to overcome life's adversities, despite odds that may appear overwhelming (Jones-Smith, 2014). Such approaches represent a paradigm shift from a deficit-based medical model, which focuses on pathology, to a model which focuses on promoting wellbeing (Franklin, 2015; Seligman, 2011). Strength-based counselling approaches draw on humanistic approaches to psychology, providing a context for solving problems that draw on clients' resources with a focus on "goals, creating a hopeful future, personal choice, and a collaborative, empowering relationship between counsellor and clients" (Franklin, 2015, p. 73).

Strength-based counselling in schools

According to Galassi and Akos (2007) in schools, "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) irrespective of the strength-based counselling modality the counsellor implements. 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 severe life circumstances (Galassi & Akos, 2007; Straus, 2017). Strength-based counselling approaches therefore teach young people to recognise their own strengths and to harness them in times of adversity. Strength-based counselling approaches include several different counselling modalities

that have a strength focus and may include positive psychology counselling, narrative counselling and solution-focused brief counselling (SFBC).

An overview of strength-based counselling modalities relevant to this research

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 (Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Compton & Hoffman, 2013; Seligman, 2003). 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). Seligman (2011) introduced the PERMA (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment) model with five core elements that constitute a positive psychology approach to psychological wellbeing.

Positive psychology shares an emphasis with Humanistic Psychology on the positive, but embraces a dominant scientific paradigm (Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Rich (2001) argues that humanistic psychologists emphasise growth and the authentic self and adopting a critical attitude towards pathology-oriented approaches. Indeed, humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow (1999) was the first psychologist to use the term positive psychology, and spoke of self-actualisation, a growth-oriented theory of motivation and the study of healthy people instead of sick people as early as 1968. 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 therapeutic relationships and focused on 'normal' rather than 'neurotic' subjects, in so doing beginning to de-pathologise therapy.

Narrative counselling similarly recognises people's competencies and endeavours to augment personal strengths instead of focusing on correcting personal deficits (Weisenburger, 2004). In narrative counselling clients are seen as separate from the problem, and counsellors aspire "to help people see problems as the product of circumstances" (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.

Finally, solution-focused brief counselling (SFBC) is founded on a social constructionist philosophy (Ventura, 2010). 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 (Ventura, 2010). Ventura 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, the clients move toward the preferred future they have identified” (p. 3). This is not unlike the narrative counselling process discussed above.

Aims and research question

The larger study from which this article is drawn aimed both to create an awareness of the importance of school counsellors and to explore the contribution they make towards positive youth development using strength-based counselling practices. This article focuses specifically on counsellors’ narratives of strength-based counselling in a school context and answers the question:

> How do the metanarratives (embedded narratives/discourses) of the school context influence a school counsellor’s strength-based practice?

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted, to explore of the narratives and metanarratives of strength-based counsellors within a school context, since qualitative methods are empirical procedures that describe and interpret the experiences of the research participants in a contextual setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative methods involve 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.

A narrative methodology and method were chosen as it aligns with the epistemology of social constructionism guiding this study. Social constructionism suggests that our world is constructed through the stories we tell in 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).

The narrative methodology enables the researcher to access participants' experiences and respects participants' expression of "truth" and makes room for them to explain reality as they perceive it. Using a narrative methodology and method is well suited to this research as it also allows the researcher to look beyond participants' narratives to that which may not have been said.

People define themselves 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) 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 (McAdams, 1993). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) recommend narrative as "the best way of representing and understanding experience" (p. 18).

According to Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) "people are storytellers by nature" (p. 7), stories have a central role in our communication with others and give unity to our experiences. It is through the medium of language that individuals understand and engage in the process of creating themselves (Crossley, 2000), and thus the stories presented by narrators about their lives and experiences are the best way in which to learn about their inner worlds (Bruner, 2004). Since we "understand and experience the world narratively", it makes sense to "study that experience narratively" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). A narrative approach thus provides a good fit as a method of investigation for this research and also aligns with the subject area of strength-based counselling being studied.

