

KEY COMPETENCIES AND SCHOOL GUIDANCE COUNSELLING: LEARNING ALONGSIDE COMMUNITIES OF SUPPORT

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Abstract

Often the work of school guidance counsellors goes on “behind the scenes” in the privacy and confidentiality of the counselling room. This article makes visible particular aspects of school counselling practice. It illustrates the potential for understanding school guidance counselling as a site of student learning, in particular of key competency use and development. Moments of counselling interaction are investigated for their illustration of moment-by-moment learning-in-action. Further, when two students come to counselling, the possibility of a community of support becomes available. Collaboration within a community of support is shown to offer therapeutic and learning benefits.

Key words

Community of support, managing self in relationship, collaborative knowledge making, learning, key competencies.

Introduction

School guidance counselling is a context that emphasises learning as a socio-cultural practice. This article illustrates opportunities of student learning in counselling, when a peer is present and the conversation is structured to become a learning partnership (Bishop & Glynn, 1999, 2000) between student, peer and counsellor. The counselling room is shown to offer a context for a learning partnership that addresses student, teacher or parent concerns—such as the presence of violence or alcohol—that may seriously disrupt classroom teaching and learning, for a student, a group, or a whole class. Learning partnerships, we suggest, produce communities of support for young people’s hopes, plans, and dreams for their learning and their lives.

The illustration is from a conversation between two young people and a counsellor and shows key competencies (Ministry of Education, 2007), as means in action—producing learning in the moment-by-moment development of the conversation. The counsellor is a facilitator of learning in the counselling room, just as the teacher is a facilitator of learning in the classroom. Students use the key competencies in response to the counsellor’s carefully scaffolded inquiries. The counsellor asks questions in the territory of the problem story and then opens up the possibility to scaffold towards the unknown story of lives outside the problem’s influence. White (2007) draws on the work of Vygotsky and Bruner to explain how a counsellor can scaffold therapeutic questions to assist clients in a movement from the “known and familiar” problem story to the “unknown or yet to know ... alternative stories” (p. 262) of their lives.

The scaffolding in this example supports two students to identify and speak the demands and challenges in their lives. These demands and challenges have serious effects in their lives, as well as on their participation in education. In the vignette taken from the first conversation, they take responsibility for the effects of the problem in their lives; they story the history of their friendship and call on their collaboration to help them move towards their hopes and dreams of lives without the influence of the problem. In the words of White (2007) they story “intentional understanding ... [they

hold] knowledge of what makes life worthwhile ... and accord value” (p. 97) to an identity conclusion without the problem. They assign value to loyalty, friendship and support as they speak their goal.

The example in this article comes from a Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) projectⁱ that investigates school guidance counselling as a site within which students perform key competencies, and learn. In Cycle One of the project, an overview of counselling practice indicated that multiple competencies were involved in any counselling session, with both learning and therapeutic effects. This article draws on material from Cycle Two of the project and shows how at the start of a first counselling conversation an opportunity is opened for two students to take up agentive positions (Davies, 1991; Drewery, 2005) and to name the problem they are dealing with. In this meaningful action of a counselling conversation, *self-management* materialises through using *thinking* when for example, the students formulate a goal for their lives. The dialogue also highlights *relationship competencies with others* and how they initiate a respectful and trusting relationship with the counsellor. These interconnections are important if, as Hipkins (2006) suggested, more options become available for students to *participate* in and *contribute* to their communities when the key competencies are employed together.

