

The case for increasing the number of counsellors in secondary schools

Ratios, research, and recommendations

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Abstract

For many years the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC) and the Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) have been lobbying the government for a higher ratio of counsellors to students—without much success. There have been many formal and informal documents, representations and press releases written to highlight the need for more counsellors in secondary schools. Evidence regarding the escalation of counsellors' workloads, their levels of job-related stress and potential burnout has accumulated over the years. Research from the USA and UK has shown that school counselling benefits students' educational and personal lives in numerous ways. In addition, higher counsellor-to-student ratios have been shown to be associated with better student outcomes. Until recently, apart from anecdotal evidence, there has been no equivalent research on the impact of counselling on students' lives in New Zealand schools. However, two new studies have now identified: 1) the broad range of problems that counsellors deal with in schools and how that factor might be affecting counsellors' workloads; and, 2) the benefits of counselling for student wellbeing in a national sample of schools. Within months of the results of the second study being released, the New Zealand government announced that \$44 million will be made available to community organisations to provide counselling in primary and secondary schools. This has marked the first significant increase in funding for counselling since 2001. The potential effect of that expenditure on the role of counsellors is discussed, and a target ratio to be used as a benchmark for all schools is suggested.

Keywords

counselling outcomes, counsellor/student ratios, benefits of school counselling, research, secondary schools

The history of guidance counsellors in New Zealand secondary schools has been marked both by the cautious introduction of counsellors into schools in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and by periods of uncertainty over their status within schools (for a useful review of this history, see Besley, 2002). By the late seventies and eighties, according to Agee and Dickinson (2008), a generally accepted ratio of counsellors to students was about 1:500, an estimate echoed by Miller et al. in their 1993 survey of Christchurch guidance networks. A slightly more favourable target ratio was established in 1988 when the Department of Education introduced a policy that provided one full-time counsellor for every school with at least 400 students (Department of Education, 1988). Exactly where and how this particular number originated is not known, but it eventually became the target ratio adopted by the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC) and the Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA), both of which have long been pushing for a school counsellor-to-student ratio of 1:400. That level of staffing was thought to be adequate to deal with the increased number and complexity of problems being dealt with in counselling (PPTA, 2019). However, none of the numerous submissions, working

parties, or press releases produced over the years has been successful in achieving that goal. Instead, counsellor-to-student ratios across schools still vary widely, and generally fall below the target ratio by a wide margin.

In 2018, an unpublished survey of Canterbury counsellors showed that ratios varied from 1:315 to 1:1257 (as cited in PPTA, 2019), and in a recent report on the effects of counselling in a national sample of 16 schools, the average ratio was 1:637, with a range of 1:487 to 1:1035 (Manthei et al., 2020a; and discussed in more detail in the section labelled “Study 2,” below). These figures show just how far from the target ratio many schools are. Nevertheless, there was new hope when it was announced in 2018 that a joint research proposal between the NZAC and the Ministry of Education (MoE) would be carried out to gather evidence to support the 1:400 ratio (Donaldson, 2018a). The results of that research (see Manthei et al., 2020a, 2020b), and the government’s announcement (Martin, 2020) that \$44 million over four years will be provided to primary and secondary schools, are discussed in relation to NZAC’s target ratio of 1:400.

This article traces the history of the long-debated counsellor-student ratio issue and documents the steadily expanding workloads and job stress being experienced by counsellors. As part of that background, evidence for the effectiveness of school counselling and the generally positive influence of more favourable counsellor-student ratios on counselling effectiveness is reviewed. Finally, two recent New Zealand studies that clearly support the case for more counsellors in schools are discussed and recommendations made.

Background to the counsellor-student ratio issue

A key, relatively recent document underpinning the arguments in favour of more counsellors in schools was the 2013 Education Review Office (ERO) report, which found:

- there were growing numbers of students seeking counselling;
- most students were positive about guidance and counselling services in their schools;
- two-thirds said it was socially acceptable to see a counsellor about personal matters;
- students said they were most likely to seek help first from a parent or caregiver, and secondly from a counsellor.

Thus, students expressed a positive and encouraging view of counsellors and counselling in their schools.

There were also some concerning findings regarding counselling services in schools:

- there was a growing demand for counselling (thus increasing workloads);
- the issues students were seeking help for were increasingly complex, and included household poverty, family dysfunction, poor mental health, relationship issues, significant family difficulties, bullying, and drug and alcohol misuse;
- there were worries about the capacity of guidance and counselling staff to manage their increasing workloads;
- counsellors were finding it more difficult to access effective and sufficient specialist help outside schools.