Metanarratives underpin the narratives we tell and can be defined as conversational exchanges between people (Winslade & Monk, 1999) but may also be understood as clusters of "taken-for-granted assumptions" that inform conversations in a social context (p. 22) or as "the collective web of meanings underlying the story" sourced from "available cultural forms that can be used by the narrator" (Zilber et al., 2008, p. 1063). Typically, the narrator may not be aware of the metanarratives within his or her own story as they appear implicitly within it. Metanarratives thus "construct the narrative" and create the storyline "without the narrator's explicit acknowledgement" (p. 1054). To access and interpret such metanarratives is a "bottom-up" process approached by asking questions 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?" (Zilber et al., p. 1054).

Methods

There are few prescriptive guides for conducting narrative research which may be compared to the critical reading of a poem (Crossley, 2000). As such, the narrative approach advocates "pluralism, relativism, and subjectivity" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 2) while providing a sound and systematic rationale for the methods used and a clear account of the processes of interpretation that have produced the results.

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) and these actions have multiple influences. Narratives, which have multiple layers of meaning, are thus a good way in which to express knowledge that results from actions. Yet, how are these meanings accessed?

Authors suggest that reading and re-reading transcripts will assist the researcher in recognising narrative themes within the stories (Lieblich et al., 1998). 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. However, Lieblich et al. (1998) and Crossley (2000) caution that with narrative research there is neither an absolute 'truth' in humanity, nor one correct interpretation of a text.

In exploring the narratives of school counsellors, the first author of this study intended to co-construct a narrative with counsellors that reflected the potential influences of strength-based counselling on adolescent wellbeing. As the research process progressed, the first author/researcher became increasingly aware of the role of metanarratives and context in informing school counsellors' practice with adolescents in schools.

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. The metanarrative may thus be seen 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. The metanarratives identified in counsellors' talk about their practice and the school context influenced counsellors' strengths-based practices and were thus explored to add to the richness of the research data.

Selection and recruitment

Ethics approval was obtained from the AUT University Ethics Committee (AUTEC), and the reference number is 10/295. Once ethics approval was obtained, the participants of this study were recruited from secondary schools in Auckland, New Zealand. Participant selection was purposeful and deliberate with the inclusion criteria for participation being that the counsellors were working as counsellors in a secondary school, were registered members of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors – Te Roopu Kaiwhiriwhiri o Aotearoa (NZAC) and had received some type of training in, and used aspects of, strength-based counselling approaches as part of their counselling practice.

The first author 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. They were asked to forward the email to any other secondary school counsellors potentially interested in participating, thus allowing for snowball recruitment.

Eight secondary school counsellors expressed an interest in participating in this research, met the inclusion criteria and were selected for participation.

Participants

The participant sample included eight secondary school counsellors. All participants were members of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors – Te Roopu Kaiwhiriwhiri o Aotearoa (NZAC) and attended fortnightly supervision. Pseudonyms were used for participants and identifying personal information was altered. A table of participants' demographic information, qualifications, experience and school decile number is included below (see Table 1.). In New Zealand, decile numbers are a measure of the socio-economic position of a school's student community relative to other schools throughout the country. Decile 1 schools are the 10% of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities, whereas decile 10 schools are the 10% of schools with the lowest proportion of these students.

Narrative interviews, transcriptions, and narrative analysis were conducted by the first author while the remaining authors served as supervisors, mentors and auditors.

(Please insert table here)

Researchers

In this study, the authors/researchers' orientation stems from their own experiences as practitioners and educators. All the researchers currently work in a university setting as academic educators, three in the department of psychology and one in the department of education. The first author is a trained counsellor and worked as a secondary school counsellor for several years before entering academia. The second author previously worked as a secondary school History teacher and is currently a Professor of Education. The fourth author worked as a special-needs teacher and along with the third author, holds senior academic roles, are registered clinical psychologists and work in private practice.

Narrative interview and analysis

Individual face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, using an interview schedule of direct questions – to collect demographic information – followed by open-ended indicative questions, were

conducted with the participants to elicit their narratives of using strength-based counselling in a school context.

As recommended by Hollway and Jefferson (2004) open-ended questions were used as prompts, allowed respondents to have greater autonomy over the direction of the interview and assisted the interviewer in building rapport with respondents (Crossley, 2000). Each interview proceeded with the same open-ended question: "Tell me the story of 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. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Initially, the first author wanted to look at each counsellor's narrative holistically and in its entirety. However, despite this initial desire to preserve the integrity of the entire narrative, universal themes across narratives were identified. Lieblich et al. (1998) suggest that the categorical-content mode of reading a narrative is the one to adopt if the researcher's motivation is to look at phenomena shared by a group of people, and that in so doing a collective story develops (Elliott, 2005). Since the first author was interested in the commonalties and difference of strength-based counsellors' narratives of counselling in a school context the categorical-content approach was considered appropriate.