Method

The project involved a number of action research cycles. In Cycle One three school guidance counsellors gathered data on how often specific key competencies were foregrounded in their counselling sessions. Cycle Two focused on the demonstration of the use of key competencies in specific counselling vignettes. In Cycle Three the research team investigated in depth counselling practice with a focus on key competencies as means and ends. Cycle Four included dissemination of the data gathered and consultations with management teams from the different schools that participated in the project. This article is based on Cycle Two. In this research cycle the school guidance counsellors brought practice stories to meetings of the full research team, including university staff. Together we reviewed these practice examples, and interpreted them, first, for learning in action and key competency use and development, and, second, for counselling practice. In Cycle Two our analytic focus was on *moments* of practice that occur within a larger counselling story with a particular student. This article highlights one series of moments that emerged in our analysis. We noticed the recurrent practice of counsellors meeting with two students at once, and that this practice afforded benefits for student learning. The accountⁱⁱ below illustrates how a counsellor structured learning opportunities in the interactional moments of what in teaching practice is a “community of inquiry” (see, for example, Wells, 2002; Wells & Arauz, 2006), and in counselling practice a “community of acknowledgement” (White, 1995, 2007), and which we suggest is a community of support.

Dylan and Tama: Bros who arrive together

Jeff is the school guidance counsellor. At the appointment time, he greets Dylanⁱⁱⁱ who has his friend Tama with him. Dylan says, “Tama is here for the same thing, sir.” Their older siblings attended the school and Jeff knows enough about these two to know that they are good mates. He invites them both into the counselling room.

Jeff: How come the two of you have come together?

Jeff begins by inviting Tama and Dylan to reflect on the meaning of the two of them coming to counselling together. He does this to make explicit any implicit intentions, in counselling terms, making visible the “absent but implicit” (White, 2007). In the context of key competencies, by asking

ⁱ See <http://www.tlri.org.nz/tlri-research/research-progress/school-sector/key-competencies-how-school-guidance-counsellors>

ⁱⁱ The illustrative account has been changed significantly to offer confidentiality and to protect student privacy. Our emphasis is on the illustration of school guidance counsellor practice and principles in support of learning, rather than on detail of the lives of individual learners.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the three schools in this study, more than 70% of students refer themselves to counselling.

what shaped their actions in coming together Jeff invites *thinking* to make explicit tacit knowledge about the relationship.

Tama: Because we're bros.

In Tama's response, Jeff hears the implications of a relationship as a possible community of support that may play an important role in the counselling. In the context of key competencies, namely *relating to others*, Jeff's next question investigates the meaning they ascribe to the relationship.

Jeff: What does it mean to be a bro?

His inquiry invites Tama to make explicit the meanings and values that are implicit in his choice of words: he invites critical thinking/reflecting on how language constitutes. His inquiry implies that the use of the word "bro" expresses some knowledge about relationship that is relevant to this specific context.

Tama: We look out for each other.

Tama speaks of working together effectively (*relating to others*).

Jeff: So how are you going to look out for each other in counselling?

Jeff's inquiry brings the "looking out for each other" into the specific context of counselling. He asks how this knowledge will be enacted. In terms of the key competencies, his question provides an invitation for *thinking about managing self (in relationship)*.

Dylan: We want to chuck the booze, sir. You know the ad, sir, where the guy says, "Bloody idiot". We're not idiots.

With the relational context in place, Dylan displays resourcefulness in taking the risk of naming a problem and a goal with which they came to counselling. By drawing a clear distinction between the example in the advertisement and their goal to be different, Dylan takes a clear stand against alcohol abuse, the first step toward a "can-do attitude", an expression of *managing self*.

Jeff: So how come you two decided to come together?

Jeff again asks about the significance of their collaborative action, investigating its potential as a strategy to meet the challenge of giving up drinking: *managing self* and *relating to others* are being foregrounded.

Tama: It's what bros do.

Implicit in Tama's reply is insider knowledge of *managing self* in *relating to others*.

Jeff: Do you know many bros who would do this kind of thing?

Jeff further scaffolds his inquiry into their knowledge and learning experiences about collaborative action, perhaps events that Tama and Dylan witnessed and can call on in this situation.

Tama: Dunno.

Tama does not take up the invitation for *thinking* or cannot recall an example.

Dylan: Yeah, man, you told me about your uncle, you know, the one who was the league player.

