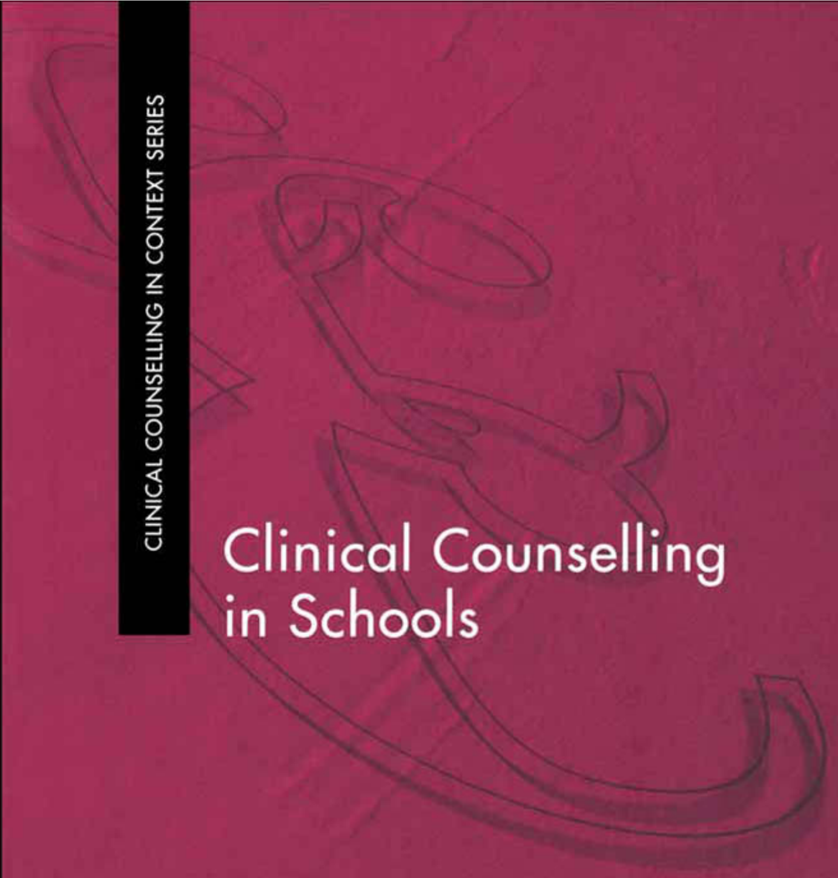
CLINICAL COUNSELLING IN CONTEXT SERIES

Clinical Counselling in Schools



Edited by Nick Barwick

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Clinical Counselling in Schools

Too often in education there is a split between those concerned with children's personal and emotional well-being and those focusing on academic achievement. At a time when counselling in schools is on the increase, working towards an integration of the personal and the academic is paramount.

Clinical Counselling in Schools provides counsellors, educational psychologists, teachers, teacher-trainers and other interested professionals with essential insights into how counselling best works within a school. Covering a wide range of problems encountered in schools, the contributors – all experienced school counsellors – show how the context, be it state or public, primary or secondary, mainstream or special school, needs to be acknowledged in order to support and foster the emotional and academic welfare of the child.

Using a wealth of clinical information, *Clinical Counselling in Schools* is timely and essential reading for counsellors and all educational professionals who wish to utilise the full potential of counselling in the context of schools.

Nick Barwick has worked in the educational sector for fifteen years, first as a teacher in secondary and tertiary institutions, then as a student counsellor. He now works as a counsellor at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He is Associate Editor of *Psychodynamic Counselling*.

Clinical Counselling in Schools

Edited by Nick Barwick

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A note on the use of pronouns

There is always a problem about the use of the generic pronoun. Contributors to this book, both male and female, have found various ways of dealing with this. In a book which celebrates diversity, I have not interfered in this respect.