The report made several recommendations, including that the MoE:

- review the staffing formula used to calculate the Guidance Staffing Entitlement to ensure this provision better aligned with roll size;
- ensure that schools had sufficient access to external agencies and support services for their work with students in need.

Since that report, there have been numerous additional documents clarifying counsellors' role in schools and/or trying to persuade the government to enact those recommendations. Useful background papers on this initiative include:

1. *The School Guidance Counsellor: Guidelines for principals, boards of trustees, teachers and guidance counsellors* (NZPPTA, 2015, rev. ed.). This document, published by the PPTA, set out details of the school counsellor's role; employment conditions for counsellors; the suggestion that the ministry's 1985–1995 staffing formula be thought of as an *absolute minimum* (it ranged from 0.6 full-time teacher equivalent [FTTE] in schools of 200 to 400, to a maximum of three FTTE in schools over 1800); how the counsellor's role fits within a school; and a description of the principal/counsellor relationship.
2. *Te Pakiaka Tangata: Strengthening student wellbeing for success* (MoE, 2017). These guidelines, which were three years in the making, were developed by the MoE as a response to ERO's (2013) recommendation "to lift the capacity of pastoral care, guidance and counselling provision and to ensure the efficacy and consistency of these services" (p. 9). They were intended to assist boards, school principals, teaching staff, deans, school guidance counsellors, external agencies, parents, and school communities to understand the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in the pastoral care of students. However, in a critique of the document, Donaldson (2018a) reported that NZAC was angry that the recommended ratio of 1:400 was left out of such a "cornerstone document" and was critical of the lack of promotion following its launch. It was unfortunate that the release of the document coincided with the timing of the 2017 national election, and with a restructuring in the Ministry of Education. Counsellor Sarah Maindonald was quoted as saying: "Addressing staffing ratios was the number one recommendation from the ERO review. Yet Cabinet in the previous government would not entertain it, despite both ERO and the working party raising it repeatedly" (Donaldson, 2018b).

Clearly, many counsellors at this point were left feeling cynical about participating in more discussions and working parties on the matter with the ministry (Donaldson, 2018b). Jean Andrews, a counsellor who held the guidance portfolio on the NZAC Executive, went so far as to warn that unless there was extra resourcing for counselling in schools, counsellors would be "wanting to down tools and resign" (Donaldson, 2018a).

3. *PPTA Submission to the Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction* (PPTA, 2018). The submission focused on the provision of mental health and addiction services in secondary schools and outlined the critical role school counsellors played in the provision of supportive services to students. It was yet another attempt by the PPTA (and NZAC) to bring the inadequate staffing levels of counsellors in schools to the government's attention. Its impact seemed to be minimal.

Thus, although the NZAC and the PPTA have lobbied for years to get more counsellors in schools, assuming that more staffing would mean more effective counselling, fewer counsellors experiencing burnout, and reduced waiting lists for students seeking counselling, their efforts have been unsuccessful. From 1989 to 1995, the MoE operated a formula for counsellors that was "tagged," meaning allocated money for guidance had to be used to employ counsellors (PPTA, 2015). The formula was based on school size and ranged from 0.6 FTTE for schools with rolls from 200–400, to three FTTE for schools 1800+. Over that number there was no provision for additional staffing. This tagging ceased in 1995. Currently, NZAC and PPTA's target ratio of 1:400 is not recognised by the MoE, nor does it remotely represent the reality in most schools.

Expanding workloads and job stress: How much is too much?

In addition to making formal submissions, counsellors, principals, NZAC, and the PPTA have all actively lobbied the government by means of informal reports, surveys, and press statements. The aim has been to highlight the urgent need for more counsellors in schools to cope with high workloads, job stress, and inadequate resources.

For example, Andrews' survey of counsellors (reported in Lewis, 2018) found that 81% of the 166 NZAC-member respondents reported a year-by-year increase in the numbers of students seeking counselling; 96% had noticed an increase in the severity of the issues; 91% operated a "waiting list" for students wanting help, and for 14% of these students this wait was greater than 10 days; 91% said they could not see all the students who sought help; and 90% said more resources were needed to meet student needs. Some counsellors said their work had been reduced to focusing on "risk management," leaving little or no time for programme development or prevention initiatives.

