

Counselling in Schools and Universities in England: Battling the Effects of the Covid Crisis

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Abstract

This paper examines counselling provision in schools and universities in England which has been growing since the 1960s. However, of late, despite high increases in children in school and young people in higher education, displaying higher levels of emotional and mental health problems, funding for schools has been cut and a decline in the numbers of counsellors available has occurred. This, despite serious concerns in government about children's mental health and various government initiatives, aimed at encouraging schools to provide such services for pupils and their parents. In many cases, the role of counsellor has been diverted to teachers or often, to teaching assistants or welfare workers, who have received little training in this area. In universities, problems have risen sharply since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, as campuses were closed and teaching delivered on line. This meant the ability to access one to one counselling for students also had to be provided online, not face to face. This was at a time when university students were facing numerous problems including isolation, some teaching staff unprepared for high quality online delivery and loss of part-time employment which for students, was vital in maintaining a decent lifestyle. New students starting in September 2020 faced a situation which was not what they expected to find in university life and this has resulted in a growth in stress, anxiety and ideas of abandoning studies. Those graduating are also facing the challenges of a rapidly declining job market and a highly uncertain future, with little in the way of support for mental health issues, as they are now outside the education system.

Keywords: counselling, schools, colleges, universities, mental health, England, Covid

Introduction

The UK government provides advice to schools, the National Health Service, Local Authority (LA) Commissioners of Counselling and other facilitators of psychological support, who provide counselling to pupils in primary and secondary schools in England. Interest in this service started in the 1960s and increased in the latter half of the twentieth century. However, one past Chief of Ofsted Chris Woodhead, was known to hold the opinion that schools and teachers are not there to mirror the work of social service departments, but to educate children (The Times, 2006). He believed many teachers were too closely involved with giving emotional support, as opposed to educating their pupils and that former task should be left to experts, preferably educational psychologists and social workers. However, many

schools had noted an increase in children suffering from mental health issues and demonstrating the effects of emotional disturbance with altered behaviours, caused by the problems in their lives. The origins of these included, family breakdown, bullying, (cyber or in person) and the intense pressures to conform and to be popular with peers and successful in school, plus presenting the 'right' physical image, to name only a few. This had led to an increased suicide rate in young people, school refusal, family relationship problems, eating disorders and the desire to be popular and attractive and belong. This latter has in some areas, led to the move to a gang culture. Schools therefore saw an urgent need to offer counselling services to their pupils. Eventually however, the costs of providing this service in-house, as school/college budgets came under strain elsewhere, became impossible for some institution. This resulted in teachers having to deal with children with mental health issues with, in some areas, little or no support.

Training counsellors

Counsellors in England can be trained after obtaining a degree (any subject) followed by acquiring a post graduate counselling qualification, or following an introductory counselling course, which leads to further awards, such as, a certificate, or diploma. There are many companies, in addition to colleges and universities providing such programmes and these can be followed face to face or online. However, most of them involve payment by the individual. Training involves placements, so that students learn to apply their theoretical knowledge, whilst being supported in their role. Counsellors need to be listed on an accredited register to be allowed to work in schools and like all school staff, have to pass police safety checks and hold the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance. Once in post in England, school counsellors work only during term-time. The posts are often part-time, so an individual may have to work for more than one school, or for a business that provides counselling services to several schools in their area. Some LAs have counsellors who work within that authority's schools, as needs arise. Those working with younger children tend to base their work on play, or use art to help children understand and express the problems they face. Whereas, with secondary students, the one to one approach of a listening ear is available. Counsellors also have to be ready to discuss problems with the parents, who may not wish to acknowledge there is a problem or conversely, be over anxious or demanding, insisting that their child's needs are prioritised. Training of these counsellors therefore has to include how to approach this type of situation. Incomes tend to be lower than for teachers, but there are good chances of promotion possible, including becoming a trainer of counsellors.