A benefit of having two young people engaged in counselling at the same time emerges here. In the face of Tama's not knowing, Dylan responds to Jeff's question, coming up with an idea located in Tama's own whānau. His response then creates an opportunity to join in an available story of giving up alcohol. A community that may support the boys' hopes and plans for their lives becomes available.

Tama: Oh yeah, yeah, he gave it up.

Tama takes up this opportunity offered by Dylan. He now joins an alternative story (White, 2007) of giving up alcohol.

Jeff: Your uncle—who looked out for him?

Jeff picks up the language used earlier—that bros look out for each other. His question directs the boys to *thinking* about the wider community in which their giving up alcohol is located. By building connections with family histories, Jeff offers Tama and Dylan routes to *participating in community*. In this interaction Jeff calls on culturally responsive practice.

Tama: The bros in the team—that was mean, man.

Tama evaluates his uncle's change—in the *language* of his community.

Jeff: What happened?

Jeff's question about the actions (White, 2007) invites Tama to draw on personal knowledge: *thinking*.

Tama: They just looked out for him, like bros do. They probably told him he was an idiot, too.

Tama's use of wry humour, in commenting on his uncle's context, implies an informative and imaginative use of *language* as *text and subtext*.

Jeff: How did that help?

Jeff continues to attend seriously to this story of change, inviting Tama and Dylan to re-tell the meaning they made of the support the uncle had. Tama and Dylan mentioned small snippets of the actions being taken in the development of the preferred story and identity of the uncle. This story, first invisible, may shape actions towards preferred stories and identities that Tama and Dylan want to reach for in their own lives. In the context of key competencies, Jeff calls forward the construction of knowledge (*thinking*).

Dylan: It's like us, sir. We want to be in the first XV.

Dylan intuitively makes connections between his uncle giving up alcohol—*thinking*—and his and Tama's personal goals: *managing self*.

Jeff: Both of you?

Jeff's inquiry focuses on the goals—*managing self*—and adds co-operation towards the goal: *relating to others*.

Tama: Yeah, but he drinks more than me.

Tama uses humour again: in the same moment there is insider co-operation and competition—*relating to others*.

Jeff: You both want to be in the first XV?

Jeff returns to the reason Tama and Dylan have come: their shared goal to work towards preferred identities (White, 2007).

Dylan: We've been in the same team for ever.

Tama: Since Pukeiti School, sir.

Tama and Dylan call on the history of their friendship in working towards their goal of giving up alcohol.

Jeff: Wow—that's a while.

Jeff shows his surprise in the face of the history of such an established relationship. He becomes a witness (Weingarten, 2000) to their performing identities as reliable friends and he acknowledges this by this comment (*relating to others* and *managing self* in relationship). Tama's telling of the history of this relationship invites a learning opportunity for Jeff, Tama and Dylan.

Dylan: We told you, sir, we're bros, bros from way back.

Jeff's surprise and acknowledgement opens up an experience of delight for Dylan as he re-calls the history of the friendship. Jeff returns to the initial concern of the dominant problem story of drinking.

Jeff: So how does being bros help you with dropping the booze? You said you would look out for each other, and your uncle's mates looked out for him.

Jeff's inquiry brings into focus the relational community context of their goal, by building connection between their goals and family history—*managing self, relating to others, participating and contributing* are foregrounded.

Tama: Nah, his bros.

Here Tama calls Jeff to step back into the landscape of their local knowledge as he did at the start of the conversation. He offers an invitation, through the use of humour, playing on *text and subtext: relating to others*.

Jeff: Oh okay—his bros. There's the looking out for each other? How do you do this, look out for each other in dropping the booze?

Jeff accepts the invitation and uses the language they prefer (*relating to others*) in a description closer to their experience. He follows this up with re-focusing on the purpose of the counselling session when he scaffolds the two questions. These questions re-evoked the boys' knowledge about practices of relational care: *thinking, relating to others* by contributing to each other's lives as well as *participating and contributing* to a larger community of care.

