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Key competencies: How school guidance counsellors contribute to student learning

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Introduction

The project summarised in this report demonstrates how counsellors effectively facilitate learning in the course of attending to student wellbeing. Students seek counselling to deal with problems, concerns, and struggles. In responding to student distress, school counsellors call on a repertoire of specialist therapeutic practices. Many of these practices facilitate learning. This study shows how this learning, in counselling, can be understood in terms of the curriculum's key competencies.

The project demonstrates how the problems, concerns and struggles that young people experience directly shape the particular key competencies that are used and developed as learning occurs in counselling. It highlights the relevance of counselling skills and knowledge to the implementation of what is known as the *front end* of the New Zealand curriculum.

Young people interviewed in the third cycle of the project evaluated the contribution of counselling in the following ways:

Will: Will had come to counselling in the grip of a serious depression, which he described as “taking him to breaking point”. After the counselling had come to an end, he reported, “Some of the lessons I learned every week were quite phenomenal for me, they were very, very helpful in my recovery and I cannot express how special it was for me to talk so clearly to him [the counsellor]”.

Rahera: “Sometimes she [the counsellor] will ask me a question and I have to actually think about it. ... It brings stuff up that you didn't think about and using it helps you, like it's a bit of new information that moves you forward. ... It's like a question you never thought of yourself,” said Rahera.

Cruz: “I wasn't expecting that much [from counselling], just a little talk ... a growling,” Cruz said about being referred and accompanied to counselling by a teacher. Speaking of having heard from the teacher what her concerns were, Cruz said, “I didn't know that teachers cared. ... I found respect for her, from just thinking she'll care”.

Key findings

The two key findings were:

1. School counselling offers students unique opportunities for learning. Counsellors use a repertoire of refined and specialised skills in creating highly personalised learning moments, in response to the difficulty or challenges each student brings.
2. Viewing student learning in counselling through the lens of the key competencies connects counsellors into learning in the wider school community.

Background to the research

The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) states:

Key competencies are both end and means. They are a focus for learning—and they enable learning. They are capabilities that young people need for growing, working, and participating in their communities and society. (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 38)

The NZC further expresses a vision of young people as “confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners” (p. 37). Since the NZC was published, attention has been given to its practice implications (see for example, Cowie et al., 2009; Cowie, Hipkins, Keown, & Boyd, 2011; Hipkins, Cowie, Boyd, Keown, & McGee, 2011; Hipkins, 2010), with particular focus on key competencies. Discussion of competencies on the terms of te ao Māori (Macfarlane, Glynn, Grace, Penetito, & Bateman, 2008) is an example of efforts to address challenges involved in implementation. This TLRI project's contribution is in extending discussion of NZC implementation beyond the classroom and into the school counsellor's office.

When the project began, little attention had been paid to the interrelationship between the specialist roles and responsibilities of school counsellors as members of a school teaching/learning community, and the NZC. The project's focus on the contribution of school counsellors proved to be timely, given that the Prime Minister's Mental Health Task Force subsequently initiated a review of the provision of guidance and counselling in secondary schools. That review was undertaken by the Education Review Office during 2013, at the same time as the second year of this TLRI study. The Education Review Office (2013) findings highlighted the strategic importance of guidance and counselling being valued and integrated school-wide. In reference to schools where effective services were available to young people, the report stated: "It was the strong ethos of care and shared understanding about the approach to guidance and counselling that underpinned provision" (p. 3). Key competencies offer one means by which counsellors might build shared understandings about the mutual contributions school counsellors and teachers make to both learning and wellbeing.

School counselling has its own unique values, skills, responsibilities, and knowledge. As well, school counsellors share values, skills, responsibilities, and knowledge with teachers. This project's focus on the NZC and key competencies highlights both what is shared between teaching and counselling, and the different, and specialist, contribution of counselling. The project illustrates how counselling offers students opportunities to particularise learning, relevant to what matters to them in the particular contexts of their lives, including engaging in meaning-making about how and what they learn when they address the specific personal or interpersonal problems that they bring to counselling.

Research question

The project's research question was: "How do school guidance counsellors contribute to students' development and use of key competencies?"

Method

The project drew on a participatory action research ethos (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; McTaggart, 1997), as a collaboration between school guidance counsellors from four Eastern Bay of Plenty schools and researchers from the University of Waikato. The research focus moved between phases of action and practice, and of collaborative reflection and theorising. This approach honoured commitments to relevance for practice and to research rigour. The study employed a series of action research cycles, each involving ethical approval for the complex process of researching counselling practice in schools. We took particular care to manage informed consent and student privacy. Initial fieldwork was based in four Eastern Bay of Plenty schools.