Recently, Morrinsville counsellor Vicki Tahau-Sweet reported that 33 of her 70–80 clients were considered high risk and that she felt "burnt out" by the work. Her principal, John Inger, was even more forthright: "I don't think it's an exaggeration to say there's a crisis in our schools. Our youngsters are dying because of a lack of targeted funding for trained counsellors in secondary schools." (Taylor, 2019). Inger himself surveyed 16 schools in the central North Island and Bay of Plenty about their counselling services and found that many counsellors could not see students requesting help for up to eight weeks. In addition, many reported they were unable to provide an adequate counselling service due to "unsustainable workloads." In response, Inger recommended a ratio of 1:300 to enable counsellors to cope with these problems.

A paper presented at the PPTA annual conference in 2019—*School Guidance Counselling in Crisis*—reported that more time was being spent by counsellors on critical incidents, workloads were growing, they were dealing with the effects of an increasing number of traumatic events (such as suicides, natural disasters, and a terrorist attack in Christchurch), contending with work stress and burnout, and that accessing outside specialist help was becoming more difficult. None of these was new, but if they continued counsellors' capacity to cope effectively with all of the changes to their workloads would be outstripped (PPTA, 2019). A similar warning was issued as long ago as 2013 by ERO, expressing concern about "the capacity of guidance and counselling staff to effectively manage an increasing workload and address the complex nature of these problems" (p. 5).

A key question: Is counselling in schools effective?

A key question in the push for employing more counsellors in schools is whether counselling has measurable benefits for students and schools. It is recognised internationally that having counsellors in schools has numerous benefits for students. For example, American research has shown that school counselling can produce positive outcomes across a range of areas: enhancing academic achievement; reducing test anxiety, school dropouts and classroom disturbances; boosting students' future expectations; helping with family problems; preventing suicides; reducing violence in schools, and assisting with student career development (see summaries produced by the American Counseling Association [ACA], 2007 and American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019).

It is also clear that counselling in US school settings is effective (see, for example, ACA, 2007; ASCA, 2019; Carey & Dimmitt, 2012; Carey et al., 2012a, 2012b; Lapan et al., 1997; Whiston & Sexton, 1998). In a large meta-analysis of 107 studies, Baskin et al. (2010) reported an overall effect size of .45 (considered moderate) for students who received counselling.

Research on counselling conducted in UK secondary schools has also shown counselling to be effective. Cooper (2009) reviewed 30 studies that investigated counselling in secondary schools and found that counselling resulted in large levels of improvement with a weighted mean effect size of .81 (effect sizes of .2 are considered small, .5 medium, and .8 or more large; see Cohen, 1988). Just over 80% of the 5900 students rated their counselling as moderately or very helpful. In addition, a large-scale study in Wales involving 3613 episodes across 42 secondary school-based counselling data sets (Cooper et al., 2013) also showed that counselling was effective and resulted in significant reductions in psychological distress with a mean effect size of .93. The authors concluded that “given the numbers involved in this and previous studies, it may be safe to now state that the significance and magnitude of this association is now beyond doubt” (p. 93).

In 2015, Cooper et al. found that a sample of 256 secondary school-aged students who received counselling exhibited “large and significantly greater change than would be expected without the intervention [counselling]” (p. 262, adjusted effect size = .91), even after any improvement estimated as due to “natural change” was removed from post-counselling scores. A smaller, more recent study found essentially the same results: students who received school-based counselling had lower psychological distress and emotional symptoms and greater self-esteem than students who did not receive counselling (Pearce et al., 2017). However, at six- and nine-month follow-up, the groups differed only on emotional symptoms. These findings provide additional support for saying “that school-based counselling is associated with reductions in psychological distress for young people” (Cooper et al., 2015, p. 263).