This approach is a type of content analysis where the researcher may suggest categories from the literature relevant to the area being studied and search for evidence to either support or refute the predefined categories that were used to guide the interview (Lieblich et al., 1998) (e.g., in this case, strengths and adolescent wellbeing). In addition, the researcher may identify new categories from the narrators' transcripts. The categorical-content mode thus allows categories to be identified from the narrative, or to be predefined by theory (McAdams, 1993). 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). Sections of transcripts from all the participants' narratives can be assigned to these narrative categories. 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). McAdams (1993) concurs that 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.

Validity, representativeness and generality

Elliott (2005) observes of qualitative research that, "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). This view is in alignment with the social constructionist epistemology, where reality is regarded as socially constructed, and there is, no "real world". Thus, in this study, reality is constructed by the participants and then retold to the first author/researcher, and their reality is further constructed through their interaction with the first author/researcher whose reality in turn was subject to her interpretation through the lens of what she 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, the first author made such a complete disclosure in the writing up of this research and was reflexive in considering her existing assumptions and possible connections between them and her analytic findings, to see how they may have affected the research process. Such practices support the rigour of the study.

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).

To ensure the rigour of this inquiry, the methods used are clearly outlined and the research process was monitored by experienced research supervisors.

Findings

School counsellors do not work in isolation but instead form part of a broader educational context and are thus influenced not only by their own counselling narrative and philosophy, but also by the underlying metanarratives that inform the school's ethos and teaching practices. Angus, one of the counsellors, explained: "*We work in organisations that are influenced enormously by discourses as well as systems of thought.*" Counsellors thus need to negotiate these underlying metanarratives and a context in which they must both be supportive of the adolescent they counsel, as well as respect the ethos of the school context in which they practice. This context may or may not be supportive of counselling, and in this study could present a challenge to strength-based perspectives.

Two main narrative categories and two sub-categories were identified across school counsellors' narratives as having an impact on his or her practice and are subsequently presented. Interpretations of narrative categories are accompanied by supporting quotes from participants and pseudonyms are used to preserve anonymity.

Metanarratives of strength as facilitating factors of strength-based counselling approaches within a school context

Counsellors acknowledged that their work may be facilitated by school contexts in which counselling is considered valuable. Counsellors further emphasised how they could work successfully alongside teachers and school management in such a context. The supportive role

played by stakeholders in the school context was identified as a metanarrative of strength that acted as an ally to counsellors' work, potentially enhancing adolescent wellbeing.

Examples of these metanarratives of strength and support could be identified where teachers and management spoke of working as allies of counsellors, reinforcing skills introduced by the counsellor or monitoring a student's progress. Counsellors also recognised that teachers spent a great deal of time with adolescents, and as such, were often the first to observe any mental health issues, and could provide counsellors with access to valuable, broader insights about the adolescent including about their academic and behavioural issues. Pam explained:

> *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 and support it*.
>
> …
>
> *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 read their latest report and see if they are making progress.*
>
> *…*
>
> *We [counsellors] regularly liaise with teachers. 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 teachers will often flag us if something is not going well*.

Such access to information sets school counselling apart from counselling that takes place in a private setting, however counsellors also recognised the challenges around confidentiality that this presented. In instances where information is obtained from teachers it is prudent for counsellors to gain consent from adolescents to ensure that the ethical guidelines regarding confidentially are maintained.

Jess believed that the facilitating factors of strength-based school counselling are "*multi-pronged*", but her narrative highlighted that, relationships are at the "*heart*" of it all: "*Having a relationship with the principal and the leadership team and taking up leadership that promotes a strength-based view is important… so that teachers refer kids to me*."

