Therapeutic counselling in UK secondary schools: A review of current research

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Current context

• ‘Significant revival’ in provision of therapeutic counselling in British secondary schools
• Around 75% of schools in England and Wales now provide such a service (Jenkins and Polat, 2005)
• Moves towards establishment of Counselling in Schools as universal service in:
  – Northern Ireland: counselling service available for all post-primary pupils
  – Scotland: all pupils required to have access by 2015
  – Wales: government plans to develop universal service
• May soon be most accessed, accessible site of therapeutic provision in UK
• But, limited evidence regarding efficacy, effectiveness and nature of such services
Aims

- Review available evidence regarding therapeutic counselling in schools (CiS):
  1. What are CiS services like?
  2. Who uses CiS services?
  3. What factors facilitate/inhibit attendance at CiS services?
  4. Are CiS services effective?
  5. What kind of changes do CiS services bring about?
  6. What is the impact of CiS on pupils’ capacities to study and learn?
  7. What aspects of the counselling are helpful/unhelpful?
  8. In what ways can CiS services be improved?
  9. What is the ‘added value’ of CiS services to a school’s pastoral care provisions?
Inclusion criteria

- Conducted post-1996
- Based within secondary school
- ‘Counselling’ (i.e., primarily relational therapy) as opposed to CBT or interpretative
- Based within the United Kingdom (not US-based educational guidance)
- Primarily one-to-one therapy
- Some collection of quantitative data
- Relatively rigorous data collection/analysis

<< Nine evaluation studies identified
1. What are counselling in schools services like?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>School level</th>
<th>N. of schools</th>
<th>N. couns.</th>
<th>Pupils seen</th>
<th>Length (mins.)</th>
<th>Orient.</th>
<th>Forms of referral</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dudley (Sherry 1999)</td>
<td>1998-9</td>
<td>S and P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>≈10</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Hum.c</td>
<td>Mainly TC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aberdeen (Loynd 2003)</td>
<td>2000-2</td>
<td>S (67%)</td>
<td>1 S, 2 P</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>446</td>
<td>40 (30 P)</td>
<td>Hum. (TA)</td>
<td>Mainly self, some TC</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSPCC (Fox and Butler 2003)</td>
<td>2001-3</td>
<td>S (≈50%) &amp; P</td>
<td>≈20</td>
<td>≈19</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>≈30</td>
<td>PCA</td>
<td>Mainly PCA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glasgow Phase I (Cooper 2004)</td>
<td>2002-4</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>45-60</td>
<td>Mainly PCA (93%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Ren. (Cooper 2006a)</td>
<td>2003-5</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>PCA</td>
<td>Mainly PCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulster (Adams et al., 2006)</td>
<td>2004-5</td>
<td>S (≈60%) &amp; P</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>PDT/integrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airdrie (Bondi et al 2006)</td>
<td>2004-6</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>44 (school)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>PCA</td>
<td>PCA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oban &amp; Tobermory Hough (2006)</td>
<td>2005-6</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>45-60</td>
<td>PCA</td>
<td>PCA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glasgow Phase II (Cooper 2006b)</td>
<td>2005-6</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>PCA</td>
<td>PCA</td>
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<tr>
<td>East Dunbartonshire (Freire unpub.)</td>
<td>2005-6</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>PCA</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Sch. = school, Com. = community. S = secondary school, P = primary school. PCA = person-centred approach, PDT = psychodynamic, TA = Transactional Analysis. TC = Teacher, PTC = Pastoral Care Teacher.
2. Who uses counselling in school services?
<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean sessions</td>
<td>≈9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7.63</td>
<td>5.62</td>
<td>9.88</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>6.76</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>6.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attendance rates (%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>≈86</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>84.1</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (% female)</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50% (school sample)</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
<td>53%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnic origin</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>94% White (Brit./Eu)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>85% Brit.</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>School year/age (most frequent, descend. order)</td>
<td>12 y. o.</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>S3</td>
<td>S4</td>
<td>Mean:</td>
<td>S3</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>S3</td>
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<tr>
<td>13 y. o.</td>
<td>S1</td>
<td>S4</td>
<td>S3</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>S4</td>
<td>12.07</td>
<td>S4</td>
<td>S3</td>
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<td>14 y. o.</td>
<td>S3</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>S4</td>
<td>S1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical abuse</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Bereave.</td>
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</table>
The ‘average’ client

