

Implementing Online Counselling in Australian Secondary Schools: What Principals Think

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Abstract Today's young people have integrated the online world into their everyday reality and schools have generally accepted the importance of technology in the education process. However, there has been limited use in schools of technology to counsel young people, although early indications suggest that school counsellors may be prepared to offer synchronous online counselling if they were supported by school principals. The aim of this study was to investigate Australian secondary school principals' views about using an online format for counselling in schools. There were 33 principals who participated and they indicated technological competency and acknowledged the benefits of using technology in the counselling process. The principals were generally supportive of the provision of online school counselling, although their major concern was the need for more counsellors and the impact on the workload of current counselling staff. A few principals, however, were unconvinced about

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offering online counselling and had a fundamental preference for face-to-face communication experiences for students. Strategies for facilitating the acceptance of online counselling by principals and guiding implementation in schools are proposed.

Keywords Synchronous online counselling · Text-based counselling · Principals · School counsellors · Guidance and counselling · Australia

Introduction

Online counselling is becoming an accepted form of psychological support (Baker and Ray 2011; Jorm et al. 2013). However, a review of the literature reveals a paucity of research indicating the use of technology in the provision of personal counselling services in schools, including in Australia (Glasheen and Campbell 2009; Steele et al. 2014). This apparent absence of online support for young people in schools is perplexing, as the online world is readily integrated into the everyday lives of the current generation of students. The reasons why school counsellors have been reluctant to offer online counselling may depend on factors other than their readiness to implement such innovative practices (Glasheen et al. 2015). As schools are managed by principals as key leaders, the influence of the school administration may be a crucial determinant in whether such practices are implemented. This study considers online counselling in schools and reports on Australian school principals' views about using synchronous online counselling in that context. The current use of online counselling by adolescents is described and the effectiveness and potential benefits of using technology to support secondary school students is highlighted.

Online Counselling

The use of the Internet for communication has led professional counsellors to consider how such technology can be used to assist clients who prefer to seek help online. The development and availability of online counselling has increased since the late 1990s (Gedge 2002). Although software programs and models of online counselling vary, this form of communication is generically described as the

...delivery of therapeutic interventions in cyberspace where the communication between a trained professional counselor and client(s) is facilitated using computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies provided as a stand-alone service or as an adjunct to other therapeutic interventions. (Richards and Viganò 2012, p. 699)

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) usually refers to the process of text-based human-human communication, which can range from “the exchange of textual messages between individuals typing on keyboards and reading the screens of networked computers, to any digitally mediated communication” (Herring 2014, p. 41).

Online counselling can be conducted synchronously where the interactions between the counsellor and the client are immediate, or almost immediate, such as in text-based chat or utilising video (e.g., Skype or Zoom). When online counselling incorporates a time delay by using tools such as email, the process is described as asynchronous. Both synchronous and asynchronous online counselling are now well established as acceptable forms of therapeutic support for those who prefer a convenient and less intrusive form of psychological support,

and evidence of the effectiveness of online counselling is beginning to accumulate (Dowling and Rickwood 2013).

Online counsellors are guided by protocols and ethical principles provided by their professional bodies (e.g., American Psychological Association [APA] 2003; Australian Psychological Society [APS] 2011). However, synchronous online counselling does not seem to have been taken up by school counsellors, despite students' reliance on technology and social media for communication, and evidence that many students would prefer this modality for mental health support (Bradford and Rickwood 2014).

Young people's use of Technology

Prensky (2001) described today's generation of young people as being digital natives. Sophisticated online technology has always been part of their lives and they are like natives of a country who have grown up with their [digital] native language. The importance many young people place on social media highlights an insatiable need to be connected to their peers and the wider community '24/7' (Solis 2012). The existence of the online world for young people complements their face-to-face relationships, is a key factor in their development, and has the potential to be a positive influence (Davies and Eynon 2013). Young adults communicate with their peers and use technological applications to meet, maintain and even terminate relationships (Morey et al. 2013).

The advent of the smart phone, which basically is a mobile computer, has become an essential accessory for most young people, leading to the expectation that life's answers will be found online. If there is not an appropriate 'app' available, they look for it to be developed (Gardner and Davis 2013). As technology and the Internet are a familiar resource for young people, it is logical that they would seek assistance for health concerns, including mental health, from this source (Figge 2014).

