

## Out of Our Comfort Zone

### Holistic Counselling in a Multicultural School

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#### Abstract

Effective pastoral services in schools depend on leadership from the board of trustees and the principal, as well as teamwork and trust among all involved in the pastoral network. The counsellor has a critical role in developing and maintaining the network as s/he is the nexus linking many “players” in the school, community and key social agencies. The development of the pastoral services in our South Auckland high school has been guided by the Vision, Values and Principles of the New Zealand Curriculum. This article describes the philosophy behind, and the implementation of, our pastoral services, which embrace all aspects of students’ well-being and development, the counsellor’s role in the process, the importance of an holistic approach that incorporates spirituality in the lives of students, and aspects of safe practice in a challenging environment.

**Keywords:** pastoral care, spirituality, school systems, school counselling, holistic counselling

As an older Pākehā<sup>1</sup> woman, I could scarcely be more different in terms of age, ethnicity, education, and life experiences from the young people who form my client base. My work is carried out in a large multicultural high school in one of the poorest areas, economically speaking, in the greater Auckland region. In this article I explore the way we have met the needs of members of my school family—students, staff, and families/whānau in the ten years between 2002 and mid-2012. The school where I work is a large (1,550 students) co-educational, multicultural secondary school that serves students from South Auckland. Our counselling and pastoral services are holistic, embracing the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of our students’ wellbeing and development.

## Background

In mid-2002, when I was being appointed to my current position, the conversation included a discussion about setting up a Student Services Centre that would be a one-stop shop incorporating a deans' room, a careers centre, a health centre, counselling services, and several meeting rooms. My enthusiasm was obvious, and I was offered the job. The Student Services Centre was only a dream then. I worked in a prefabricated building on one side of the grounds, with no running water, but it did have the power on. "Careers" was in a classroom and was very cramped, the deans were all over the place without telephones or interview rooms, and the school nurse (not registered) combined running the photocopy room with attending to ill and injured students.

At the same time, the school was working through some tough issues, including the appointment of a limited statutory manager to support a new principal and board to address financial matters and problems linked to the previous board's foray into bulk funding, which resulted in the new board having to reduce the number of teaching and support staff. The new principal was faced with challenges that would have daunted a less resilient and optimistic person. He had the courage and vision to grasp several nettles simultaneously, setting out to raise academic standards, bring the finances under control, and get what he considered the heart of the school both physically and philosophically—the Student Services Centre—up and running.

In 2003 we moved into our building, which had been converted from a teaching block, and in 2008 some more offices and a large meeting/teaching space were added. By 2010, the Centre was home to the Special Educational Needs Coordinator, seven deans, two full-time registered nurses, a weekly clinic run by the Family Planning Association, another weekly clinic run by a local general medical practitioner (GP), a part-time physiotherapist (mostly for members of sports teams), two social workers, two counsellors (one full-time, one half-time), plus five trainees who each work one day per week, a team from Odyssey House who run the Stand Up programme once a week for students who have alcohol and other drug issues, three staff in the careers area, a receptionist, and attendance personnel. It has to be said that there are some days when I long for the quiet and relative simplicity of being the "lone ranger" in my little old building.

In developing these services, the school has been mindful of the Vision, Principles and Values set out in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), and the discussion documents that preceded it, together with the need to support the development in students of the five Key Competencies.<sup>2</sup> *The New Zealand Curriculum*

document itself applies an holistic approach to teaching and learning, embracing a pedagogy that sets out concepts in which both teachers and students are reflective learners. It emphasises generic skills—thinking; using language, symbols, and texts; managing self; relating to others; participating and contributing—that enable each student to become not only a lifelong learner but a person equipped with the crucial skills for living and working. It sets out as well the direction and scope of what students will learn in each of the eight learning areas throughout their schooling.

### **A multicultural school**

The student body of our school is drawn from over forty different ethnic groups, but the demographic of the school differs from that of both the Auckland region and New Zealand as a whole. Over half of the students claim a Pasifika ethnicity, about 15% identify as Māori, another 15% are of Indian heritage, and the remainder include Pākehā/European, as well as immigrants from Southeast Asia and several other countries.

We fall into a trap if we think that ethnicity is the sole criterion for defining culture. Students belong to a plethora of other “cultures,” some of which are “mainstream,” such as their own family structure and customs, religious groups, academic groups, music groups, sports teams, and the like. Some cultural groups, though, are more “underground” in nature: gangsta culture, drug culture, street cultures (many streets in our area have a style and culture of their own), and a few that hover in between, such as electronic culture in which the young are far more at home than many adults are, and loose groupings such as Emos and Goths.