• Slightly more likely to be female
• About 12-14 years old
• Most likely to present with:
  – Family, relationship and anxiety issues (particularly if female)
  – Behaviour, anger and school-related issues (particularly if male)
• Likely to attend for about 7 sessions
3. What factors facilitate/inhibit attendance at counselling in schools services?
Inhibiting factors
(Glasgow I school-wide survey, n = 578)

1. Feeling that there are other people you can talk to (mean = 2.05)
   (2 = ‘a moderate amount’, 3 = ‘quite a lot’)
1. Worrying that other pupils might find out what you say (mean = 1.87) (esp. fem.)
2. Not wanting to talk to a stranger (mean = 1.86)
1. Believing that you should be able to sort out your problems on your own
   (mean = 1.78) (esp. male)
1. Worrying other pupils might find out that you are going (mean = 1.68) (esp. fem.)
Facilitative factors (Glasgow I survey)

1. ‘Being able to contact the counsellor directly, without having to tell a teacher’: mean = 2.40
2. ‘Being able to see the counsellor on a drop-in basis’: mean = 2.27
3. Being reassured that the counselling is confidential’ mean = 2.26
Preferred location of service

- 73.4% of pupils school-wide expressed preference for school-based location (Glasgow I survey)

- Glasgow I post-counselling interview:
  - 58% preferred in-school location
  - 37% expressed no overall preference
  - none expressed preference for community setting (e.g. youth club or surgery)
Preferred modality of service

- 86% of pupils school-wide expressed preference for individual, rather than group, format (Glasgow I survey)

- Glasgow I post-counselling interview:
  - 63% preferred one-to-one modality over group
  - 37% saw strengths and limitations of both
  - none expressed preference for group format
4. Are counselling in schools services effective?
Effectiveness

• Significant reductions in levels of psychological distress from pre- to post-counselling in all 6 studies using outcome measures

• Effect size (Cohen’s $d$):
  – 0.88 NSPCC (Teen-CORE)
  – 0.73 Glasgow I (Teen-CORE)
  – 0.33 East Ren. (SDQ)
  – 0.75 Oban and Tobermory (YP-CORE)
  – 1.00 Glasgow II (YP-CORE)
  – 1.12 East Dumbartonshire (YP-CORE)

Mean prepost $d = 0.80$

= 79% of clients post-counselling are better off than average client pre-counselling
Effectiveness II

- Clinical improvement: 50-60% (Glasgow II)
- But, all studies uncontrolled (though Ulster study found statistically significant deterioration in ‘quasi-control’ group)
- No significant differences in effectiveness across: gender, age, schools/counsellors, number of sessions
Self-reported helpfulness

• Helped ‘A lot’ or ‘Quite a lot’:
  – 54% (Dudley)
  – 74% (Glasgow I)
  – 73% (Oban and Tobermory)
  – 78% (Glasgow II)
  – 85% (East Dumb.)

• ‘Very helpful’ or ‘Helpful’
  – 97% (Aberdeen)

• ‘6’ or ‘7’ on 7 point scale (‘not at all helpful’ to ‘very helpful’)
  – 67% (East Ren.)

• Overall: around three-quarters of clients rate it as moderately to very helpful

• Also rated as helpful by external observers and professionals, e.g.....
Pastoral care teachers’ ratings of helpfulness (Glasgow I & II)
5. What kind of change does counselling in schools bring about?
SDQ subscale data (East Ren.)