Counselling in schools

The purpose of the provision of counselling in England's schools, is to provide such services 'as a psychological therapy to improve the mental health and wellbeing

of children and young people' (Gov.UK, 2016, p. 1). In its Guidance Document (DfE, 2016), the government acknowledges that the country has a problem with mental health issues in young people. This Document is not of a statutory nature; that is, its purpose is for guidance only on the use of counselling services in schools and why the government supports the idea of offering this service to pupils. Therefore, schools are not obliged to appoint a school counsellor, indeed many do not and use 'support staff', such as teaching or welfare assistants to fulfil this role. However, such people rarely have professional counselling or psychological training, to enable them to help with the mental health issues of students. LAs and state schools have access to an educational psychologist and these professionals are often involved with children with learning, or severe behavioural difficulties in schools. However, educational psychologists are in short supply and not readily available as many have long waiting lists of clients. In addition to the above-mentioned material, the Department for Education (DfE) also issued a document on *Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools* (DfE, 2018) and the PSHE Association also offers support on mental health issues to teachers working in the area of personal social and health education (PSHE Association, 2019). This later document stresses the need for a safe learning environment in order to successfully teach such difficult subjects. The problem with PSHE for many years has been, that most teachers are not sufficiently trained in these aspects of the curriculum, but rather in the main subjects such as maths, English etc. Although PSHE is now statutory, there are few experts trained in this field and most of this teaching is undertaken by form teachers, or a team of senior teachers, many of whom have little specific training in this area either (Hilton, 2009).

The DfE advises that counselling services provided in schools are most effective where encompassed by a whole school approach to the emotional health and well-being of its pupils. Schools are urged (DfE, 2016, p. 12) to develop 'confidence, resilience and motivation in their students'. This the DfE suggests, will establish these traits in students and so, in their later working lives they will enhance the ability to contribute fully to society and therefore to the economy. Much of the document on counselling appears to be directed mainly at improving the mental health of young people. Obviously, concerns have been raised in recent years about the rise in bullying, gang activity and abuse of children by their peers, which may occur face to face, but most often on social media. This can and has led to suicide and also to the development of a gang culture, as individuals feel protected if part of a gang, even if this involves them in unlawful behaviour.

By 2017 it appears that one in eight children had recognisable mental health issues (NHS, 2018). This report resulted in the government issuing a green paper on improving children and young people's mental health and subsequently several health mandates, with the intention of addressing the problems of mental health amongst the young. The disturbing reports of children self-harming and attempting suicide alerted the media to the problem and questions began to be asked nationwide, as to what solutions could be offered. In the *Counselling in Schools* paper (DfE, 2016) the government had acknowledged the need for support in schools for young people,

but subsequently the lowering of school budgets and strain on finances has handicapped schools in appointing qualified counsellors. The pandemic of 2020 has added further concerns about vulnerable children being at home when schools were closed, with domestic violence incidents becoming more common and many deprived children not having the required access to technology, in order to continue their learning. In addition, Samaritans, the suicide prevention charity, has drawn attention to the rise in suicide amongst young people, with concerns over mental health rising steeply during the lockdown experiences. Their Head of Research reports (Parker, 2020) that young people are suffering from the loss of friends' support and as a result have anxious feelings and a stronger sense of frustration with lockdown, than that suffered by older citizens. This is exacerbated by the loss of their mechanisms for coping, which are their supportive friendship groups, plus their own inexperience in coping with life's challenges.

BACP has started a campaign in England to ensure that every secondary school and further education college in the country has a trained counsellor. Salaries vary however, and often positions are part-time only. The Institute of Public Policy research reported that fewer than half the secondary schools in England have a counsellor in place, worryingly less than in 2010 (BACP, 2020). In addition, counsellors are much more common in private schools than in ones run by the state, which the great majority of students attend; in particular children from deprived homes, or with behaviour or learning difficulties.