Val and Angus's narratives also reflected the importance of relationship building as a facilitating factor for strength-based counselling. Val explains that "*What you hope to do is build*

trusting relationships with teachers, so they value you and the strength-based approach you use, you value and respect them, and then you start getting trust." Angus in turn comments:

> *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.*

Finally, Pam, Gaby and Angus's narratives referred to the value of metanarratives of strength within the school context that align with strength-based counselling practices. Pam is gratified that school management takes an interest in strength-based approaches:

> *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 taking an interest in looking at ways to weave strength-based ideas into the curriculum and encourage staff to take it on-board.*

Gaby talks about the school ethos which supports strength-based counselling: *"The ethos of the school is based on the core values of respect for human dignity, compassion, service, social justice, and care for the poor and vulnerable, so this supports strength-based counselling."* Finally, Angus explains that school stakeholders are open to strength-based approaches*: "I am in collaboration with the teachers, that it is a partnership, which supports the reception of strength-based approaches."*

Deficit metanarratives as barriers to implementing strengths-based counselling approaches within a school context

The school context was also regarded as characterised by a dominant deficit metanarrative around education and adolescents, that acted as a barrier to counsellors' work, potentially inhibiting adolescent wellbeing. This deficit metanarrative in education is one that is punitive and pessimistic, and views adolescents as defective in some way.

Dominance of a deficit metanarrative in schools: Influence on counsellors' strength-based practices

Schools may be concerned with rules, regulations, discipline and academic achievement and want to build a reputation that portrays a good standing within the community. As a result, students that do not abide by the school's ethos, or who fail to achieve academically, or have behavioural problems, may not be well tolerated by teachers and school management. Tom reflected on the

deficit metanarrative in his school: *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.*

Indeed, these adolescents are often sent to counsellors to "fix" the perceived problem, and a deficit narrative may be identified in this approach.

While Angus reported using a strength-based counselling approach with his students, he was sceptical as to its effect in the context of school disciplinary processes that reflect a deficit metanarrative. From his perspective, once students had been identified as requiring disciplinary intervention, the view towards them was one of deficit. Angus explained: *I am not sure that the school board of trustees' disciplinary processes would appreciate strength-based ways of working. They focus on the facts, the offences, which are presenting. The weight of evidence has already been gathered against adolescents.*

Tom and Hamish both commented on the disparity between the disciplinary processes within the school which reflect a deficit metanarrative, and the school counsellor's approach which reflects a strength metanarrative. Tom noted that the school and the counsellor may draw on different metanarratives regarding adolescents and education, and it is important to find middle ground:

> *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.*

Hamish refers to the ingrained institutional challenges that reflect a deficit metanarrative of working in a school context:

> *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.*

Hamish's narrative reflects the discrepancy between what passes for pastoral care from a school management disciplinary perspective and from a counselling perspective, and again highlights disparate metanarratives. Being part of the system, he must abide by the dominant metanarrative, uphold its rules and make do with the time he has with students.

Hamish expanded on the deficit metanarrative that in a school context the expectation is that the counsellor has to "*fix*" students. Both Hamish and Abby talked about students being referred to counselling when they had no desire to be counselled. This again creates a duality between deficit and strength metanarratives since what the school expects of the counsellor may be beyond the parameters of a counselling role.

Val and Angus highlighted the hierarchical nature of the school environment (another deficit metanarrative), and how the relationships within such structures worked against strength-based narratives. Val talks about the power discrepancy between adolescents, teachers and counsellors and says: *Essentially what drives relationships in schools is power. They are going to be marked by us, reports are going to be written by teachers about them and they are going to be disciplined by teachers.* Angus refers to the teachers as *"the boss"* and reiterates, "*the person at the top of the hierarchical structure is well and truly the leader*."

Similarly, counsellors identified a deficit narrative in teachers' views of adolescents. Angus reflected that, "*You can hear the deficit approach from other professionals"* which led him to ask his teaching colleagues*, "I am sorry, but we are strength-based and if you are going to tell me what is wrong, then could you tell what is right.* Val emphasised that, "*Teachers must have an understanding that they are not here to catch kids out."* She explained how she would say to teachers that, *"This is a child that's doing her best,*" and how she would be met by a response of, "*Oh well I think she's malingering.*" She expressed her frustration that, "*It is hard to get them away from that cynical point of view*."