Tama and Dylan have arrived with what might be thought of as a *self-management* concern. Jeff makes skilful use of their friendship to produce a context and actions of support for the management of their lives. This approach is in line with Hipkins' (2006) comment that "students cannot learn self-management in isolation from their interactions with others, and they are unlikely to make good progress without support" (p. 33). Jeff identifies the strategic action Tama and Dylan are taking in requesting counselling and in coming to counselling together.

As counsellor, Jeff takes the position that meaning is not already given to actions, but rather meaning is to be made in collaboration. His contributions invite the students into *thinking*, and in particular *assessing*. The following examples of developing *thinking* (see Simon, Erduran, & Osborne, 2006) are evident in Jeff's approach during the session. He

- encourages discussion;
- encourages students to take a position;
- checks evidence;
- prompts students to use evidence to justify claims;
- encourages reflection; and
- encourages evaluation.

Jeff scaffolds his inquiry into Tama's and Dylan's knowledge about their joint action by asking about the experience they are calling on in taking joint action as "bros". The inquiry thus invites situated cognition (Hipkins, 2006, p. 25), that is, making meaning from a situation of which a student has direct experience.

When Jeff works with the understanding that "knowledge is not something people possess, somewhere in their heads, but rather something people do together" (Gergen, 1985, p. 270), Tama and Dylan experience collaborative knowledge-making in a community of inquiry and acknowledgement. Further as they make meaning of their actions as "bros", they perform and "renegotiate their identities" (White, 2007, p. 82) as young people who are taking responsibility to manage themselves, to work towards their sporting goals, and to participate and contribute to each other's lives.

Tama and Dylan came to counselling with shared goals. The counselling story illustrates rich possibilities for learning when two students attend counselling together. Learning in action, Tama and Dylan

- enact responsibility together in coming to counselling;
- relate effectively to others, peer and counsellor;
- participate in and contribute to each other's lives;
- act as audience to the difficulties of each other's lives;
- act as audience to the hope they speak; and

- are invited as collaborators to support ongoing future actions towards change.

The counsellor engaged in an assessment of the appropriateness of seeing two students at once. This assessment will be the focus of a future article. We note here that along with the particular counselling practice skills illustrated above, the guidance counsellor's knowledge of their school community is significant in discerning *when* to undertake this practice.

Discussion

In the context of teaching, Hipkins (2010) suggests that there is an element of “unpredictability” (p. 7) in the outcome of key competencies, and that new learning possibilities should be followed as they unfold. The counselling example shows the moment-by-moment unfolding of learning possibilities in the context of counselling conversations as a counsellor responds to and creates learning, knowledge-making and knowledge-using possibilities.

Teachers carry ethical and moral responsibilities in their relationships with learners (Hipkins, 2006). Significant to the counselling practice we highlight here is the ethical responsibility to take seriously small but significant developments in a student's life. White (2000) argues for valuing small steps towards change, including the expression of hope for things to be different. In this way, counselling becomes a community of support, as the counsellor offers processes that enact acknowledgment and inquiry. Acknowledgement by others—in this example, a peer and a counsellor—supports the performance of identity; and inquiry produces learning and builds knowledge. As this practice example shows, counselling becomes a site and relationship of learning. Counsellors identify and call on already available key competencies, and scaffold their further development. Counsellors also identify and scaffold the emergence of yet-to-be-developed or hoped-for competencies. In counselling terms, this kind of conversation offers a young person movement from what is “known and familiar” to what is “possible for them to know and to do” (White, 2007, p. 263).

This article uses one vignette of counselling practice to illustrate the day-to-day work of school guidance counsellors. In making a counsellor's practice visible, it shows how the counselling room is a site of student learning and the school guidance counsellor—as a facilitator of key competency learning and development—is a contributing member of the learning and teaching community.

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