To ignore or be ignorant or dismissive of any of these and other powerful cultural groups places a counsellor at risk of only partially connecting with their clients and the issues they bring. Exploring some of these cultures, and their rules and mores, with our clients will be likely to take counsellors well out of their comfort zones. Sitting with one’s own dis-comfort while remaining fully present with a client and giving unconditional positive regard can be challenging.

### **Roles**

How does a counsellor fit into the structure of such a school? The school is a complex, layered environment, and in my school, the counsellor appears in a large number of the layers, and is a key player in several of them. I work closely with the senior leadership of the school. I am able to do this safely as a result of having built strong, trusting relationships with them over time (Pritchard, 2007). Because the ethics of the

counselling profession are known and appreciated by the senior leaders, and because of the strong relationships that have developed, I have been used as a consultant and “sounding board” by members of the leadership group.

There is a great deal of mutual consultation and co-working with students. This is effective because we all have one paramount concern—the safety and wellbeing of our students. It is not insignificant that every year, new students are welcomed with their families to the school. They are assured by the principal that now they are members of this large family there will be certain expectations of both students and their families, and in return, all the support, caring, and aroha (love) that occurs within a family will be offered to them by the school (Khaleghian, 2003, 2008; Noddings, 1984).

Similarly, I have a strong relationship with the board of trustees, largely as a result of my being present at all hearings of the board’s disciplinary subcommittee.<sup>3</sup> This came about many years ago when I asked to sit in on a hearing to satisfy myself about the process that was followed, and I was invited to be present at all subsequent hearings. Parents are offered the option of meeting with me prior to the hearing so that we can walk through the process and they can get advice about small but critical points. By being part of the hearing I can also be part of planning and implementing any follow-up.

Having been a teacher for many years prior to becoming a school counsellor, I have the knowledge and understanding of the education system to fit comfortably with groups, such as the heads of department meetings, where matters to do with teaching and learning are debated. It has been helpful to be part of a team that translates the intricacies of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) requirements into the information that students and their families need when planning each student’s programme of subjects for the following year, and into writing courses and units for classroom use. Once again, acceptance by this group of colleagues comes from constantly creating and building relationships with the individuals who make up the group.

Another critical aspect of my role as counsellor is participating in a school-wide committee that grew out of the school’s joining the Eliminating Violence programme in 2003.<sup>4</sup> This committee is charged with maintaining and nurturing the philosophical changes that were agreed to at that time. The committee manages a set of initiatives such as Student of the Month; vouchers (to go in a draw for prizes) awarded by teachers when they see students acting in pro-social ways; and Praise Postcards, sent home when students make a significant effort or change, which are warmly received by students and their families and are displayed at home for all to see. Fun activities for students and staff are also organised by the committee.

Within the Student Services Centre, the deans and I work as a team. This is the result of several years' work by all participants as we developed trust and mutual respect. We have agreed that certain tasks are carried out by designated members of the team, so, for example, disputes and disagreements among students are dealt with by the deans because each dean knows the students and classes in their year level well and is aware of the dynamics between individuals and groups. All deans have had training in Restorative Practice (Drewery & Winslade, 2006) and are confident practitioners in this way of dealing with conflicts among students. When an incident occurs and no dean is available immediately, other workers in the Centre have the students involved complete an incident report to gather information from each student's perspective; this forms part of the record of the incident. Should the incident be of a more serious nature involving, say, physical violence, the deans complete the initial part of the process and hand on the file and the students to the senior leader of the year level who will decide on further action. The counsellors or social workers become involved if underlying concerns arise. In the course of a week it is not uncommon for several collaborative ventures involving deans and counsellors to occur. When parents become involved, the Student Centre staff operate as a team to place a web of support around students and other family members.

The counsellor is also the point of contact between many outside agencies and the school. I have built and maintained strong relationships with Child Youth and Family, the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, lawyers, the police, the courts, and many other services as well as with families, working in partnership with the wider community (Walsh, Howard, & Buckley, 1999). This should not imply that I necessarily see eye-to-eye with these agencies, but having developed mutually respectful, appreciative relationships with them, the way is opened up for dialogue should challenging issues arise, or support for the counsellor be required.

### **The counsellor**

Why do schools have counsellors? It has been recognised for many years that when students are facing personal, family, and other stressors, their learning may be affected (see, for example, Agee & Dickinson, 2008; Weare & Gray, 2003). The pastoral care system in the school has as its principal role the care and support of students and staff (Ministry of Education, 2000). Counsellors and social workers work with students and families to reduce the impact of any barriers to the students' full participation in learning and the other opportunities offered by the school. Teachers who notice changes in their students' academic and social behaviour may talk with the student;

if concerns arise they will notify the dean or the counsellor. Many students are “soldiering on” at school while carrying heavy burdens regarding family pressures, including serious illness in the home, financial issues, family breakdown, and the like. The school is sometimes not notified when crises hit families because the family system is too overwhelmed to get in touch, so it is important for staff to be vigilant.