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Introduction

Nick Barwick

Growing up is difficult. Distressing life events make it more so. Bullying, bereavement, family divisions, substance abuse, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, sexual and racial harassment, unwanted pregnancy, isolation, suicidal feelings – all these issues and more invade the lives of many young people, disrupting school life and the ability to learn. An important role of counselling in schools is to support such children through these crises, helping them to deal more effectively with the pain they bear. Emotional relief may also then better allow them to focus upon the educational tasks at hand. Thus, implicit in the task of counselling in a school context is a dual aim: the psychological *and* educational well-being of the child.

In fact three types or 'levels' of counselling are often identified as occurring in schools: the immediate, the intermediate and the intensive (Hamblin 1993). The first describes an environment in which teachers, using 'counselling skills', sustain a non-judgemental and empathic relationship with their pupils in order to both help identify those experiencing difficulties and promote a 'positive climate for learning' for all. The second level refers to the activities of those teachers who, as well as having responsibility for pupil development as part of the care curriculum, utilise basic counsellor training to work with troubled pupils and, if necessary, refer them for specialist help. This leaves the third, intensive level: the province of the specialist – the clinical counsellor.

This hierarchical description is both useful and misleading. It is useful because it identifies clinical counselling in schools as an area of specialism; one which, dealing as it does with the confusing and painful intricacies of young people's emotional lives, is a complex enterprise, not to be undertaken lightly or without sound training and supervisory scrutiny and support. It is misleading, as it can cast the counsellor as adjunct *to* rather than participant *in* the life of a school; one whose sole function it is to act as receptacle for the most disturbed and disturbing, and often, particularly with disruptive children, as precarious shelter at the last stop before exclusion.

Dealing with the individual needs of disturbed and disturbing children is clearly a vital part of the school counsellor's role. Such children tend to bring to school personal problems which, though interfering with both their and sometimes others' academic and social learning, have their source elsewhere. Yet school is no neutral ground and the tasks of teaching and learning, as well as other complex social interactions that make up the life of a school, have an impact upon each and every child and adult within it and are charged with meaning. In short, the problem may not be in the child *alone* but in the interaction between child and context (the school).

The contributors to this book approach their work from many different theoretical perspectives – behavioural, cognitive-behavioural, Gestalt/TA, person-centred, psychodynamic, systemic – using art, stories, structured and unstructured talk and play. Yet whatever their perspective, each keeps the context in which they work firmly in view. The ramifications of this 'context-sightedness' are varied. Some counsellors, though resisting the practical impingement of school context upon the therapeutic work, utilise it as material for the process of therapeutic thinking. Others, seeking to make fuller use of school (and family) resources, broaden the counselling boundaries in order to buttress and extend the therapeutic work. And then there are some who, taking a more proactive approach, forgo the consulting room and, instead, work in deliberate fashion to create therapeutic opportunities within the ordinary life of the school. Whatever the approach, whatever the theoretical disposition, common to the rich tapestry of clinical practice depicted in these chapters is that the context, whether it informs or transforms the counselling process, is never long or far from mind.

In a lively opening chapter, drawing on psychodynamic thought with a touch of Charles Dickens, Hamish Canham and Biddy Youell set the contextual stage, immediately highlighting how complex and emotionally charged the process of learning is. The way we learn is *learnt* – in infancy in relationship to the mother and later through relations with the whole family – long before we arrive at school. And then, just when it seems the child's learning efforts reach solid ground, along comes adolescence!

A focus common to chapters 2 to 4 is the management of boundaries in school counselling. In Florence Heller's lucid description of her work with deprived children in an inner city school, she argues against a 'purist' approach and for the need to be open to appropriate collaboration with teaching staff, in an effort to provide the type of nurturing conditions Winnicott refers to as ‘the holding environment’. Working from a person-centred perspective, Miranda Ommanney and Jan Symes echo many of these sentiments. Their vital work with young people with severe disabilities is movingly portrayed, as they reflect upon the particular difficulties experienced by the counsellor in maintaining ‘core conditions’ and the right balance of intimacy and distance in work that to many might seem unbearable. Last in this set is Philip Hewitt’s subtle and often poetic description of his work in a public school. Here, a rigorous though uncomfortable holding of the therapeutic ‘membrane’ of confidentiality forces the counsellor to think about the painful, isolating feelings experienced by the client. It is a chapter which offers rich examples of how thinking about context can inform the counselling without transforming it.