Hamish likewise pointed to "*a lack of understanding from teachers*" that reflected a deficit metanarrative. He highlighted his perception that "*When they (teachers) have sent someone and he has seen the counsellor, he should be fine*", and his frustration that teachers may not consider the context within which adolescents find themselves: *The teacher says, "Oh so and so is not working." I am like, "Yes but he's sleeping in a shack."*

Hamish emphasises environmental aspects that may influence adolescents' psychological wellbeing, including concerns like poverty and the effect this may have on an academic performance. In these instances, the counsellor may have a limited capacity to assist and despite counselling, the adolescent's practical reality is not altered.

Teachers who are unaware of the conditions in which adolescents live may inadvertently believe it is the duty of the counsellor to "fix" the adolescent and may not understand why the

problem persists and this again perpetuates a metanarrative of deficit. In this sense teachers' perceptions of the role of counsellor stem from a deficit-based metanarrative whereby the problem lies with the adolescent and it is the counsellor's job to fix the problem and thereby the adolescent.

As Angus commented, even teachers' language tended "*to lead toward deficit approaches and to labelling of a problem child*." Val, similarly, identified a cynical view among teachers towards adolescents and believed that they "*could make their own job much easier*" by taking a more positive strength-based approach. She identified that teachers were not always aware of the power they had over students and the potentially negative impact of their language and says: *I'm thinking of kids who had things said to them that 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.*

At the same time, Val despaired that she didn't "*know how to shift people like that*". This 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. Interestingly, in explaining deficit views, Val's comments about teachers are themselves deficit-based.

Jess on the other hand spoke of how a strength-based approach was not always easy with challenging students: "*Where it gets tricky is when young people are considered difficult then it is not easy for teachers to stay in a strength-based approach.*" Angus also highlighted how he felt that teachers sometimes imposed their beliefs and expectations on students without giving any consideration to what the students want: "*The teachers are the ones who think there are issues because this young lady seems to be enjoying her year and everything seems fine.*" Again, this reflected a deficit metanarrative of young people.

As reflected above counsellors' counselling practices are 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 stakeholders have a strength-based or deficit-based orientation towards a school counsellor's practice. A deficit-based orientation towards counselling that perceives those who seek counselling

as weak or that is seen as a punitive measure can seriously detract from adolescents' willingness to seek help.

In addition, to school contexts permeated by deficit metanarratives that operate as barriers to counsellors practising from a strength-based perspective; counsellors in this study appear to attempt to resist these deficit metanarratives with varying degrees of success. Hamish demonstrated the subjugation of his strength-based practice and appeared to fall back on deficit narratives and the structure and rigidity of rules and regulations that are laid down by the school and societal contexts:

> *The definition of educating boys is to create men that can take a positive role in society. Therefore, teaching boys to be proud of who they are and to function in society - adhering to 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 metanarrative of the dominant school culture: "*As I get to know more of the management and teachers, I think the skill set of communicating to adolescents what might be supportive of behaviours that management or teachers want to see more of is important*." 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 counsellors' strength-based counselling practices.

Institutional and relational metanarratives, and practical constraints to counselling in the school context

The counsellors spoke of institutional and relational metanarratives and the practical constraints of working within schools. While these metanarratives and constraints are likely to be experienced by all school counsellors irrespective of the counselling approaches used, they are nonetheless relevant to understanding the barriers to strength-based practices in particular. Val highlights one of the institutional metanarratives and believes, "*There is too much conversation about running the place like a business. It's not a business model, we're educating young people."*

Val further highlighted how counselling in a school environment differs from counselling in private practice where the counsellor can focus on the counselling role and the individual student's issue. Instead, she says the role of the school counsellor was to support adolescents as learners within the school environment.

> *You should be conscious of the role of school counselling. You are here to support students as learners. 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.*

School counsellors need to navigate metanarratives of deficit and strength, upholding the policies of the institution as well as advocating for and supporting the student. This duality may result in counsellors having to shift between a metanarrative of deficit identified within the school system and a metanarrative of a positive, strength-based approach to counselling.

In addition, Val talks about teachers who don't support students in counselling and explains that due to ethical guidelines, and 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.