By comparison, in New Zealand there are numerous surveys and descriptions of guidance systems and the work of counsellors (see, for example, Crowe, 2006; Hermansson, 1980; Manthei, 1991, 1999, 2001; Manthei & Miller, 1991, 2001; Miller & Manthei, 1992; and more recent articles by Barclay et al., 2013; Crocket et al., 2015; Hughes et al., 2013; Hughes et al., 2019). There are also several reports that have tried to evaluate guidance activities across schools (see the reviews by ERO, 2013, 2015), to evaluate the overall impact of a specific counsellor or guidance department in particular schools (see Manthei, 2009, 2012), or to evaluate a pilot programme that utilised “guidance resource teachers” in several intermediate schools (Tuck et al., 1990). This literature highlights the enormous range of responsibilities of school counsellors, details of which were laid out in the joint PPTA and NZAC guidelines (PPTA, 2015), and in *Te Pakiaka Tangata: Strengthening Student Wellbeing for Success* (MoE, 2017). However, as positive and informative as these reports have been, none was a systematic evaluation of the effects of actual counselling on student wellbeing across a sample of secondary schools. Thus, although school counsellors have been a valued part of New Zealand secondary schools since their formal introduction in the 1960s, their effectiveness has lacked supporting empirical evidence.

Related research by Denny et al. (2014) surveyed the state of school-based health services (SBHS). These services were defined as doctors, primary care nurses, and public health nurses. Counsellors were not included, and it was unclear in the research just how their roles were perceived and why they were overlooked and/or parcelled out of the results. Nevertheless, the findings indicated that in schools with more health services (e.g., number of health personnel and the time those personnel spent working) there was less depression and suicide risk among students and better contraceptive use by female students. In other words, increased health services were associated with specific, positive health outcomes.

Similar research evaluating the presence of counsellors, time spent counselling, and the ratios of counsellors to students has not yet been done. It may well be, however, that higher levels of counsellor:student ratios (i.e., more counsellors in secondary schools) would result in similarly positive outcomes, particularly in areas such as improved school attendance, better mental health, and fewer episodes of bullying and incidents of disruptive behaviours.

Despite the lack of direct evidence of their effectiveness in the New Zealand context, counsellors' roles have expanded over the years to include providing mental health services to students challenged by increasingly complex issues (ERO, 2013; Gromada et al., 2020). In the UK, schools have been identified as a "prime choice" for the delivery of interventions to address emotional difficulties (Kavanagh et al., 2009; Weare, 2015). The same is true of New Zealand schools, which are increasingly identified as "health promoting," that is, an ideal setting in which to implement a "whole school" approach that links mental health and learning outcomes (see Agee & Dickinson, 2008; Cushman et al., 2011; and MoE, 2017).

Do higher counsellor-to-student ratios lead to better outcomes?

In the USA, the ASCA recommends a counsellor-to-student ratio of 1:250 (ASCA, 2007). However, the reality from state to state is often different. For example, Goodman-Scott et al. (2018) reported that in Arizona secondary schools the ratio was 1:941, in New York 1:624, and in Minnesota 1:743. These ratios are considerably lower than the 1:320 ratio across all secondary schools reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) for the years 2011–2012. When all counsellors, psychologists, and social workers were included, the average ratio increased to 1:230. Although ratios can vary from state to state and school district to school district, the national average of 1:320 was relatively close to the ASCA's target and certainly much higher than NZAC's target of 1:400.

Research from the USA has also shown that higher ratios are associated with increased counsellor effectiveness in their work with students. Boser et al. (1988) compared the effects of three ratios in elementary schools (1:600, 1:750–1000, and 1:1000–2000+) and found that the higher the ratio, the greater the availability of counsellors to teachers, parents, and students, and the greater was their perceived effectiveness among those groups. Higher ratios also meant more students could be seen. Analysing data from four state-wide studies of counselling in secondary schools, Carey and Dimmitt (2012) found that more favourable ratios were associated most strongly with improved student attendance and discipline, and lower suspension rates. In one state there was also a significant association with improved student graduation rates. The authors did not, however, identify, or recommend, an optimal ratio that might maximise those benefits.

Lapan et al. (2012) also found that lower student-to-student-counsellor ratios (i.e., fewer students per counsellor) in secondary schools were associated with reductions in suspensions and disciplinary incidents. Consequently, they recommended that student-to-counsellor ratios should be kept low: "cutting school counselor positions would increase ratios and have very negative consequences for students" (p. 124). They also suggested that counsellors "reduce the amount of time [they] spend carrying out job duties that are not aligned with...[a] counseling programme model" (p. 124). Finally, Goodman-Scott et al. (2018) found that lower ratios of students to counsellors were associated with better secondary school academic performance, higher grade point averages, and graduation rates, and although the effects were modest, they were worth pursuing.