- Emotional symptoms
- Conduct Problems
- Hyperactivity
- Peer Problems
- Prosocial

Graph showing changes in subscale data before and after counselling.
Table 8. Ranked reductions in levels of psychological distress on YP-CORE items (Glasgow II)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Pre-coun. mean</th>
<th>Post-coun. mean</th>
<th>Pooled SD</th>
<th>Effect size (d)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Felt unhappy</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Problems felt too much</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3=</td>
<td>Able to cope</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3=</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Can't stop thinking</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Felt alone</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Haven't felt like talking</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Unwanted thoughts</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>0.63</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Felt tired</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.57</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Felt nervous</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.51</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Others got on nerves</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>0.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Felt can ask for help</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>0.47</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Have done all wanted</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>0.45</td>
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<td>14=</td>
<td>Self-harm</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>0.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>14=</td>
<td>Hard to sleep</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>0.35</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Thought future good</td>
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<td>1.78</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>0.35</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>No friends</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>1.16</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Felt close to someone</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>0.15</td>
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</table>
Primary impact on *affect* consistent with findings from wider psychotherapy research field

- Few studies on effectiveness or efficacy of PCT with C&YP (≈2% studies, Fonagy et al., 2002)

- **But:** some evidence that non-directive/counselling approach efficacious for mild to moderate *depression*:
  - Vostanis et al. (1996) non-focused intervention as effective as cognitive-behavioural
  - Birmaher et al. (2000): nondirective, supportive therapy as efficacious as CBT and systemic behavioural therapy in treating depression in long term
Negative findings for counselling

• Non-directive counselling not particularly efficacious for behavioural problems/disturbances of conduct/‘juvenile delinquency’ (e.g., Fonagy et al., 2002; Lipsey, 1995; McGuire & Priestley, 1995)

• Multimodal, highly structured, skills-orientated, CBT programs shown to be most effective
6. What is the impact of counselling in schools on pupils’ capacities to study and learn?
6 out of 10 clients said counselling helped them study and learn (Glasgow II)

- Motivated to attend school
- Able to concentrate in class
- Motivated to study and learn
- Willing to participate in class

Much less... No difference Much more...
8 out of 10 pastoral care teachers also felt counselling helped pupils to study and learn (Glasgow II)
Most recent findings: simplified post-counselling questionnaire
Glasgow post-Phase II

![Bar chart showing frequency distribution of responses to questions related to school engagement and academic performance. The bars represent different aspects such as keen to attend school, keen to take part in class, keen to study and learn, able to concentrate in class, able to do well in tests and exams, and able to get on with your teachers. The x-axis represents the frequency categories ranging from 'A lot less' to 'A lot more', while the y-axis shows the frequency scale from 0 to 100.]
Trend toward reduced absences and exclusions following counselling (Glasgow II)

Half-day absences (including exclusions)

- Pre-counselling
- Post-counselling
Principle change pathway

Client interviews, Glasgow II

Interpersonal/emotional problems → Ruminating on problems in class → Poorer concentration and focus in class → Impaired capacity to study and learn

Counselling reduces Interpersonal/emotional problems → Opportunity to think through problems and get things off chest