To some degree, chapters 5 and 6 do, however, describe clinical work transformed by context. This is partly because of the roles these authors play within the contexts in which they work. Ferelyth Watt, working as a psychodynamically trained area support teacher, gives a detailed, probing account of some difficult relatively long-term, intensive counselling. Working with children in class as well as individually, she shows how context can be used both to gather important information and achieve the desired therapeutic effect.

Watt’s theme is the need for safety if learning is to take place. Sarah Adams takes up this theme in her engaging, vivid description of drama therapy with children in an EBD school (a school for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties). In particular, she explores how the therapeutic use of stories can complement her work as a teacher, and help establish a ‘secure base’ for those children whose ‘insecure attachments’ frustrate their ability to socialise and learn.

June Platts and Yuki Williamson bring a different perspective – the cognitive-behavioural approach (CBT). In a clear, uncluttered account, they argue forcefully for the cultural fit between educational aims and methods, and CBT work. Both are concerned with clarity of thinking, unfettered by ‘irrational beliefs’, and both employ collaborative methods in which pupils/clients are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning and growth.

Chapters 8 and 9 are both contributions of educational psychologists. Drawing on Gestalt therapy and transactional analysis, Hilary Hickmore argues convincingly and enthusiastically for the use of art and play as a powerful means of engaging disaffected children and enabling them to communicate deeply troubling issues of which they themselves may not even be aware. Further, promoting an integrative approach, she sees such work as playing an essential part in the design and implementation of children's individual education plans. In contrast, Peter Sharp and Elizabeth Herrick, responding to teacher requests for help with difficult students, employ a group approach, based mainly upon behavioural and cognitive-behavioural principles. Their exciting and innovative work is radically proactive, promoting 'emotional literacy' and deliberately including teachers in an effort to stimulate a systemic shift in the way that 'problem anger' is dealt with in schools.

Complementing yet contrasting with Sharp and Herrick's approach is that described by Gill Morton. Again, working with groups, the fascinating clinical material she presents gives vivid insights into many of the emotional difficulties blocking children's learning. As with the previous authors, she adopts a deliberate policy of working with teachers, since her aim is not only to provide a space for children's thinking but also to contribute to the development of teachers' understanding and therapeutic repertoires.

Singly rather than in groups, in the final chapter I turn to the most common form of writing exercise required of older children – the essay. Using object relations theory, I describe my attempts to understand what hinders able children in fulfilling their academic potential in this field. I suggest that the curiously ordinary exercise of essay-writing can become, for the adolescent, the dramatic stage upon which deep ambivalence about aggression and the prospect of leaving home are acted out to the detriment of academic success.

In a cogent and useful review of the history and present state of school counselling, Colleen McLaughlin (1999:21) berates a recent 'regression' to 'previous views of counselling as the province of specialists', concluding that:

> The evidence seems to be that we need to develop the role, skills and pedagogy of counselling, not restrict it. The need of young people in the context of a personally and socially complex society, which is aiming to become a learning society, requires us to develop and integrate counselling theory and skills into the role of all teachers, not compartmentalise it.