Cycle 1: Grids to identify key competencies

Cycle 1 produced an impressionistic overview of counselling as a site and process of learning. The school counsellors used a record-keeping grid, noting which key competencies were to the fore in each counselling session. It quickly became clear that the key competencies provided a lens and language through which counselling processes could be described. More than this, behind the numbers and marks on the grid were rich stories of counselling practice that refused to keep silent when we met as a research team.

Cycle 2: Vignettes to illustrate practice

Focusing on counselling practice as a location of learning, the data generating in Cycle 2 identified particular practices, within the context of counselling meetings, that contributed to students' strengthening and using key competencies.

School counsellors brought practice stories to research team meetings. As one school counsellor recounted a counselling episode, other research team members engaged in collaborative, appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) about the specifics of the counselling practice and the effects for students. Together we explored how we might make meaning of the episode as an instance of learning, in key competency terms, and how the counsellor directly facilitated learning.

We then wrote vignettes of these episodes of counselling. The vignettes illustrated the particular therapeutic practices the counsellor employed. The vignettes showed how counsellors drew on key competencies to produce learning, and how counsellors invited students into learning that further developed key competencies.

Cycle 3: Counselling stories

Cycle 3 focused on longer periods of counselling with a particular student, akin to single case studies. Following appropriate ethical consent processes, each school counsellor drew on counselling with selected students—from one to three students each—whom they had counselled over a period of time. As a research group we engaged in collaborative enquiry about the counselling, drawing on counselling and learning theories to understand what was happening. Two factors were particularly critical offering opportunities to extend our understandings of the effects of a complementary focus on therapeutic purpose and student learning. First, we ourselves were a learning community, where research and practice actively spoke into each other. Secondly, the project afforded time for reflexive investigation.

Also contributing to this community of practice and research was a colleague-in-support selected by each school counsellor within their own school. Ongoing consultation with colleagues-in-support during each cycle helped to keep a focus on dialogue with the wider school, and was particularly useful when we reported to schools in Cycle 4.

During Cycle 3, the university researchers engaged in research interviews with four young people, about their experiences of counselling. A teacher who had referred one of the young people to counselling also participated in an interview. Interviews were transcribed. These transcripts formed part of the data for this cycle.

Cycle 4: Consulting with schools

The research team met with senior leaders, the colleague-in-support, and teachers in each school to present our findings so far, and to consult about the implications of our findings. Notes taken during these consultations formed a further data set.

One senior staff member who had offered support to the project within his school expressed particular appreciation of the detailed analysis of counselling interactions, and asked that the research team include similar analysis of his practice in his specialist leadership position. To take up this request was beyond the scope of our project, but we responded by including an interview with him in Cycle 5 activities.

The Cycle 4 consultations with schools were formally structured into our research design as a means of assessing the relevance and applicability of our findings. We also took a number of opportunities to present our findings to school counsellors at national conferences and regional professional events.

Cycle 5: Responding to the consultations

The research team reviewed the Cycle 4 consultation material, particularly engaging with questions and suggestions that could extend our findings. For example, in response to a question about how school counsellors might “assess” the key competencies in counselling, we had wide-ranging conversations about the nature of assessment, how it is done, who gets to do it, and on whose terms. Out of this discussion, we created sets of key competency “card sorts”, a strategy familiar in careers advising and counselling settings as a means to discuss values, interests, and so on. We made sets of about 30 cards using the language of

the NZC, along with some Māori concepts (see Macfarlane et al., 2008). Each school counsellor went on to use these cards, investigating their value as a means by which an individual student might reflect on and assess, in collaboration with the counsellor, the learning they had undertaken, and in particular aspects of key competencies they had used and strengthened during counselling. We caution that these cards are aids to dialogue and understanding, not structured assessment tools.

Key finding 1

School guidance counselling offers students unique opportunities for learning. Counsellors use a repertoire of refined and specialised skills in creating highly personalised learning moments, in response to the difficulty or challenges each student brings.

In focusing on students' wellbeing, counsellors use a range of responses to support students to make meaning of the practices in which their lives are caught up. Meaning is made in small increments. A counsellor scaffolds from what is already known and familiar to a young person, towards what is possible for them to come to know/learn. In this scaffolding, a counsellor may support the young person to identify:

- what the problem is
- how the problem is affecting their lives
- what meaning they make of this and why
- how they want things to be different.

These personalised learning/wellbeing goals may then guide a counsellor and young person to explore:

- possibilities, hopes and preferences
- the history of these possibilities, hopes and preferences
- who supports them in these possibilities, hopes and preferences
- means to further develop and strengthen the above.