Several aspects come together when a counsellor practises in this environment. These include the counsellor’s persona and ways of being with clients and families/whānau; her modelling and embodiment of her own values; her own self-knowledge and her understanding of human development and the process of identity development; and her positioning of herself as a respectful “visitor” when exploring clients’ worlds. The way a counsellor positions herself in relation to other staff in the school and external agencies, advocating for students and staff, and bringing new perspectives to issues to achieve a just resolution in the best interests of a client, means that the counsellor must be open to challenging her own assumptions as well as those of others. Most importantly, the counsellor is human, subject to the frailties of all humans, can be grumpy occasionally, makes mistakes, is untidy, has a robust sense of humour, and learns daily the extent of both human suffering and resilience.

With these things in place, the counsellor can come from a secure place both within herself and within the school community to work holistically with all who enter her room. Who do they meet there? An older White woman, often referred to as “Nana” by students and staff. The concept of “Nana” fits the role well. I first used the term in a meeting with parents—many of whom were unhappy with the idea of their child talking in confidence with an “outsider”—when I described my role as being like the school’s Nana, a caring older woman who listens, nurtures, comforts, and strengthens, who is committed to the role of the family in the lives of students, who (ostensibly) is wise, who will walk through good and bad times with her clients, who is unconditional in her commitment to their wellbeing and healing, and who at the same time is realistic and grounded. “Nana” is a concept that both students and their families/whānau know well and are comfortable with.

And what kind of space do they come into? The room is small but warm, untidy, welcoming. There are items—pictures, books, stones, crystals, cards—arranged so clients can look at them, touch and hold them when they want to. They are reassured by the photo of my family. It seems important for clients to know that I am not a random, disembodied person, but a member of a close-knit family, and that we too have our joys and sorrows.



In the process of engaging, we explore the clients' worlds, first through making a genogram (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008), then by getting a picture of their home, their (ethnic) culture(s), friends, church, groups they belong to, sports, and other interests. I sense a parallel process here, interestingly, because I too inhabit several worlds. For the majority of students, church and their spiritual life is an important part of their identity. For students from Pasifika backgrounds, their church often has ties with their village and with family members in their island of origin.

It is well worth the counsellor's time to research cultural influences on clients and their families, while being careful not to stereotype clients according to their ethnic background. Makasiale (2007) has referred to the need to consider both Western and non-Western models as having equal significance. Rather than speaking of empathy, she favours the deeper perspective of Augsberger's concept of *interpathy*, which in short means to "learn a foreign belief, take a foreign perspective, base my thought on a foreign assumption, and feel the resultant feelings in a foreign context. Your experience becomes both frame and picture" (p. 110). See, for example, Tanielu (2000) and Tupuola (2000) for valuable insights into the lives of Samoan youth and their families.

Makasiale (2007, p. 110) went on to emphasise that the "spiritual perspective has a profound impact on the personality development" for Pacific people. Thus, to neglect the spiritual, the transcendent, when working with people of the Pacific would be, for me, a failure to be fully present with a client. I would like to add that, although spirituality manifests in different ways, Western and other people also respond to spiritual (contrasted, of course, with religious) concepts if these are presented respectfully, in an enquiring but not dogmatic way. I believe that counsellors, whatever their own beliefs and makeup, and with thorough supervision, are able to canvass spiritual ideas and approaches with clients, but not to advocate for or against any particular belief system.

This is an appropriate point to differentiate between *spirituality* and *religion*. While there are some commonalities, as Woods (2002) notes, there are fundamental differences. Some people may express their spirituality through religion; others may never see religion as their pathway to spiritual expression. For those engaged in the caring professions—social work and counselling in particular—it seems vital that they are aware of their own spirituality, even if this is only to the extent of feeling connected with others and the natural world, and being accepting of the spirituality of others. Eastham (2002), Morris (2002), Stewart (2002), Tiatia (2007), and Woods (2002), among others, believe that workers in these professions will be safer

practitioners if they are aware of themselves as spiritual beings because they will then recognise the spirituality of their clients and be more likely to enter deeper, more respectful, more effective therapeutic relationships.