A purpose of introducing online counselling into the school setting stems from the fact that many young people who experience mental health issues do not seek appropriate professional help, and there is a range of strong barriers to young people seeking face-to-face professional mental health care (Birleson et al. 2000; Evans 2010; Rickwood et al. 2005). Though help-seeking rates have improved over the past ten years, one-third of this age group still do not seek help (Lawrence et al. 2015). Poor mental health impacts markedly on the emotional wellbeing of the young person and also has detrimental effects on their educational outcomes and wellbeing in later life. These facts challenge school counsellors to explore creative ways to connect with 'at risk' students, and online counselling is a potential conduit to help-seeking for those young people who are reluctant and hesitant to seek face-to-face counselling.

Young People's Use of Online Counselling

A number of Australian community agencies have built a reliance on the Internet as the source for providing various forms of information and offering 'real-time' support through online counselling, such as that available through *Kids Help Line* (King et al. 2006a, b) and, more recently, via *e-chat* at the Australian national web-based youth mental health service of *eheadspace* (McGorry et al. 2007; Rickwood et al. 2016). The trend to use online counselling for young people is not just in Australia. The establishment of online support sites in the

United Kingdom (U.K.), such as the Brighton-based online counselling service for 13–25 year olds (e-motionbh.org.uk) and Kooth.com, which also provides resources and online counselling for young people, indicates a widespread move to online support services for young people.

The effectiveness of online counselling has been found to be at least equal to face-to-face counselling (cf., Barak et al. 2008; Dowling and Rickwood 2013; Richards and Vignano 2013). Central to effective counselling, including online counselling, is the quality of the therapeutic alliance (Cochran and Cochran 2006; Dyer 2012; Hanley 2009, 2012), which may be more difficult to achieve online (Dowling and Rickwood 2014) as rapport building may take longer in that form of interaction (King et al. 2006b). Despite this challenge, the crucial element of a quality therapeutic alliance is achievable online, as evidenced by users of the U.K. service Kooth.com, who rated the online alliance they experienced as being medium to high (Hanley 2009). The typical use of person-centred counselling techniques in online counselling may account for such a view, with it being essential for keeping clients engaged and validated (Dowling and Rickwood 2014).

The online medium provides an emotional safety zone that is empowering for those reluctant to access face-to-face counselling, and is appealing to those who feel emotionally vulnerable (King et al. 2006a, b). Young people have commented on how much easier it is to text their problems and express their emotional state in the written word (Bradford and Rickwood 2014; Kids Help Line 2003). This can be attributed to what Suler (2005) coined as the ‘disinhibition effect’ of online communication. This effect acknowledges the phenomenon of not feeling confined in what can be expressed, as there is an absence of body language signals that have the potential to convey judgment. This disinhibition has been demonstrated by the readiness with which a person seems prepared to disclose personal details and sensitive information about themselves. As a result, online counselling tends to focus on the problem more quickly and with less restriction.

Previous research has found that both male and female secondary school students expressed intentions to seek online help if they were experiencing stress and depression (Glasheen et al. 2015). Schools have a responsibility to provide support for students. To date, however, online counselling has seldom been offered in school contexts by school counsellors, because it is perceived as an initiative with possible legal and ethical consequences and requires the support of school principals (Glasheen et al. 2013).

Online Counselling in Secondary Schools

The concept of online counselling is novel in the school environment and, as a result, factors that may inhibit its practice need to be addressed before it can be realised (Glasheen et al. 2013). Even though the successful implementation of new ideas into schools results from a contribution of many, the principal is often primarily responsible for the management of change in schools (Hall and Hord 1987). In particular, if an innovation is likely to impact on the whole school, it is essential that the principal appreciates the value of the initiative and is prepared to encourage it in both words and action.

Over fifty years ago, Chesler et al. (1963) found that when teachers believed that new practices might help solve problems important to students, and where the new practice could be easily adapted without great investment of time and energy, the support of the principal was a crucial factor. It is logical that this remains the case. As many school counsellors also have

teaching backgrounds, it could be assumed that they too would value the support of their principal when considering innovation in their practice. Principals' authority is delegated by employing bodies and it is the responsibility of principals to ensure that all school practices conform to systemic protocols and relevant codes of practice.

Uncertainty about having the support of their employing body was identified by Australian school counsellors as being a barrier to adopting online counselling into their guidance and counselling practice (Glasheen et al. 2013). If an innovation has the principal's support, it is in effect being sanctioned by the employing body and is, therefore, more likely to be actioned by school counsellors. Furthermore, school counsellors are more likely to innovate when they have a sound working relationship with the principal, as an innovative climate in the school is more likely to exist when there is professional trust between staff members and the principal (Moolenaar et al. 2010).