Two recent studies that support the case for more counsellors

Study 1 (Hughes et al., 2019)

A critical study on the work of Aotearoa New Zealand secondary school counsellors (Hughes et al., 2019) highlights the challenging role counsellors are playing in their schools, the influence of their work, the often stressful and excessive workloads they are carrying, and, consequently, the need for more staffing. Data from 11 secondary schools involving 25 counsellors, 1,596 students, and over 4,600 counselling appointments indicated the “sheer breadth of problems” for which students sought help. The study found that counsellors saw students for an average of 2.5 sessions and that 72% of all students had fewer than four sessions. In other words, their work with students was brief, and, it can be assumed, efficiently delivered. In spite of the brevity of the typical relationship, 30% of students wanting to see a counsellor had to wait three or more school days for an appointment. The top five categories of presenting problems were: family concerns, anxiety, school issues, peer friendships, and depression.

This data indicates that counsellors must be prepared to deal with a wide and challenging range of presenting problems. There is often no outside service to which to refer difficult cases, a point that has been made previously (see ERO, 2013). As Hughes et al. (2019) noted, compared to earlier findings reported by Manthei (1999), career decisions and disruptive behaviour have been replaced by anxiety and depression in the top five presenting issues, perhaps reflecting changing pressures on young people. They also commented that “It is concerning that so many counsellors reported that the sheer volume of work was impacting on their capacity to respond” (p. 68).

Study 2 (Manthei et al., 2020a, 2020b)¹

The study by Manthei et al. (2020a, 2020b) is the first research to systematically examine the benefits of school counselling on the wellbeing of students in New Zealand secondary schools. The research, which was co-funded by NZAC and the MoE, collected counselling outcome data from secondary schools across the country. One hope was that the information would lead to better-informed discussions between NZAC and the MoE about the optimum staffing level of counsellors in secondary schools. This is the project that was referred to in *Education Central*, an independent news source for educators, politicians, policy makers, and parents (Donaldson, 2018a).

Thirty counsellors from 16 schools (see Table 1; Manthei et al., 2020a) provided information on changes in students’ wellbeing during counselling. Thirty-seven schools were approached, but 21 (57%) were unable to participate even though they regarded the research as important. Those unable to participate reported that their counsellors’ workloads and stress were such that they were unable to take on additional responsibilities. Their reasons were similar to those found in a 2018 NZAC survey of secondary school counsellors (Lewis, 2018), and those discussed in a series of articles on Stuff.co.nz (see Taylor, 2019), all of which have been discussed earlier in the “Expanding workloads” section. Being overwhelmed by the everyday demands of their work is captured in the following statements from the counsellors who did participate in the research but found it difficult to do so:

- with 60–70 clients at any given time...anything extra...is difficult to manage.
- counsellors are very busy meeting the needs of various stakeholders of the school...
- the workload on the counsellors in Term 1 and 2 was overwhelming...
- it was an extra thing to do.
- had a noticeable impact on the workload.

In Christchurch, most of the refusals to participate could be attributed wholly or partly to the extra work and stress generated by the terrorist attack on March 15, 2019. One counsellor declined participation by saying:

Apologies, I have barely come up for air this week after the horrendous events of Friday and the aftermath. My counselling colleagues and I have already seen 105 students in the first three days of this week...Frustrating, as I am keen for us to contribute...however, I need to look after my team and prioritise being available and responsive to our student community.

Two other schools ceased involvement shortly after initially committing to participate. Both cited pressures of huge workloads and the stresses of outside events. Notably, counsellors in all of the schools that were approached about the study expressed their support for the project and considered it to be a valuable initiative that would ultimately benefit the profession.

Table 1
Participating schools (from Manthei et al., 2020a)*

School (N = 16)	Decile	Roll	Participating counsellors: full- or part-time	Counsellor staffing	Counsellor: student ratio
1	7	644	1 FT	1.0	1:640
2	6	2041	1 FT	2.7	1:756
3	4	908	2 (.8, .4)	1.2	1:757
4	9	847	2 (.8, .8)	1.6	1:529
5	6	984	1 FT	1.5	1:656
6**	6	1146	1 FT	1.4	1:849
7	9	1685	1 FT	2	1:843
8	8	1673	1 FT	3.1	1:540
9	9	1553	3 (1FT, .25, .25)	1.5	1:1035
10	4	1365	3 (2FT, .8)	2.8	1:487
11	7	1750	2 (1.0, .8)	2.3	1:761
12	6	584	1 FT	1	1:584
13	4	1939	4 (2FT, .8, .6)	5.0	1:537
14	10	1687	3 (2FT, .6)	2.6	1:649
15	9	2550	3 FT	5.0	1:510
16	5	1641	3 FT	3	1:547
	M=6.8	22997 M=1437	32 counsellors	37.7 M=2.4	M=1:668

* Decile and roll numbers were taken from www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/schooling/student-numbers/6028. The figures were from a time series spreadsheet dated July 1, 2019.

