

“I’ve been sent to you for counselling” – An IPA study on how school-based counsellors build the therapeutic relationship when counselling is not voluntary.

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Introduction

A challenge facing many school-based counsellors is that of working with young people who have been mandated into counselling.

Recent publications from both government and counselling professional bodies stress that school-based counselling should be a voluntary process and that young people should not be ‘sent’ to counselling as part of re-integration interventions or for behavioural reasons (DfE, 2015).

Research and anecdotal experience suggest that counselling in schools is still offered as either a punitive or accessible intervention (Prior, 2012). This can often arise from misunderstanding about counselling, but mandatory referrals are often met with resistance and refusal to engage, which can lead to longer term disengagement with appropriate adult mental health services (McArthur, 2016).

This study explores school-based counsellors’ experiences of building the therapeutic relationship with reluctant or mandated clients whilst upholding client autonomy.

Method

Four school-based counsellors participated in individual semi-structured interviews, focussing upon mandatory counselling and how counsellors address this professionally.

Data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological

Analysis (IPA) producing four super-ordinate themes:

	Super-ordinate theme
1	Power issues encountered by the counsellor
2	Awareness of the young person’s external world within the context of the school
3	Engagement of clients with limited agency
4	Counsellor’s sense of value within the school

Analysis

Super-ordinate theme 1	Super-ordinate theme 2	Super-ordinate theme 3	Super-ordinate theme 4
Mandatory counselling	Understanding of school processes	Client agency	Value of counsellor and service
Barriers to the therapeutic relationship	Working with what’s there	Strategies used	Counsellor autonomy
Power	How the counsellor is perceived by young people	Client autonomy	Counselling as a box-ticking intervention
Organisation of service			Building relationships in school

Power issues encountered by the counsellor:

- Non-attendance of client following mandatory referral.
- Management of caseload (queue-jumping, termination of counselling).

Awareness of young person’s external world within school context:

- Understanding of school processes and impact upon young person.
- Awareness of the investment teaching staff make in their students and how this can be managed without breaching confidentiality.

Engagement of clients with limited agency:

- Collaborating with young people over attendance, frequency and duration of sessions.
- Respecting the decisions made by clients, such as how much they disclose and if they wish to be acknowledged by you around school.

Counsellor’s sense of value within the school:

- Consultation with counsellor over referrals or alternative interventions.
- Counsellor autonomy in managing service and caseload.
- Connectedness to school (for example, invited to award evenings).

Discussion

Participants felt that the therapeutic relationship could be strengthened in these situations by:

- Using mandatory referral as an opportunity to explain what counselling is.
- Offering ‘thinking time’ and the choice to attend counselling
- Building strong relationships with key staff leading to better referrals and understanding of counselling.
- Collaboration with young people and parents (Luxmoore, 2013).

Thoughts on the value of a counselling service:

- Counselling services within schools were valued by staff, but took time to develop.
- Counselling offered as one of a range of interventions improved the quality of referrals and reduced stigma around counselling (Cromarty and Richards, 2009).
- Where counselling was the only intervention available, incorporating techniques such as Transactional Analysis (TA) or Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) proved useful.

References

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