Policy Conflict

The implementation of technology-based innovations within schools can be impeded by any seeming contradictions in policies. For example, schools may encourage and promote their use of computerised technology, but at the same time expound its negative impact and consequences, such as with cyberbullying. Understandably, school administrators strive to pursue protective practices to ensure the safety of students in their care, but often the option to restrict access can limit the opportunity to learn how to use technology appropriately, and schools have a responsibility to provide such learning (Weaver 2010). This results in a conflict of policy, or what has been termed 'conflicting policy frames', which can contribute to 'dilemmas of practice' and can threaten student opportunities offered by new technologies (Ahn et al. 2011, p. 6).

The negative impact of social media use is not restricted to students, as a number of unethical situations involving teaching staff has been a cause of concern in some schools (Rubin 2014). It is, therefore, understandable that the introduction of services based on the use of computer-mediated communication by members of staff may be a source of concern for school administrators. In fact, this may be the reason that the potential of technology has been largely untapped in schools (Lemke et al. 2009). The disconnect between the policies of information communication and that of sound educational policy is one that principals must resolve to ensure that technological advances are integrated into the educational process.

On this basis, the full support of school principals would seem to be a necessary precondition for the successful and sustainable implementation of online counselling in schools, and there is a need for information about principals' likely attitudes in this regard. It is for such reasons that this research focused on principals' attitudes to the use of technology for school counselling. The aim of the study was to investigate secondary school principals' beliefs and attitudes towards using online counselling in schools.

Method

Participants

An online survey was completed by 33 secondary school principals from one Australian state. Of the participants, 54.5% ($n = 18$) were male and 45.5% ($n = 15$) were female. The majority

were aged 41 and over, with 42.4% ($n = 14$) in the 41–50 year age group and 45.5% ($n = 15$) in the 51–60 year age group. Only one participant was aged over 60 and there were three aged between 20 and 40 years. There were 30.3% ($n = 10$) who indicated that they worked at a school that was located in a metropolitan area, 33.3% ($n = 11$) in a regional city, 15.2% ($n = 5$) were rural and 21.2% ($n = 7$) were in a remote area.

Procedure

Prior to the commencement of the study, ethical clearance was sought and granted from the relevant University Human Research Ethics Committees and gatekeeper clearance was obtained from the Secondary School Principals' Association of the one Australian state involved. Subsequently, an email containing information about the study and an invitation to participate, as well as a link to the online survey, was distributed to members of the Principals' Association. A reminder to participate was sent to members two months after the initial invitation.

Data were collected through an online survey that was adapted from a survey of school counsellors about their attitudes to online counselling (Glasheen et al. 2013). To confirm the relevance of the survey questions and language for secondary school principals, before the survey was sent out semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small sample ($n = 4$) of secondary school principals from different education sectors (e.g., Catholic education, government schools), leading to some minor amendments.

Measures

The online survey comprised basic demographics and three questions about previous experience with computer technology. These included asking whether principals thought they needed advanced computer skills for their job, and whether they used computers (yes/no) for each of five forms of online communication (email, skype, chat rooms, Facebook, other social networks) for personal tasks and also with students. To determine the participants' beliefs and attitudes toward online counselling in schools, a definition of online counselling was provided at the start of the relevant questions. This definition restricted online counselling to involving “‘synchronous’ chat, which refers to the use of a real time chat facility provided via the Internet. It does not refer to email communication, which is time delayed and thereby defined as ‘asynchronous’”.

There were 37 survey items, each answered on a 5-point response format. There were 6 items that tapped into general *beliefs about online communication*, 4 items on *beliefs about students' behaviour online*, 4 items on *online counselling in schools*, 6 items on *students' attitudes about online counselling*, and 5 items on *who would use online counselling in schools*. These items were answered in relation to the possible responses of: ‘strongly disagree’ ‘disagree’, ‘unsure’, ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’. There were 8 items on *concerns about online counselling*, involving possible responses of: ‘no concern’, ‘maybe a concern’, ‘some concern’, ‘significant concern’, ‘major concern (would impact implementation)’; and 4 items on *implementation likelihood* involving possible responses of: ‘extremely unlikely’, ‘unlikely’, ‘unsure’, ‘likely’, ‘extremely likely’.

Finally, two open-ended questions sought principals' main concerns about offering online counselling to students and what would need to occur for them to support the use of online counselling in their school.

Analysis

Frequency distributions for the beliefs and attitudes items were examined. Due to the ordinal nature of the data and non-normality of the distribution of most items, scores were dichotomised to indicate endorsement (agree/strongly agree) with the belief and attitude statements, significant/major concerns about online counselling, and likely/very likely to endorse implementation. Chi-square analyses were used to examine gender differences.