> *I get a lot of cynicism from teachers. If a student is seeing me out of a deep need, and the teacher says, "Oh out of class again," rolling her eyes. The teacher's thinking, I am a sucker - I have to wear that.*

Val also felt that relational metanarratives are different in the school environment and that there are certain hierarchical structures in place that the counsellor must accommodate: "*I am asked for advice by senior management. You see their name on the phone and say,* "*I have to pick up.*" *But no, I don't, I'm here to counsel students.*"

The counsellor in the school context where a deficit metanarrative is dominant is often misunderstood by school management and teachers who lack awareness of the counsellor's role. Val comments that "*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 relation to his counselling practice Tom explains: *"The management of the school are not aware of the strength-based counselling approach I use."* Jess agrees with Tom and reiterates: "*No one would really know what I do. It wasn't always easy with my senior."*

Counsellors also spoke of the practical constraints of counselling in a school context. These practical constraints related to counselling in schools in the broadest sense and are not linked to the specific counselling modality used.

The contact that counsellors have with students is minimal and often student are only referred when in crisis and yet the school management's expectations of the counsellor to effect change within the student are high. Jess felt that often the number of counsellors within the school

is insufficient, given the number of students who need counselling: "*It is all about an overload of crisis when you are the sole person in the school.* Jess discussed the implications of not having enough time to counsel students: "*You have to get comfortable with mess and not finishing*". Hamish felt that adolescents are often sent for counselling as a last resort and explains: *"We are dealing with ambulance at the bottom of the cliff stuff."* Pam highlighted the frustrations inherent in counselling in a school context:

> *The reality is that school counselling is different from being in private practice because sometimes there can be a lot of putting on Band-Aids. You can attempt to start a therapeutic process, but something comes up and you might not see them again for several months.*

Abby conveyed the chaotic nature of school counselling:

> *I have a diary with appointments, but if a teacher brings over someone they think needs to see me urgently – It's like running a doctor's appointment book and emergency department at the same time. You have to take whoever crashes through the door. Teachers think I'm just sitting here waiting - I'm fully booked.*

The use of the medical terms "*ambulance at the bottom of the cliff"; "band-aids"*; *"doctor's appointment book" and "emergency department"* to explain counselling in schools is interesting, and suggests that counsellors, while practising a strength-based approach to counselling, may still be influenced by a metanarrative of deficit as inherent in the school system. This is reminiscent of the biomedical model that treats symptoms as opposed to underlying causes.

Several counsellors also 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 could work with clients over longer periods of time. Jess described counselling in schools as "*brief therapy*" and explained that "*you do not have the privilege of working with someone over time*." Pam believes: "*Counselling takes time*," and that she needs "*to be aware of age and the fact that it takes more than one session to introduce a new concept*." Val talks about the challenge of being more visible outside of the counselling room: "*I 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. Most nights I was here until 8:00pm. Not okay.*"

Jess described school counselling as "*a public health service*" and again pointed out the time constraints involved. This once more 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.*" In addition to time constraints, Jess 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 counsellors within a school context varies. The counsellors drew attention to the fact that schools often are not aware of what counsellors are trying to achieve within the school and while counsellors may be supported in a general sense, specific support may be lacking.

Overall, the experiences that school counsellors highlighted included both strength and deficit metanarratives which either facilitated or served as barriers to implementing strength-based counselling approaches in schools. Metanarratives of strength facilitated teachers and staff being supportive of counselling in general, as well as being specifically supportive of strength-based counselling approaches. Barriers most notably referred the dominant metanarratives of deficit in the school and counselling contexts and the impact thereof on subjugated metanarratives of strength in counsellors' strength-based counselling practices.

Discussion

This study, conducted in Auckland, New Zealand, explored strength-based counsellors' experiences and the significance of counselling in a school context.

The counsellors in this study reported that the school environment as a context for counselling is fundamentally different from a traditional private counselling setting and has both metanarratives of strength that act as facilitating factors for their counselling approaches, and metanarratives of deficit within the institution that serve as barriers. This finding is in alignment with the ecological systems theory framework as applied to school climate research (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Rudasill et al, 2018), which conceptualises school systems and students/staff as part of an interactive context that includes both barriers and facilitating factors which moderates access to support/counselling services across subsystems.

The facilitating factors of counselling in a school context in this study included teachers and school management staff as allies of counsellors. While this finding is not unique to counsellors working in school settings, it is nonetheless part of strength-based school counsellors' narratives in this study and is therefore worth referencing. In particular, school counsellors spoke

of the value of having teachers and school management who are supportive of strength-based counselling approaches and who model these approaches within the broader school context.