I concur with this vision, though, as teacher *and* clinical counsellor, I do not berate the return of specialists, as long as they have a role that allows them to be a participant *in* rather than an adjunct *to* the school. More accurately, to misappropriate a term used by Harry Stack Sullivan (1954), I would suggest that the role required of the clinical counsellor in the context of school is that of 'participant-observer'; one who, being an observer, may offer a safe space characterised by the necessary illusion of being outside the context, yet, being a participant – one who recognises that, inevitably, they are part of a context and are implicated in the life of the school – may utilise this position to good therapeutic effect. In this way, a school counsellor acts as both receptacle and vessel: receptacle, because he or she must be open to what is poured into them; vessel, because what is poured in may, in due course and in a different, more processed form, be poured back. At times, what is poured back is an individual who, having had a safe space to consider new ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, may better negotiate the intricate relationships involved in the process of learning in the context of school. At others, what might be poured back is *not* the individual, but a different perspective regarding the interactional life of the school. Whichever it is, individual or perspective, systemic thinking suggests there is a vital connection between the two, since 'Every part of a system is so related to its fellow parts that a change in one part will cause a change in all' (Watzlawick *et al.* 1967: 123). In this way, clinical counsellors who properly take note of the context in which they work and breathe may contribute something vital not only to the life of the child but also to the life of an effective and affectively oriented school.[1]

Note

1 I borrow the notion of 'affective education' from Long (1995).

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Chapter 1

The developmental and educational context

The emotional experience of learning

Hamish Canham and Biddy Youell

Models of learning

It is no coincidence that the formal schooling of children in this country begins at five, and that there is a transition from primary to secondary school at eleven. These changes in the educational context correspond to transitions in children's development. A child of five is at a point in his life when he is leaving babyhood and early childhood and entering the period known as latency. A child of eleven is poised on the brink of puberty and adolescence. In this chapter, we want to look at the interpenetration of the child's developmental progress and emotional state with the external educational environment.

We also want to draw attention to how models of learning vary at different stages of development. Whatever the age of the child, there is an important distinction to be drawn between the two types of learning distinguished by the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, as 'learning about' and 'learning from experience'. The former is characterised by a lack of curiosity and the accumulation of facts and figures; the latter by a gradual making sense of the world through one's own experience of it.

Charles Dickens embodies these contrasting ways of learning in *Hard Times* in the persons of Sissy Jupe, a circus girl, on one hand, and the teacher, Mr M'Choakumchild and the principal, Mr Gradgrind, on the other. As the extract below shows, Mr M'Choakumchild and Mr Gradgrind teach a system of learning based on 'facts' and the accumulation of knowledge in which the role of imagination or 'fancy' is subordinated to the dry, meaningless repetition by rote of the external characteristics of objects. Sissy Jupe breathes life into learning, through a meaningful, personal connection to the subject by using her mind and having independence of thought.

> 'Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, Sir!'

This is how Mr Gradgrind expounds his educational system to the schoolmaster Mr M'Choakumchild and his pupils. He sees the children in the classroom as 'little vessels . . . ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim'.

> 'Now, let me ask you girls and boys, would you paper a room with representations of horses?'
>
> After a pause, one half of the children cried in chorus, 'Yes, Sir!' Upon which the other half, seeing in the gentleman's face that Yes was wrong, cried out in chorus, 'No, Sir!' – as the custom is in these examinations.
>
> 'Of course, No. Why wouldn't you?'
>
> A pause. One corpulent, slow boy with a wheezy manner of breathing, ventured the answer. Because he wouldn't paper a room at all, but would paint it.
>
> 'You *must* paper it,' said Thomas Gradgrind, 'whether you like it or not. Don't tell *us* you wouldn't paper it. What do you mean, boy?'
>
> 'I'll explain to you then,' said the gentleman, after another and dismal pause, 'why you wouldn't paper a room with representations of horses. Do you ever see horses walking up and down the sides of rooms in reality – in fact? Do you?'
>
> 'Yes, Sir!' from one half. 'No, Sir!' from the other.

This stifling of imagination and conviction that there is a right way to view the world is, of course, represented in Mr M'Choakumchild's and Mr Gradgrind's names. Sissy, or Cecilia as Mr Gradgrind calls her, has another view of things.

> There being a general conviction by this time that 'No, Sir!' was always the right answer to this gentleman, the chorus of No was very strong. Only a few feeble stragglers said Yes; among them Sissy Jupe.