The two open-ended questions were content analysed. One author coded the participants' responses into data-driven categories and these were confirmed by a colleague who clean coded responses into the same categories.

Results

All the principals were familiar with online technology, having used such technology, primarily email, and 57.6% also used social media. Most had used online technology with students, again primarily email, although there was one participant who had not. The majority (76.7%) believed that they required advanced computer skills to conduct the role of being a principal.

Table 1 presents the percentage of participants who positively endorsed each survey item. Chi-square analyses revealed no significant differences according to gender. The responses showed mixed beliefs about online communication - while few thought that people presented an untruthful persona online, there were also few who thought it was easy to get to know people online. Only a quarter thought that privacy could be ensured online.

There was universal endorsement that online communication was important to students and the vast majority understood that the online world was very real for students. Over a third thought students were truthful online and few thought they would be deceptive.

Concerns about online counselling were primarily about expectations of the school counsellors and difficulties in following up students at risk of harm. There were generally positive beliefs about students' attitudes toward online counselling, particularly that the counsellor would be more accessible.

Beliefs about who would use online counselling were not clear. Even though over half thought hard to reach groups would be more likely to use it, there were generally equivalent percentages who thought girls would use it more, and that senior students would be more likely to use online counselling. There was positive endorsement of implementation likelihood, with almost all participants stating they were likely to discuss online counselling with their school counsellor, and most being open to online counselling being made available in their school.

Content analysis of the two open-ended questions revealed a number of key themes. There were 22 participants who provided answers to the item asking about main concerns regarding offering online counselling to students. The overwhelming concern, expressed by half the participants who responded to the open-ended questions ($n = 11$), was the added workload for school counsellors. There was a belief that the current staff were already overworked and that this would be an additional task, and that more staff with additional training would be needed to provide online counselling and follow-up.

Table 1 Participants' percentage responses to survey items

Survey item	Percent
<i>Beliefs about online communication^a</i>	
Most people are honest when online	57.6
Most people keep their online world separate from their offline world	27.3
Privacy can be ensured online	24.2
Bad things are likely to happen online	18.2
It is easy to get to know people online	15.2
As a rule, people present an untruthful persona online	6.1
<i>Beliefs about students' behaviour online^a</i>	
Online communication is important for students	100.0
Students consider the online world as real as the offline world	84.8
Most students are usually truthful when making statements online	39.4
Most students tend to be deceptive when online	12.1
<i>Beliefs about online counselling in schools^a</i>	
I would support the use of online counselling by guidance counsellors/officer	81.9
Online counselling would be an effective way to counsel students	63.6
Students would feel more comfortable disclosing online	42.2
Students would find online counselling more engaging than f2f counselling	9.1
<i>Concerns about online counselling^b</i>	
Expectation by students that the guidance counsellor/officer can be contacted	63.6
Ability of school guidance counsellors/officers to provide online counselling	51.5
Difficulties involved in following up students identified at risk of harm	48.5
Legal implications	33.3
Parent reactions	33.3
Impact on work load of guidance counsellors/officers	30.3
Possible conflict with other messages we give students regarding security online	21.1
Dealing with the ethical implications of online counselling	21.2
<i>Beliefs about student attitudes toward online counselling^a</i>	
Students would think the school guidance counsellor/officer was more accessible	78.8
Students would like having online counselling available through the school	57.5
Students would like online chat being used for counselling	57.5
Students would use online counselling to 'check out' the counsellor	48.5
Students would be worried about confidentiality	27.3
Students would not take it seriously	9.1
<i>Beliefs about who would use online counselling^a</i>	
Hard to reach groups who don't usually access counsellors would use online	57.6
Girls would use online more than face-to-face counselling	33.3
Mainly junior students would use online counselling	30.3
Mainly senior students would use online counselling	27.2
Boys would use online more than face-to-face counselling	27.2
<i>Implementation likelihood^c</i>	
How likely are you to discuss online counselling with your guidance counsellors?	84.9
If training in the use of online counselling was available for guidance counsellors	78.8
How likely are you to permit online counselling in your school?	69.7
How likely would you actively encourage online counselling in your school?	60.6

Items are presented in order of endorsement, not in the order they were presented in the survey. Positive endorsement means: ^a agree or strongly agree; ^b significant or major concern; ^c likely or very likely

Two principals were specifically concerned about the impact on school counsellors of feeling that they were available "24/7".

"Additional workload to [school counsellors]"; "Our overloaded [school counsellors] would have even more work to do"; "Volume of demand. The [school counsellor] may not be able to cope with the numbers"; "Ability to monitor, support and follow up."