Against this general description, the following five vignettes and counselling stories (Cycles 2 and 3) illustrate learning in unique moments of counselling practice. In many sessions, all of the key competencies were present in one way or another: in the vignettes below, we identify those that are in the foreground.

Wiremu and key competencies

Using language symbols and texts; thinking

Wiremu arrived at the school counsellor's office in distress, shocked by his behaviour. He reported that he had acted violently in his intimate relationship.

Wiremu I did it again, Miss. I gave him a hiding; real bad this time. He was so in my face. Everything was sweet; we were cruising, having a great night. But then he started at me.

Counsellor So it's the same as last time? (The counsellor calls on history to verify if the actions previously talked about are repeated and to assess severity.)

Wiremu Yeah, the same stuff but worse. ... I really gave him a hiding this time. Once I started, I couldn't stop.

(Wiremu pauses, going back in his mind to the events of the previous evening—the ensuing silence gives him space to think and process what he wants to say.)

Wiremu ... either way, if I stay or if I go, he won't be happy. That's where my head's stuck.

Counsellor How about we look at drawing where your head's stuck—the going or staying—on the whiteboard.

(Wiremu grabs a pen and draws an enlarged “Y” on the whiteboard. He writes, “Leave” on the left hand fork and “Stay” on the right hand fork. He then adds himself standing at the apex, right at the crossroads emphasising the “stuckness” he is experiencing.)

Counsellor So what if you stay, what would that look like?

Wiremu and the counsellor explore possible outcomes of this option.

Wiremu steps back and both he and the counsellor look at what he has written, absorbing in silence the implications of staying in the relationship. Some time passes.

Counsellor What about if you leave? What would that look like?

Again, Wiremu and the counsellor explore and record on the board possible outcomes of this option. With both options outlined, the “stuckness” becomes even more palpable. Wiremu contemplates the board in silence.

Counsellor What if there’s a third road?

The counsellor’s speculative enquiry, along with Wiremu’s changed position as onlooker to the situation represented visually on the whiteboard, offered Wiremu space and time to also reflect and speculate. We draw attention to two particular aspects of how learning was facilitated in this vignette:

- the move to visual representation
- the use of speculative language.

It is not unusual for binary decisions to produce an experience of “stuckness”: by initiating a change to visual mode the counsellor widened the resources available to Wiremu to make sense of the situation. Wiremu’s move to draw on the whiteboard was both physical and symbolic. In the action of drawing, and thus representing himself in relation with the problem, he enacted knowledge about his situation. He became an onlooker to the dilemma. This different position offered him different points of view from which to engage in knowledge-building. The symbolic representation provided a visual focus for Wiremu as the counsellor asked step-by-step scaffolded questions. Carefully paced, scaffolded inquiry, mediated by the visual representation to which Wiremu continued to add, invited Wiremu to draw incrementally on knowledge from his own life in making meaning of the violence, and then in shaping ideas to guide non-violent actions.

Wiremu was no longer immersed in and overwhelmed by the violence that he had acted out. Through step-by-step meaning-making he was able to begin to think about his thinking, and to understand himself in the context of relationship practices. This is metacognition at work.

At times the counsellor used the speculative language of the subjunctive mood: *what if, what would?* These questions offer genuine enquiry and speculative consideration about possible action, and about the values that would be lived out through that action.

‘Subjunctive’ stories are easier to enter into, easier to identify with. Such stories, as it were, can be tried on for psychological size, accepted if they fit, rejected if they pinch identity or compete with established commitments. (Bruner, 1990, p. 54)

Positioned to speculate, Wiremu became a consultant to his own life. This consultation accessed and made explicit the assessment that Wiremu had already made of having acted against his values. Building on this explicit assessment, the counsellor continued to ask speculative questions that supported Wiremu to critically evaluate values and actions, to see whether they fitted for him.

Mere and Zoe and key competencies

Relating to others

Mere and Zoe arrive at the counsellor’s door in a highly agitated state and without an appointment. The counsellor is about to leave school for a meeting, but because of the girls’ agitation, he invites them into the room. He asks them to make a decision whether they stay for a brief conversation now when his time is limited, or make a later appointment for a longer counselling meeting.

Mere and Zoe decide to stay for the brief time: they tell the counsellor that they hate this particular teacher whose class they have just left, that she doesn't teach them anything, and that she picks on them. They provide some details about their complaints.

The counsellor listens, allowing time for the students to express their frustration, without trying to edit it. He wants them to know they have been heard. At the same time, he is finely judging how far to let this story go.