** Provided baseline data only.

Data was collected on 490 completed counselling cases. The Outcome Rating Scale (ORS), an internationally recognised self-report measure, was used to collect pre- and post-counselling wellbeing scores from students (Duncan, 2012). The *gain score*—the change in the ORS from first session to last—was used to estimate counselling effectiveness.

The study analysed counselling impact in a number of ways, using both inferential statistics and clinical indicators of significance. No matter the approach, counselling was found to be associated with beneficial outcomes for students. Specific findings included:

1. Students' ages and year in school

There was considerable variation in the students' ages, but most (97%) were within the age range 13 to 17 years. Eighty-one per cent of the students were in years 9, 10, 11, and 12. The percentage of students from those years who sought counselling is very similar to the 83% of the 1,596 students from those same years who sought counselling in Hughes et al. (2019).

2. Presenting problems

Information from 269 students (55%) indicated that although students brought to counselling over 30 types of concerns, the top five categories were self-destructive behaviours like suicide attempts and substance abuse; relationship difficulties with families and friends; classroom and learning problems; career issues, and psychological challenges such as phobias, anxiety, and depression. These were the same as the top five presenting problems identified in Hughes et al. (2019)—just not in the same rank order. Both studies illustrated the broad range of issues that every counsellor must be able to recognise and respond to, whether that means working directly with the client or referral to an outside specialist. Seldom do counsellors have the option of screening out certain problems or focusing on only a few issues to the exclusion of others. They are, of necessity, generalists who must deal with all student requests.

3. Number of sessions

Counselling tended to be brief, with the average number of sessions being four, and a range of one to 16 sessions. The modal number was two (30%) with the next highest number being three. Sixty per cent of the counselled students had fewer than four sessions and 92% had fewer than eight sessions. Thus, the counselling these students received is accurately described as “brief counselling,” and fits with other New Zealand research that has shown, whatever the setting or age of clients, that counselling tends to be brief: that is, fewer than four to five sessions (Bridgeman & Rosen, 2016; Hughes et al., 2019; Manthei, 2016; Manthei, 2017; Manthei & Nourse, 2012). This finding should not surprise counsellors. In a recent interview on the topic of single-session therapy (Young & Dryden, 2019), Young pointed out that “the most common number of service contacts that clients attend is one, followed by two, followed by three...irrespective of diagnosis, complexity, or the severity of their problem” (p. 646). This suggests that counsellors and educators should expect counselling to be brief and treat every session as if it will be the last one (Young & Dryden, 2019).

4. Gender

Seventy per cent of the students were females (this is similar to the 64% females in Hughes et al., 2019). Table 2 (Manthei et al., 2020b) sets out the means and standard deviations for the three gender groups. Although boys had significantly higher first-session and last-session ORS scores than girls, there was no significant difference in their gain scores. A small number of students declared themselves as “other,” a non-specified alternative to female or male. Although few in number, this figure no doubt indicates a change in the way today's students identify themselves in terms of their gender.

Table 2

Means and standard deviations for gender by change over time (from Manthei et al., 2020b)

	Gender	Mean	SD	N
1st ORS	F	16.0	7.6	339
	M	20.5	8.2	136
	Other	15.1	5.2	9
Final ORS	F	24.0	8.6	339
	M	26.8	8.4	136
	Other	22.3	10.2	9

5. Ethnicity

There were 22,997 students enrolled across the 16 schools that initially agreed to participate (Education Counts, 2020). The official statistics on student numbers showed that in these schools Pākehā students were in a majority (62.6%), followed by Māori (14.7%), Asian (6.9%), Pasifika (4.1%), Indian (2.2%) and Other (9.5%). The proportions of these ethnic groups in this study were similar: 63.6%, 14.1%, 7%, 3.6% and 2.3%, respectively. Table 3 (Manthei et al., 2020b) sets out the means and standard deviations of the first and last ORS scores for the five ethnic groups. One obvious trend was the positive change in ORS means for all five groups. On average, all ethnic groups had made significant gains in ORS scores after counselling. The ethnic differences in Table 3 plus the increasing cultural diversity of New Zealand makes it important that future research in counselling processes and outcomes includes ethnicity as a factor.