The recognition of teachers and school management working as allies of counsellors is supported by the conclusions of the New Zealand Education Review Office (ERO) (2000). ERO suggest that teachers and management staff can support counsellors through providing contextual information including observations of students' health and wellbeing and insight regarding academic and behavioural issues. In addition, ERO explains that teachers and school management may work alongside the counsellor in promoting adolescent health and wellbeing.

Lambie and Rokutani (2002) also supports the findings of this study and highlights that the school context is a facilitating factor in itself as 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 in conjunction with other stakeholders within the school system. The facilitating factors highlighted in this study serve as a metanarrative of strength that encourages counsellors and school stakeholders to work together as a team, drawing on each other's strengths to support the counselling process with adolescents.

The counsellors in this study also expressed tensions about competing expectations and metanarratives within their roles. Participants reported navigating the dual roles of upholding the policies and practices of the institution and advocating for and supporting the student which resulted in shifting between the metanarrative of deficit dominant within the school system and the strength-based metanarrative of their approach to counselling. Dominant metanarratives in education and about adolescents are often narratives of deficit, which invites counselling positions and actions of "fixing" the student. These metanarratives are identified as institutional barriers in the current study. These deficit metanarratives often focus extensively on disciplinary processes and are punitive and pessimistic which contrasted with counsellors purported strength-based approaches. The New Zealand Education Review Office (2013b) support this finding and explain that school contexts may focus on academic achievement and managing behavioural issues in such a way that the mental wellbeing of adolescents may be discounted. Furthermore Crowe (2014) and Winslade & Monk (1999) add that 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.

Drewery and Winslade (2005) and Winslade and Monk (2001) support these findings and explain that since schools are distinctive social contexts, they have their own set of metanarratives that shape experiences of what happens in schools. Furthermore, these authors explain that 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.

Adults working in schools, including school counsellors frequently make this assumption that adolescents are challenging and talk to students about their development in a way that emphasises this dominant deficit discourse (Winslade & Monk, 1999). 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).

Another important consideration in the use of deficit descriptions according to Winslade and Monk (1999) is teachers and 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 teachers' and 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 teachers and 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 are based on metanarrative or discourses that relinquish the temptation of knowing what is best and focus instead on client empowerment (Jones-Smith, 2014).

The ingrained nature of the dominant deficit metanarrative within the school context and the challenges around shifting this metanarrative placed counsellors' positive, strength-based metanarratives into "lesser" or subjugated positions hindering their practice. This is evident in how while talking of adolescents' strengths, counsellors were at times also "pulled back" into the deficit context and metanarrative of their school system. The power of metanarratives within the school context thus actively shapes counsellors' practice.

Despite these deficit metanarratives 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 in which they work.

It is thus important to consider whether the power of the counsellor to "make a difference" is merely tokenistic. Is the counsellor acting as the kindly face of power and as an advocate for adolescents but with no real influence in relation to influencing 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 (Ministry of Health, 2016). 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.

Counsellors in this study 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. This study therefore highlights that school counsellors must thus be aware of their own metanarratives around counselling and adolescents as well as the metanarratives of the school context in which they work. The implications for a school counsellors' practice of fostering this awareness will be to assist counsellors in advocating for the adolescent wellbeing. Furthermore, it may prevent counsellors from being drawn into the traditional deficit metanarrative of schools and the counselling profession which often views clients as presenting with a problem that needs to be "fixed".

Counsellors also identified the relational hierarchy in schools as an institutional barrier reflecting a deficit metanarrative. This particular construction of relationships within the school system informed implicit expectations of disclosure of student information and availability to management which might impact negatively on student counselling in this context.

In terms of a strength-based counselling approach, the counsellors expressed certain limitations of using this counselling modality, particularly in a school context. Given the time constraints around counselling in the school context counsellors felt that the number of sessions they had with adolescents was insufficient 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 approaches with adolescents entailed. Furthermore,

some of the counsellors reported that there was little support outside the counselling suite from teachers in anchoring strength-based skills.