As the brief conversation continues, he says:

"Girls, I can see you feel frustrated here and I'm glad you've come to see me because you've got a right to come to school and go to class without feeling put down and picked on. So how about we make another time to really talk about this, because this deserves some time and some thinking. I want it to be more than just a complaint session because in the end that wouldn't change anything and this situation deserves more than that. So when we meet next, girls, how about we plan that we'll come up with some ideas about what could make a difference here."

It is a refined skill to respond to distress at the same time as inviting students into the responsibility of making an instant decision whether to meet immediately for a brief time, or to delay for a longer meeting. The responsibility of decision making required the girls to discern the urgency of their request. The discerning called them to:

- recognise that they have options available to them
- weigh up the two available options the counsellor gave them
- take up the moral agency of making a decision.

Out of these steps, a more resilient response became available to Mere and Zoe as they began to find a direction out of the agitation. The counsellor prepared the ground for them to engage meaningfully in counselling.

The counsellor demonstrated skilful relationship to others, showing discursive empathy towards young people in the context of compulsory education. He took seriously their experience of having been affronted. He listened to the girls in a way that counsellors describe as a double listening that hears both the immediate surface story about classroom interaction and its broader sociopolitical context. He affirmed that it is their right to experience fairness at school. Indeed, we might say that learning to speak appropriately against unfairness is a capability our society would want young people to develop. A further step in learning and making discernment was in the follow-up counselling meeting where the student-teacher relational difficulties were investigated, and the students' assumptions, actions, and values were explored.

Also significant, in this vignette, are the clear boundaries the counsellor put around the way he spoke about the problem. He preserved the mana of both the girls and the teacher. He emphasised that this situation required careful attention and consideration in order for something to be different. He stayed available to counsel the girls while not getting caught up in what might be seen as "dissing" the teacher. An explicit invitation to consider thoroughly what might make a difference did not exclude a systemic intervention: any breakdown in relationship may require restorative negotiation.

When there are breakdowns in relationship between students, or between students and staff, counsellors may provide restorative negotiation through which all parties, including counsellors, learn about relating and fairness. Learning for relating is life long.

Here in our study, the counsellor offered Mere, Zoe, and the teacher the opportunity to put relationship right, and to acknowledge unfairness, illuminating the suggestion made by Hipkins et al. (2014) that "An emphasis on a decent life might increase the focus on human rights and social goals as an aspect of curriculum thinking" (p. 99). Learning for human rights and social goals, at a local level, is made possible when the counsellor hears the complexity of the difficulties that the girls bring, and has the courage to believe that he, the girls, and the teacher can use and develop the relational competencies required to negotiate across and understand difference.

The significance of offering young people opportunity to articulate and evaluate experiences of unfairness or exclusion, and to support them to take thoughtful relational action, has been illustrated by an event in

the wider community beyond our study that took place as we have written this research report. The New Zealand Commissioner of Police recently apologised in person to Tuhoë families affected by the 2007 police raids (see <http://www.ngaituhoë.iwi.nz/news-feed>). The presence of Tuhoë rangatahi at all four of the study schools brings our attention to a link that might be made with this event—the Police Commissioner taking responsibility to put relationship right by acknowledging unfair actions. The competencies involved in relating to others in ways that are fair and just are played out both on the sociopolitical macro-level, and at the micro-level of interpersonal relationships in schools.

Arlo and key competencies

Thinking; using language symbols and texts

Arlo consults the counsellor because his design teacher has said Arlo needs to get his act together and think further outside the square if he is to follow his hopes of a future in design and animation. Arlo is worried that he has lost his creative spark: he has even begun to find himself boring. Out of sheer desperation—and boredom—he had completed an online personality test that suggested that the character he is most like is SpongeBob SquarePants (a cartoon/gaming character; see <http://spongebob.nick.com/>). This is almost the last straw for Arlo: “SpongeBob’s sickly good—always pleasant and nice—and so BORING!! I’m sick of good and reliable. I thought I was zany and original. How can I think about working as a creative if I’m not, and what will I do if I can’t?”

The counsellor asks, “If you weren’t SpongeBob—who do you imagine you might be?”

Arlo replies, “I don’t know—maybe not any kind of two-dimensional character. Mmm. I’m not sure. [Pause.] Perhaps I’d like to be a unicorn.”

“A unicorn—how come a unicorn?”

“Well, I’m not sure. [Pause.] Maybe because they’re magical?”

“They’re magical? What is it about them that’s magical?”

“Well, maybe not magical, but they are somehow mysterious or something. They can talk telepathically to other unicorns. They make dreams come true, I think. They’re pretty rare. And they are creative and work on the edge in making dreams come true.”