In the process of identity formation, adolescents try to make meaning of their lives (Geldard & Geldard, 2004). They may develop spiritually through joining in conventional religious organisations, through thinking and discussion about what is happening for them and why certain events occur. Others take less orthodox pathways as they explore the spiritual world through, say, Satanism or cults. Yet others explore the metaphysical world through what might loosely be described as “New Age” practices and meditation. Boorstein (1997) described his own spiritual journey through traditional and non-traditional practices to embracing mindfulness meditation. He noted the positive effect of his personal spiritual life on his practice as a therapist. Awareness of our own spirituality can be integral to our capacity to work effectively as counsellors with our clients’ spiritualities.

When working with some students in our schools, circumstances may emerge that seem overwhelming: lack of money; illness of family members; depression; anxiety; feeling they are not wanted or accepted at home or at school; intergenerational conflict; experiences of various sorts of abuse; alcohol and other substance use; and frequently feeling blamed by their family for all or any of the misfortunes that have arisen. When there seems to be no way to change the situation, especially when illness and financial issues are at the core of students’ distress, we work to resource them to live and deal with what is happening by enabling them to access services or support people who can assist them and their families to cope, and by opening up conversations that are solution-focused, rather than problem-saturated. We look for the exceptions to the problems and the clients’ strengths and build on these.

Many students appreciate symbolic and metaphorical approaches in which they are able to access their inner strengths through conversations about, for example, angels, or by offering clients stones (“failed” marbles from the \$2 shop work wonders) to give them “something to hold on to.” Several students have kept these stones with them as they have made their journey through school; some were in trouble, mostly for being high-spirited, and others were contending with deep personal issues.

Some spiritual concerns that clients bring to the room are rarely their presenting issue; the counsellor has to be tested by the client to ensure that s/he is accepting of their experiences. Clients are afraid of being labelled “mental” especially when their experiences, which may be appropriate or “normal” in their culture of origin, are at



risk of being pathologised, especially by Western practitioners (Bray, 2008). Lui (2007) says that Western mental health systems are often “not equipped to respond to and treat such [spiritual] injury...because...the medical paradigm cannot easily respond to anything that is cultural, religious or spiritual in nature” (pp. 72–73).

In particular, when a Western counsellor is supporting a client who is seeing and hearing deceased family members or ancestors, s/he can reassure clients by entering their world in a respectful way, sharing their experiences. The counsellor may be able to offer strategies to help the client cope with daily life and gain some measure of control by, for example, suggesting that they make an “appointment” each day with whatever phenomenon or entity they are experiencing. If the phenomena intrude at other times during the day, the client can silently remind them that it isn’t the right time to meet. There are practitioners in the mental health field in this area who have cultural knowledge and understanding of the impact of spiritual matters on clients, and who will provide support and help for counsellors.

### **Summing up**

My school has evolved a way of working with students, staff, and families that is based on a shared vision and philosophy for our school. The way we do things has emerged over the years, but the spirit of the school has remained constant. We want the best for our students, academically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. A team—principal, senior leadership, deans, and student services—has come together, prepared to work towards this aim. This unity supports and strengthens the individuals who make up the team, and creates space for robust debate, for innovation, for accepting our humanity and frailties.

We are a school that is lively, filled with high spirits, the sounds of our choirs’ voices, our dance teams rehearsing, sports teams training and playing, students engaged in learning (and for some, engaged in avoiding classes). It is an enormously complex organisation, but one in which the welfare of each student is a priority.

The student services team, situated deliberately at the heart of the school, is complex itself, bringing together skilled, committed people who do the hard/heart work to support the learning and achievement of our students. Spirituality, whether articulated as such or not, is implicit in all our work because healthy physical, emotional, and academic lives rest on the healing and nurturing of the spirit.

## Endnotes

1. Pākehā is a Māori term that refers to New Zealanders of European origin.
2. *The New Zealand Curriculum* sets out the following aspirations:  
**Vision** Young people will be confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners.  
**Principles** High expectations, Treaty of Waitangi, cultural diversity, inclusion, learning to learn, community engagement, coherence, future focus.  
**Values** Excellence; innovation, inquiry and curiosity; diversity; equity; community and participation; ecological sustainability; integrity; respect.  
**Key Competencies** Thinking; using language, symbols and texts; managing self; relating to others; participating and contributing.
3. The board of trustees of each school has statutory responsibility for conducting hearings in cases of the suspension of students, according to the Education (Stand-Down, Suspension, Exclusion and Expulsion) Rules 1999; see <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/regulation/public/1999/0202/latest/DLM288425.html>
4. *Eliminating Violence, Managing Anger: Process and Strategies for Peaceful Relationships and Safe Schools* (n.d.) was an initiative of the (then) Special Education Service that trained school staff in strategies that emphasised positive behaviour management techniques.

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