Table 3

Means and standard deviations for ethnicity by change over time (from Manthei et al., 2020b)

	Ethnicity	Mean	SD	N
1st session ORS	Pākehā	17.2	8.0	280
	Māori	15.7	8.9	62
	Pasifika	15.5	7.1	16
	Indian	14.9	10.6	10
	Asian	18.0	9.0	31
Final session ORS	Pākehā	25.9	8.2	280
	Māori	23.7	8.3	62
	Pasifika	27.4	7.9	16
	Indian	25.4	9.1	10
	Asian	21.8	9.3	31

6. Aggregated cases

Ignoring gender and ethnicity as variables, the aggregated data showed that the difference between the mean ORS for the first and final counselling sessions (see Table 4; Manthei et al., 2020b) was significant ($t=-19.4$, $df=489$, $p<.001$). The first-session score was 17.2, which is lower than reported overseas. Why this is so is not known. However, the average gain score (7.5) fell within the averages for adults and adolescents reported overseas. Moreover, the size of the typical gain score of the counselled students in the current study is greater than 6 points, signalling clinically significant change (Miller et al., 2005).

Table 4

Means and standard deviations for ORS over time for counselled students (from Manthei et al., 2020b)

	N	Mean	SD	SE
1st ORS	490	17.2	8.0	0.36
Final ORS	490	24.7	8.6	0.39

8. Effect size

A change may be statistically significant but its magnitude of little practical value. Cohen's d (Cohen, 1988) is a robust and relatively unbiased estimate of the relative magnitude of any change. The effect size (Cohen's $d=0.87$) for the current study is "large" (Cohen, 1988). Thus, in this study not only is the students' gain in ORS scores statistically and clinically significant (Miller et al., 2005), but its relative magnitude is also large. The only other published New Zealand research using the ORS (Bridgeman & Rosen, 2016) reported a smaller effect size ($d=.64$). However, their sample of "problem gamblers" makes any direct comparison problematic.

Conclusions

1. The results of Study 2 (Manthei et al., 2020a, 2020b) show that the school counselling provided in a cross-section of New Zealand secondary schools was effective. Past negotiations between NZAC and the MoE have been hampered by the absence of such information.
2. Table 5 (Manthei et al., 2020a) sets out the actual staffing ratio for the Study 2 schools, the ratio recommended by two other professional bodies, and the level of staffing the Study 2 schools would be entitled to under each scenario. Not one school in the present study was remotely close to the ASCA's recommended ratio of 1:250. If this research had been undertaken using that ratio, there would have been between two and three times the number of counsellors in the schools, and 1.2 more counsellors if operating under NZAC's 1:400 ratio. Although there would be few schools with a staffing level near the NZAC ratio, counsellors in Study 2 still managed to provide effective counselling for their students, despite the stress and overload they were experiencing. How much more could they accomplish if a more favourable staffing ratio was in place? It seems logical to assume that more staffing would enable them to work more effectively, experience less stress and burnout, and reduce waiting times for students to see a counsellor.

Table 5

Actual and recommended counsellor:student ratios and staff levels for an enrolment of 1437 (from Manthei et al., 2020a)

	Counsellor: student ratio	Staffing level
Current study (actual)	1:668	2.4
NZAC (recommended)	1:400	3.6
ASCA (recommended)	1:250	5.7