The counsellor was attuned to the smallest of openings for learning. Rather than dismissing the pseudo-science of an online personality test, the counsellor used it as a springboard to surface the tacit knowledge about self already available in how Arlo presented the problem, and implicit in his refusal of the SpongeBob image. Her enquiry immediately tapped into imagination and possibility. Her question “*Who do you imagine you might be?*” offered Arlo reconnection with playful originality. The question landed well: its first effect was that Arlo paused, no ready-made response available. This is the territory, beyond cliché, where co-generation of new knowledge becomes possible. Arlo first used the question to further refuse descriptions that would define and limit him. Out of this refusal, a new possibility emerged: Arlo identified an alternative metaphor, the unicorn, which provided a means to rekindle the language of dreams and hopes. The unicorn metaphor became the means by which Arlo gave language to and elaborated:

- the challenges and limitations he was currently experiencing
- past successes and knowledge about self
- hope for his future.

The counsellor sensitively waited as Arlo paused, thinking himself towards new possibilities: in creative spaces one does not always need to rush towards answers.

Over the course of three counselling sessions in response to carefully attuned enquiry, Arlo continued to investigate the unicorn metaphor and to reconnect with and enlarge a story of himself as creative and original. Arlo repositioned himself in his design class as a student with a creative edge whose imagination was “beyond a box”; that is differently creative than “outside the square”.

The counsellor’s delight in re-telling this episode in part draws attention to the learning opportunities for the counsellor. Bishop and Glynn (2004) use the word *ako* to draw attention to the mutuality of learning possible when adults refrain from knowing in advance what should be done or known, or what material is worthy or

not of learning attention. The counsellor learned anew the benefit of stepping into conversational partnership through genuinely enquiring about a young person's world of meaning.

Joann and Zarah and key competencies

Participating and contributing

Cycle 2 provided evidence of how school counsellors made use of the presence of more than one student in counselling, with learning benefits for both students. This brief vignette illustrates this practice.

Joann has made an appointment for counselling, bringing her friend Zarah. Zarah comes with great reluctance: she doesn't speak or look at the counsellor. Joann is concerned that Zarah is experiencing violence from her boyfriend. Zarah does not join the conversation. The counsellor pauses the conversation about the violence, asking the girls about the history of their friendship. With the history of the relationship now brought to the foreground, Zarah begins to participate in conversation about the violence.

The counsellor recognised Joann's actions in bringing Zarah to counselling as enacting the key competency of participating in and contributing to her community: Joann had sought help on behalf of her friend's safety as part of a stand for non-violence. The counsellor affirmed this responsible contribution, asking Joann to elaborate her concerns. In this elaboration Joann made explicit her thinking about her thinking, about violence.

When Zarah continued to show reluctance to join the conversation, however, and was not available for counselling or learning, the counsellor shifted the focus to asking Joann, first, about the history of the girls' friendship. As Joann began to describe the beginning of the friendship, relationship competencies, already available to both girls, became visible. The counsellor's questions about the history of friendship focused on what was already known, and Zarah came to understand that it was in the context of care as a friend that Joann had brought her to counselling. As witness to Joann's account of the friendship and what it meant to her, Zarah learned more about the meaning of friendship.

This learning gave Zarah a basis from which to begin to engage in considering the relational violence. Such thinking about the moral dimensions of her life depended upon the relational qualities available, in the counselling room, between all who were present. Joann learned further the value of her contribution and participation as a friend in taking care, and in acting politically. The counsellor brought a refined sensitivity in identifying key competencies already at play and using these to build the girls' friendship as a community of support.

Dylan and Tama and key competencies

Relating to others

This brief vignette from Cycle 2 is another example of how school counsellors made use of the presence of more than one student in counselling, with learning benefits for both students.

Dylan and Tama both turn up at counselling, and Dylan tells the counsellor that they are there for the same thing. The counsellor invites both boys in and immediately asks them about the significance of their coming together. The boys tell the counsellor that they both want to stop drinking. They both want to be in the First XV. The counsellor asks more about the connection between this shared goal and their existing relationship. They tell him they are "bros". He asks what being "bros" means to them.

The counsellor identified a key competency that was already at play: that the boys had come together, thus enacting the cultural practice of tuakana-teina learning. The counsellor's intention in asking the boys about coming together was to surface tacit knowledge, by making explicit the implicit intentions in their joint action. He then asked them to think more deeply about the links between their relationship and their shared goal. The counsellor recognised their relationship as a potential vehicle for the counselling, and for the changes they hoped to make.

The language of their response, that they are "bros", carries a world of cultural meaning. The counsellor asked the boys to make explicit this local knowledge already available to them.