Poorer concentration and focus in class reduces

Impaired capacity to study and learn
Primary impact of counselling on classroom learning (East Renf.: SDQ impact supplement)
7. What aspects of the counselling service are helpful/unhelpful?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glasgow I INT</th>
<th>NSPCC INT</th>
<th>Airdrie INT</th>
<th>Glasgow I OQ</th>
<th>East Ren. OQ</th>
<th>Dudley OQ</th>
<th>Glasgow II OQ</th>
<th>Oban CQ</th>
<th>East Dumb. CQ</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to talk (95%)</td>
<td>Getting things off chest (‘some’)</td>
<td>Counsellor’s personal qualities: warmth, naturalness</td>
<td>Talking and being listened to (28%)</td>
<td>Talking and being listened to (59%)</td>
<td>Talking more openly (6%)</td>
<td>Talking and being listened to (21%)</td>
<td>Talking to someone who listens (2.41)</td>
<td>Talking to someone who listens (2.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality (63%)</td>
<td>Empathy (13%)</td>
<td>Range of creative activities (e.g., mask-making)</td>
<td>Specific improvements (24%)</td>
<td>Guidance and advice (14%)</td>
<td>Being understood (3%)</td>
<td>Getting things off one’s chest (4%)</td>
<td>Getting things off chest (2.40)</td>
<td>Getting things off chest (2.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions/advice (58%)</td>
<td>Problem-solving (‘some’)</td>
<td>Suggestions/advice</td>
<td>Getting things off chest (16%)</td>
<td>Misc. (9%)</td>
<td>Specific improvements (3%)</td>
<td>Independence of counsellor (3%)</td>
<td>Confidentiality (2.11)</td>
<td>Confidentiality (2.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection on feelings (47%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Responsivity and flexibility</td>
<td>Guidance/advice (8%)</td>
<td>Confidentiality (8%)</td>
<td>Confidentiality (2%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Suggestions/advice (2.03)</td>
<td>Suggestions/advice (1.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being asked questions (53%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Confidentiality (8%)</td>
<td>Everything (6%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Insight and understanding (1.96)</td>
<td>Being asked questions (1.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting things off chest (42%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Specific improvements (6%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Working out new behaviours (1.67)</td>
<td>Insight and understanding (1.69)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. INT = interviews, OQ = post-counselling open-ended questionnaire responses, CQ = post-counselling closed-ended rating rated responses
Overall ranking of helpful factors

1. Talking and being listened to
2. Getting things off one’s chest
3. Guidance and advice
4. Confidentiality
What might pupils want from a counsellor (Glasgow I survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Quite a lot</th>
<th>A moderate amount</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening ear</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things off chest</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-understanding</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggested reasons</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving skills</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Unhelpful aspects of counselling

• Few aspects identified
  – E.g. East Renf. study: 91% of responses coded as ‘nothing’

• Few commonalities, except:
  – insufficient confidentiality (Glasgow I, Dudley, NSPCC)
  – Lack of input and direction: 16 percent (Glasgow I interviews)
8. In what ways can counselling in schools services be improved?
Areas for improvement

1. Extended services (esp. more days) (70% PTC interviews, Glasgow II)

2. Better information exchange between counsellors, pastoral care staff and multi-agency professionals:
   - esp. more feedback on progress that clients are making
   (NSPCC, Glasgow I & II, Aberdeen)

3. Clearer protocols at start of project (Glasgow I & II)

4. Greater promotion/higher profile of service (Glasgow I & II)
9. What is the ‘added value’ of a counselling service to a school’s pastoral care provisions?
Pastoral care teachers’ interviews (Glasgow II)

1. Capacity to work with young people for extended time periods
2. Expertise in counselling skills
3. Highly confidential environment
4. Independence from school
5. Non-directive
6. More accessible than other external agencies
7. Less stigma than psychology/psychiatry
8. Provides particular support for ‘troubled’ young people
9. Relief for pastoral care teachers to know that additional support available
Summary
1. Growing number of counselling in schools services in UK, supported by governmental policy initiatives

2. Used by range of boys and girls, typically 12-14, often presenting with family issues. Average attendance about 7 sessions

3. Primary factors which inhibit young people from attending counselling are anxieties about talking to strangers and not wanting other pupils to find out. General preference for school-based, individual therapy

4. Counselling associated with significant improvements in mental health and well-being: ES from pre- to post-counselling $\approx 0.8$
5. Improvements primarily at affective, rather than behavioural, level
6. Indications that counselling can facilitate studying and learning, through helping pupils concentrate more fully in class
7. Talking and getting things off chest most helpful aspects of counselling, but advice and guidance also valued. Confidentiality important for many clients.
8. Primary area for improvement is clearer communication and protocols between counsellors and pastoral care staff
9. Good evidence that CiS services add value to a school’s pastoral care provisions
Thank you

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References