A range of other concerns were expressed by a small number of participants. There were four who believed that face-to-face counselling was always preferable, and, interestingly, a justification for this was that young people needed to learn how to communicate in this mode: “*many students have difficulty communicating with support staff and this [online counselling] further encourages the development of skills that are non-personal*”; “*they would not build the skills of talking out their problems with a human, with all the useful non-verbals that go with that, for each party*”. There were also concerns about how such a change in current practice might be perceived by parents and the school community in a time when the dangers of social media are often highlighted by school authorities.

Three participants were concerned about the effectiveness of online counselling, “*effectiveness? – would like to see the research*”; and, possibly related to this three participants thought that online counsellors would miss essential non-verbal cues, “*non-verbal information would not be captured*”, and that it would be difficult to identify students at risk. Another three had concerns about privacy and security; “*security of information?, confidentiality?*”, and there were two who thought that access anytime could cause disruption to school classes.

Consistent with the concerns, the most common response to the question about what would need to occur for the principal to support the use of online counselling in their school was the need for more staff ($n = 8/21$): “*I would need an extra [school counsellor] allocation to enable the school to consider this*”. There were six participants who required more evidence about how online counselling would actually function in the school: “*trial schools recording data of use by who and what types of enquiries?*”. Another four noted the need for education and training for staff, students and parents; and there were four who cited the need for a secure system and an IT platform conducive to privacy. Two principals were not convinced of the value of online counselling: “*I would need to be convinced*”; “*It would have to be mandated*”.

Discussion

The introduction of online counselling into secondary schools represents an innovation that would need support of not only school counsellors, but also of the administration and the broader school community. To date, however, there is little evidence of synchronous online counselling services being provided in schools (Glasheen and Campbell 2009; Steele et al. 2014). Given that principals bear much of the responsibility for the management of change in schools (Hall and Hord 1987, p. 43), this research is important as it sought the opinion of these key gatekeepers.

The results are encouraging, as most of the participants were prepared to consider the implementation of online counselling in their school. They reported that they used technology in their professional and personal lives and their opinions seemed to support the idea of their school counsellor using this resource to provide support for students. Moreover, most indicated that they would be willing to discuss online counselling with their school counsellor and also support them to receive training.

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Morey et al. 2013), most of the participants regarded online communication as important for young people and believed that they would like having an online counselling service available to them. Importantly, most of the participants believed that ‘hard to reach’ groups who do not usually access counsellors would use online counselling. These ‘hard to reach’ groups may include young people who experience a mental health issue and who typically do not seek appropriate professional help (Lawrence

et al. 2015). Because online counselling integrates the use of technology that most young people are comfortable with, it may encourage help-seeking, which Rickwood and Thomas (2012, p. 180) concluded was an “adaptive and coping process ...by using external resources for assistance” (p. 180).

Though there was preparedness to consider the use of online counselling in their schools, some of the principals’ concerns resonated with previous research undertaken with school counsellors (e.g., Abney and Maddux 2004; Vinluan 2011). Principals’ beliefs that the introduction of a new form of counselling could impact on a school counsellor’s workload has also been perceived by counsellors as being an inhibiting factor (Glasheen et al. 2013). However, this may be due to both principals and counsellors lacking a true appreciation of what online counselling might entail. The participants may not have understood that this online process can be controlled just as much as face-to-face counselling can be. In relation to the participants’ concerns, the results also provided insight into the possible support that could be provided by education authorities, including training for school counsellors, guidelines for online counselling, better online security, and advice about legal implications of online counselling.

Limitations

The major limitation of this study is the small sample size and the results need to be considered with this in mind. Principals were difficult to get engaged in this study and even after a second attempt to circulate the invitation we failed to recruit a wide representation. This might be to do with workloads, or it could suggest that the topic of online counselling in secondary schools was not a pressing issue for them, or it was not a topic on which they felt able or ready to offer an opinion. This is curious as it could be expected that principals might be open to an increased use of communication technologies in order to make their schools more responsive to the digital age.

Despite such limitations, the results do offer some insight into the potential facilitators of and concerns about the introduction of online counselling into schools. Given that the research was conducted in only one Australian state, further research with a larger Australian sample or samples from other countries could provide more insight into the facilitators of and barriers to introducing online counselling into school settings.

Conclusion

Online counselling is beginning to see more widespread use in the community including in services that provide support to young people. Schools are an important source of support for young people through their guidance and counselling services. To date, however, online counselling has seldom been introduced in schools. This study suggests that, despite concerns, such as school counsellor workload, most of the principals who participated were in general support of introducing online counselling services within schools and believed that students would make use of it.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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