The counsellor continued to listen carefully to the language the boys used. By then using their language in his responses, he invited Tama and Dylan to explore the meanings implicit in the language they employed.

- Tama and Dylan say that bros “look out for each other”. The counsellor asks them what this means for them in counselling: *how are they thinking about looking out for each other in counselling?* His question asks them to make links between the ideas they have about how things are done and the particular circumstances in counselling.
- They speak of looking out for each other and doing things together as “what bros do”. In response, the counsellor asks them if they know of many bros who would do that, inviting them to reflect on specific instances of the generalised knowledge they have just named. In this way the counsellor and Tama and Dylan carefully share in the construction of the new knowledge that will support the boys enact steps towards their goal.

As Tama and Dylan responded to the counsellor’s questions about what they knew about relationship responsibilities, they began to build a story of change as the responsibility of community, not just individuals. Learning that is embedded in participation in community becomes shared and sustainable. It draws on *kaitiakitanga*, the bringing to the fore of responsibility and care in reciprocal relationships.

Some months later Tama and Dylan have successfully made the First XV and have given up drinking. The counsellor suggested that they review what they had done and learned in counselling. As an aid to this dialogic review, he gave Tama and Dylan the key competency card sorts developed in Cycle 5. Among those they selected as relevant were the following cards:

- setting personal goals: they identified that they had both set and achieved the goal of “chucking the booze”
- co-operation: they had worked together: they spoke of “passing the ball [of responsibility for maintaining their stand]” between them
- having a “can do” attitude: Tama and Dylan identified that they came to counselling with a desire for change, which they kept alive together; and through working hard in counselling.

Through this review Tama and Dylan reflected on:

- their shared goals
- the meanings of those goals
- the actions they had taken to make change
- the significant effects of these changes for their sport, their friendship, their participation in and contribution to their community, and to their lives
- how they evaluated these developments in their lives.

Again, this evaluation employed and investigated the everyday language the boys used, building knowledge in small, incremental steps. What was enhanced here was Tama and Dylan’s knowledge of themselves as learners and actors in their lives, accomplished in the context of their relationship.

These last two examples illustrate benefits for learning in two students coming together to counselling. However there are competing priorities in secondary schools, and a focus on academic achievement can produce tension about student absence from class. The Cycle 4 consultations offered opportunity to discuss this dilemma, one which requires ongoing discussion and negotiation.

Through these vignettes and counselling stories, this project offers a view into the counselling room, not usually available. This view demonstrates that the counselling room offers young people unique opportunities to learn, that may at particular times be the learning that is most pressing for them as they grow, work, and participate in their communities and society (see NZC, Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 38).

Key finding 2

Viewing student learning in counselling through the lens of the key competencies connects counsellors with learning in the wider school community.

By placing the key competencies in the foreground, the NZC clearly claims that teaching and learning go beyond subject-specific knowledge and skills. This foregrounding provides an ethos, understanding, and language that together position teaching and counselling on common ground. The purpose of this study was to bring counselling into this common ground, by describing counselling on the learning terms of the key competencies. Our hope was to use the key competencies to open the doors to the counselling room in order to provide opportunities for better understanding of the contribution counselling makes to learning, as attention is given to student wellbeing. What we had not anticipated was the response we encountered in Cycle 4 when we took our tentative findings into schools. Those we consulted appreciated that the work of the counselling room was made visible and described in shared terms. As well, further suggestions were made about the relevance of the contribution of counselling to the wider work of the school, and about the value of the study's research method to others. There was also acknowledgement of both the strategic risk and the strategic benefits to counselling of this more strongly articulated association with learning.

When we had proposed this study, we had been advised to take our project "beyond the guidance silo". As a research team, we used this metaphor productively, particularly in thinking about the project as opening the doors of the counselling room to make counselling visible in the wider school. Our Cycle 4 consultations were intended to consult on how effectively we had accomplished this goal of visibility. At the consultations it was suggested to us that our results were more significant than we had proposed thus far: while we had hoped that the study demonstrated common ground, participants in the consultations made bolder claims for the contribution of counselling than we had made ourselves to that point.

During Cycle 4, we consulted with staff in each of the study's schools. Each counsellor invited their principal, colleague-in-support, and other senior leaders to in-school meetings.

- We began by setting the agenda as one of consultation: we wished to present some interim findings and ask if and how those present found them meaningful.
- We then gave an overview of the project so far.
- The counsellors had each selected a vignette that showed a counsellor facilitating learning as a student used and developed key competencies. A power point presentation showed the dialogue between student(s) and counsellor, and we offered analysis of the learning processes demonstrated in this dialogue.
- We asked for comments on and questions about our findings, and suggestions for development and dissemination.