Limitations and recommendations

Lieblich et al.'s (1998) categorical-content mode was used to identify narrative categories across counsellors' narratives. This form of narrative analysis may potentially have limited the information accessed as it did not focus on school counsellors' individual narratives in a holistic sense. Furthermore, narrative excerpts from individual counsellors' transcripts for each narrative category and sub-categories were used to illustrate arguments, and since these excerpts were not presented as part of a counsellor's narrative in its entirety, some of the nuances may have been lost. Future studies could look more specifically at individual school counsellors' narratives in a holistic sense.

The counsellors in this study worked specifically with adolescents. The outcomes of this study may thus have been different if 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 context in which this research was conducted was specific. This research focused on the experiences of strength-based secondary school counsellors within a school context, working with male and female adolescent secondary school students of varied ethnicity between the ages of 13 and 18 years of age from a range of socio-economic backgrounds.

Thus, it may not be applicable to other counselling contexts with a different non-student client base. 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 this research was conducted in Auckland, New Zealand, and school counsellors practising in other cities and countries may have a different experience given the different school structures, policies and ethos.

Finally, however while this study focused specifically on strength-based school counsellors who work with adolescents, it may nonetheless be relevant to all school counsellors, irrespective of the modalities they use. It could provide counsellors with the opportunity to reflect on their

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. It makes counsellors aware of some of the inherent tensions within their counselling practice between the knowledge they have of the counselling modality they use (which in this study was positive psychology and strength-based counselling) and the deficit filter that may slip into their practice. Furthermore, it creates an awareness and gives a voice to the multifaceted nature of counselling and bringing its tensions and challenges to the fore.

Conclusion

All the counsellors in this study spoke of the institutional and relational metanarratives, and practical 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 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 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.

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. 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 counsellors' practice within schools.

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article [and/or] its supplementary materials.

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Table 1. Participant Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Country of origin	Qualifications	Years' counselling experience	Type of school, *decline & enrolment number	Counselling modalities used	Presenting issues encountered
Pam	Female	42	New Zealand	Master of Counselling Education	14	Private Coeducational Decile 10 1500 students	Narrative Counselling Solution-Focused therapy Positive Psychology CBT, DBT	Friendship Issues Anxiety Depression Suicidal tendencies Family dysfunction Identity Issues
Jess	Female	53	New Zealand	Bachelor of social practice majoring in counselling	9	State integrated Girls Decile 9 1000 students	Narrative Counselling Solution-Focused therapy Positive Psychology Restorative Justice Mindfulness Practice Positive Psychology Family therapy CBT	Self-harm Relational issues Suicide / Depression Anxiety Alcohol & drug abuse Pregnancy / Abortion Bullying Identity issues Anorexia
Val	Female	66	Australia	PGDip in guidance & counselling PG Dip in Health Sciences with a child, adolescent & CBT speciality	20	Private Girls Decile 10 1400 students	Narrative Counselling Solution-Focused therapy CBT	Depression / Anxiety Eating disorders Abuse OCD Body image Family dysfunction
Hamish	Male	40	South Africa	BHSc Hons in Counselling	10	State Boys Decile 9 2200 students	Solution-Focused Therapy Rogerian therapy Gestalt Therapy CBT	Self-harm Suicide /Bullying Relational issues Blended families Divorce
Angus	Male	43	Canada	GradDip in Counselling Master's in Counselling	5	State Coeducational Decile 4 2600 students	Narrative Counselling, Solution-Focused Therapy, Drawing therapy	Bullying Identity issues Depression / Anxiety
Gaby	Female	64	New Zealand	Master's in counselling	7	State Girls Decile 10 950 students	Narrative Counselling Solution-Focused Therapy CBT	Self-harm Relational issues Depression /Anxiety Alcohol & drug abuse Pregnancy/Abortion Bullying Identity issues Eating Disorders
Tom	Male	62	South Africa	PGDip in counselling	11	State Coeducational Decile 3 1300 students	Narrative Counselling Solution-Focused Therapy	Abuse; Self-harm Bullying Toxic families Relational issues Poverty Suicide / Depression Parental crime Drug & alcohol abuse
Abby	Female	55	New Zealand	GradDip in counselling	8 ½	State Coeducational Decile 3 1300 students	Narrative Counselling Solution-Focused Therapy Positive Psychology Te Whare Tapa Wha model of wellbeing Family therapy	Abuse, Self-harm Bullying, Toxic families Relational issues Poverty Suicide / Depression Drug & alcohol abuse