3. Although research from the USA suggested that placing more counsellors in schools resulted in enhanced educational outcomes for students, none of them specified an optimum ratio. However, Lapan et al. (2012) suggested that the ratio of counsellors-per-student should be kept below 1:250. The alternative, having fewer school counsellor positions, would “have very negative consequences for students” (p. 124). In the absence of a recommended, specific ratio—one based on actual research evidence—what would be a desirable ratio for New Zealand schools to implement? It seems sensible to answer this question by considering two matters:
 1. First, the promoted ratio of 1:400 could be agreed upon as a widely accepted, initial target. Counsellors themselves see the need and advocate for that level of staffing in their schools. To accept their professional opinion on the matter—and in light of the work they are currently doing under considerably less favourable staffing levels—seems a prudent way to move forward. Future research could then be carried out to assess the impact of that level of staffing on their students and schools.
 2. A second aspect of this question, but one that has not received as much attention, is ensuring that counsellors are currently using their time in the most effective ways. US research has indicated that time spent doing unrelated guidance/counselling work could be as high as 11 per cent of a counsellor’s total time allocation. Examples of such unrelated work includes performing excessive clerical and low-level administrative duties like copying transcripts, bus duty, lunchroom supervision, and substitute teaching (Lapan et al., 2012). Time spent on these activities was unproductive, reduced a counsellor’s effectiveness, and contributed significantly to counsellor stress and burnout (see Lapan et al., 2012; Moyer, 2011): “These findings are very consistent with prior research studies that have found a detrimental impact on students when their school counselor’s time is spent carrying out a wide range of tasks” (Lapan et al., 2012, p. 123).

While the role of a counsellor in US schools is different from the role in New Zealand—e.g., a much greater focus on academic advising—and, therefore, what are regarded as “unrelated tasks” may also differ, there may be a portion of counsellors’ time in New Zealand schools being spent in unproductive ways. Up-to-date research on this possibility is needed to determine the extent to which that might be happening.

Thus, considering these two issues in tandem—implementing a staffing ratio of 1:400 and ensuring that counsellors’ time is being used most effectively—could provide a way forward in the debate about optimum staffing levels for counselling in schools, ensure a healthier working environment for counsellors, and, most importantly, increase counsellors’ value to their clients: their students.

Postscript

Six months after the Study 2 results had been delivered to NZAC and MoE, the Associate Minister of Education, Tracey Martin, announced that community organisations would receive \$44 million in contracts over four years to provide counselling to primary and secondary schools (Martin, 2020). The initiative would start in 2021, with money initially going “to schools in areas most affected by the economic downturn from Covid-19.” Secondary schools could use the money to hire an additional counsellor for two days a week (Martin, 2020), which effectively means an additional 0.4 of a position. NZAC’s response was positive, labelling the initiative a “start,” but it simultaneously called on the government to go further and implement its target ratio of 1:400. Primary school principal Kathryn Ramel was also happy and optimistic about the news and said that “a major need” in primary schools had been addressed (Nicol-Williams, 2020).

Implications of the new funding policy

While the extra funding will no doubt be useful and welcomed by all recipient schools, the 0.4 of a position (an extra two days a week) would only be a third of what would be necessary to meet NZAC’s target ratio of 1:400 for the average school in Study 2 (see Table 5; Manthei et al., 2020a). Although the staffing level would improve from 2.4 counsellors to 2.8, there would still be a shortfall of .8 of a position to reach the 3.6 counsellors required to achieve a counsellor-to-student ratio of 1:400.

There would also remain the potential problem of contracting counsellors who were not trained teachers and not familiar with the educational system, its management structure, and the counsellor’s multi-level role in the overall guidance system. This has been a concern for many years. The complexity of the school counsellor’s role has been highlighted in both *The School Guidance Counsellor* (NZPPTA, 2015) and more recently in *Te Pakiaka Tangata*:

Many guidance counsellors are registered teachers. Some do some classroom teaching as an adjunct to their counselling role, e.g., lessons on sexuality as part of the school’s health education programme. Some guidance counsellors have positions that combine a counselling role and a subject-teaching role. Regardless of whether a guidance counsellor has classroom teaching as part of their role, it is still significantly educational. (MoE, 2017, p. 56).

There is a concern that externally contracted counsellors risk being detached from the day-to-day life of the school, the students, the teaching staff, the administrators, the leaders, and the parents. Currently, counsellors are accepted members of their school communities, and understand the dynamics and complexities of the relationships within their schools. Their detachment could well lessen their acceptance and overall effectiveness.

Nevertheless, a good start has been made. If research has played a part in launching the new policy, then all parties—NZAC, PPTA, schools, communities, and MoE—should continue to sponsor research that evaluates all aspects of the effects of the new funding on the provision of guidance services. The results of that research should then be used to guide the development and implementation of future initiatives. Under this scenario, the provision of successful and effective counselling in our schools becomes a shared responsibility, and one that is informed by research evidence.

Endnote

1. Both refer to the same research: “2020a” is the final report to NZAC and MoE, and “2020b” refers to an article based on the same data which appeared in *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*.

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