Responses to these consultations suggested that this project had developed the shared language and understandings that would make possible collaboration in common ground. What follows reports the results of these consultations.

Counselling as a contribution to learning

One school leader suggested that while teaching staff might hold the idea that a student would be sent to counselling if they are not ready to learn, and the counsellor would then "do things" that make them ready to learn, the project showed that learning is already available in counselling. "Counselling is inside what we offer as a school. Counselling makes a contribution to learning, rather than preceding learning," she suggested. Counselling is not just about dealing with emotional barriers to learning: "It's not not learning just because it's not Science."

Another leader suggested that the project successfully repositioned counselling as "just another place to learn, another part of the curriculum. There are all sorts of learning in schools". When young people do not want to go to the counsellor because they do not want the stigma of being considered needy or "in deficit", the idea of the counselling room as "just another place to learn" offers a helpful alternative.

Value in our method of analysis: learning to facilitate learning

Appreciating what our analysis made visible in the practice of counsellors, a leader asked, “How would the process look if we analysed the conversations that teachers or the principal engaged in, looking at key competencies in action, since key competencies should be used at every level of the school?”

A number of participants in the consultation similarly expressed interest in the possibility of their interactions with students being investigated, saying, for example:

- I would like some similar research to look at my practice when I am with students and others in the school. There would be benefit in bringing key competencies out further into the school community. Teachers have not had the opportunity to investigate their practice to the extent you have.
- Too often, the first 18 pages of the NZC are ignored. The value of your research is that it highlights a key part of the NZC. While it highlights it for counsellors, its value is far-reaching. I like your method: any educator could tap into it.

Another leader named the following strategies employed in a longer version of the Wiremu vignette, presented at that school:

- questioning skills
- open questions
- short and succinct questions
- effective use of silence
- pausing and giving thinking time
- using a teaching tool (the whiteboard) to enhance thinking.

The leader acknowledged both the specialist competencies of the counsellor and the potential transferability to the classroom of the kinds of facilitative strategies named here. In response, other senior leaders suggested that teaching staff would also be interested in the presentation. They identified two potential benefits:

- a wider understanding of the practice of school counselling
- opportunity to acquire further skills for inquiry-based learning.

Effects for school counselling of a key competency emphasis

The project made a strategic move in repositioning counselling practice as contributing to learning. Leaders asked a number of questions about the effects of this repositioning. Below are some of their questions, with the in-the-moment responses research team members offered.

- *Will these concepts change your approach to counselling?* No, and I was a little afraid that might happen. But it's more that these concepts have affirmed my counselling approach. We used to talk about the hidden curriculum: the key competencies speak about something similar.
- *Are the key competencies a distraction from counselling when you label your interactions like this? If we accept that counsellors work in this way, are we still thinking about the whole person? Offering education of the whole person? Do we have to be careful with the Ministry [of Education] so that counselling doesn't get evaluated in terms of the key competencies?* This research offers a window into a counsellor's activities—it is not usually known to teaching staff why a young person goes to the counsellor. This research shows the counsellor working in an educational sense in ways that are very powerful, that bring the counsellor into the body of the school. If the future of education is about learning, there is value in teaching staff, parents, and students understanding what counselling is, particularly the idea of students learning about themselves and learning to learn. And yes, we do have to take care how our use of the key competencies as a lens for understanding counselling might be misused.

- *How do you make sure that what comes first and foremost is the practice of counselling, so that it is understood that in the process of counselling key competencies emerge? And that counselling is not to be used in service of achieving credits? If we promote the key competencies in talking about counselling, how do new counsellors understand that this is not a tick box approach? Yes, we would always argue for counselling standing outside assessment frameworks.*

Consulting with other school counsellors

Throughout the project, we took opportunities to consult with other school counsellors in presentations, including a keynote address at a national school counsellor conference, and a consultative workshop at another national counselling conference. These all proved useful opportunities to seek feedback. Other school counsellors identified, and some went on to use, the study's strategic potential—for example, in renewing teacher registration, in performance appraisal, and in reporting to senior management or Boards of Trustees. Further, we were encouraged to continue to shape our research materials as resources available to counsellors to use in their schools. The first of these is available on the WMIER website: (see http://www.waikato.ac.nz/___data/assets/pdf_file/0019/212716/Resource-notes-for-Counsellors_2014-08-28.pdf).

Implications of this study

1. The NZC's emphasis on key competencies offers school counsellors rich strategic potential to describe their contribution to student learning.

The emphasis on key competencies resonates with the purposes of school counselling, to promote student wellbeing so that all young people can access learning opportunities within and beyond school.

2. This study identified that school counsellors are effective facilitators of learning.

Counsellors actively engage student-clients in micro-practices that make up competencies for learning and living: for example, meaning-making; care for self and others; articulating values and aspirations; reflection on past actions; reflection for future responsible action; self-knowledge; identifying personal and community resources. These micro-practices are uniquely developed in response to the contexts, problems and concerns each student brings to counselling.

3. School counsellors promote students' awareness of themselves as learners.

During counselling, school counsellors encourage students to use various competencies as *means* to support students to engage in micro-practices of learning. Counsellors then invite students to identify and reflect on the competencies involved in these micro-practices. In this way, competencies evolve as products, ends, of counselling. At times, these ends—such as restoring relationship, or making identity claims as a learner—make classroom learning possible.

4. The development of student learning is a shared purpose for teachers and counsellors, but each group brings different expertise to how they facilitate learning.

For secondary school teachers, subject areas and the key competencies reciprocally shape the facilitation of learning. Both planning for learning and spontaneous responses are required. Counsellors facilitate learning in response to the distress a student presents with, whatever its focus or seriousness. Along with a wide range of specialist therapeutic competencies, counsellors employ listening and enquiry skills that might also be used in classrooms. This report focuses on those counsellor competencies that are most readily understood through a learning/wellbeing lens.

5. Whether or not students get opportunities to use and strengthen key competencies is as much about how a counsellor responds as what a student brings.

The agenda in counselling is shaped by what the student brings. And what the student brings is immediately and continually shaped by how the counsellor responds moment-by-moment. With responsibility to only one or a few students, the counsellor is well positioned to bring a refined attunement to micro-moments of interaction. In these micro-moments, they identify how small openings, that might easily be overlooked, can be made meaningful, provide learning, and thus offer opportunities for living life more fully.

6. This study has shown the importance of school counsellors themselves having highly developed key competencies.

This study provided opportunities for the school counsellors/researchers to identify, acknowledge and refine their own repertoire of competencies, and to read these through the lens of the NZC. These competencies, particularly read through the lens of the NZC, are a resource both for counselling itself, and for the wider school community.

7. This study took place in schools where senior managers already valued the skilled work of counsellors. They acknowledged the value of counselling for students' wellbeing. Through this study's use of vignettes and counselling stories, a closer view of the micro-practices of counselling was made available. School managers readily identified counsellors' therapeutic contributions and their effects for wellbeing and learning.

Within the constraints of confidentiality, school counsellors should seek opportunities to make their practice contributions visible, bringing together both the therapeutic and learning benefits. Senior managers should actively value the simultaneous therapeutic and learning benefits school counsellors contribute to students' lives.

8. The study showed the value of researchers and school counsellors collaborating to investigate specific counselling practices through which each counsellor developed and strengthened students' key competencies.

There may be benefits for teachers in employing a similar research practice to investigate and reflect on how they deploy key competencies in classrooms. Such collaborative and appreciative enquiry may be meaningful in giving rich accounts of specialist classroom practices.

The study itself was undertaken as a partnership between schools and university. Colleagues-in-support provided learning partnerships in schools for each counsellor as the study played out. A rich unpacking of the language and concepts of the key competencies provides school counsellors with resources to strengthen learning partnerships with young people, teaching colleagues, and school leaders at every level.

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Colin Hughes

An experienced school counsellor, Colin has recently retired after 38 years in the profession, some of those as an advisor to school counsellors for the former Department of Education. Colin now has a private practice supervising other counsellors and is involved at a national level with the New Zealand Association of Counsellors' School Counsellor Advisory Group. Colin has written a number of articles on various aspects of the school counsellor's role. His (2009) *NZAC Newsletter* article "The school counsellors' contribution to the key competencies of the New Zealand school curriculum" produced a springboard for the current research. His (2012) *New Zealand Journal of Counselling* article, "School Counsellors, values learning and the New Zealand Curriculum" has also contributed to this field.

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Judith is Head of Guidance at Whakatane High School. She taught in a variety of learning settings, before moving into the field of mental health, and then back into education as a school guidance counsellor. She is the first recipient of a Wilf Malcolm Institute for Educational Research Doctoral Scholarship. This award was for a project that would investigate how key competencies, as set out in *The New Zealand Curriculum*, are fostered, evidenced, and traced over time, places, and tasks in early years or compulsory schooling. Her study title is: "Supporting Secondary School Teachers to Foster the Development of Key Competencies in Incidental and Unplanned Moments".

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