Counselling provision for older students

Universities and further education colleges (FE) and sixth form colleges, also offer counselling for students and staff. This began in the 1970s and the need for services has increased over the years and particularly in the light of the pandemic crisis. Funding however, for counselling in FE and sixth form colleges has been reduced of late. The approach to counselling in all these settings is seen by BACP (2017) as offering the support needed by students, within the context of the place in which they study and sometimes live. The idea is to enable the clients to understand better their psychological and emotional problems and find ways to increase their coping strategies and self-understanding. This helps them to develop resilience (Broglia, 2015). Across the three areas of education involved, the type of counselling offered can differ. In FE and sixth form colleges, individual or group counselling can take place and eventually may involve parents and teachers, as it does in schools. In university settings students tend to be offered individual counselling services, or self-help approaches with professional guidance, or the support of peers (Broglia, Millings & Barkham, 2017). Recently, the use of telephone support or support online has been offered; this rising exponentially during the Covid crisis and closure of universities. Little is yet known about the efficacy of this approach, but during the pandemic of 2020, when universities were closed and lectures were online this was the only approach students could utilise, as face to face consultations were not possible.

During the start of the crisis students were, in many cases sent home until the start of the autumn term in 2020 and taught and assessed by online services. This was not only stressful for students, resulting in a rise in depression and anxiety, but also for the staff. They, at short notice, were expected to alter, (as were school teachers) with little notice, their presentation of materials and interaction with students to online delivery. In addition, staff were expected to work from home alone without on-site support. This way of working, though familiar to some tutors who taught distance courses to students resident around the country and the world, had not been a day to day occurrence for all tutors. Examinations were cancelled, course work was the area judged to award degree classifications and this for some students (those good at written or practical exams), possibly resulted in lower grades than had been expected. However, university students at least did not have to deal with the turmoil of the schools' GCSE and AL results. The use of an algorithm to alter national examination grading with the intention of promoting a fair result, caused massive outcries over what were considered unfair judgements. The regrading of many results had to therefore occur, causing untold stress to teachers and students alike.

For those moving away from home to study the problems of working in 'bubbles', or having to stay in accommodation blocks to study online, as face to face classes were suspended, resulted in much unhappiness and a feeling that they were paying for tuition that was not at the expected standard. In addition, there were, due to social mixing which was against university policy, a rising number of cases of Covid-19 within the student body, particularly amongst first years. One hundred and nineteen universities had Covid outbreaks by the end of October 2020 (Coughlan, 2020). This resulted in two-week lockdowns, causing students to feel abandoned, lonely and even lacking in basic needs, such as food and other necessary supplies (BBC NEWS, 2020). One university even asked for local residents to provide food parcels for the locked down students. This request did little to arouse sympathy in the local populace, who considered students' behaviour had in many cases been unacceptable, due to their disregard for rules about social distancing. These breaches were likely to cause impositions on socialising in the surrounding community, where students' disregard of rules on mixing was much resented by local residents.

For new students all this caused added stress to that normally felt by young people living away from home for the first time and having to cope with experiences for which they had received little, or no preparation. One new student in a university in the south of England, studying at home was concerned about the lack of face to face teaching and the inability to visit the university library to complete assignments (Lewington, 2020). However, after taking time to getting used to working online using Microsoft Teams, she found it a good experience overall. She enjoyed getting together on that platform with a small group of students, who worked together and encouraged each other, discussing materials and assignments. In addition, this blogger stressed the need for relaxation and social contact in order to control anxiety and mental stress. She made daily calls to close friends and with a group set quizzes each week for everyone to answer, providing fun and relaxation. Working together in

a group kept her motivated and was stimulating for her learning. The group in fact almost acted as counsellors for each other and prevented the possible loneliness she had worried about, before starting the course. In addition, she stressed that physical activity was also important and doing other things than studying, in order to keep a balance in her life.

The Guardian (Blackall, 2020) reported the many concerns and stresses suffered by university students as a result of the pandemic. Some had lost part-time jobs due to closures of cafés, pubs and shops. They were very concerned about this, as the jobs were what kept them able to attend the university; that income provided money for food, books and other necessities. Some said if they could not find other employment, they might have to leave their studies. Many worried about the quality of education they would receive in this new environment, whilst still paying the high price for what should have been face to face teaching and support. The social distancing restrictions also worried many, as they saw university as a way of making new friends, many for life and networking, especially if undertaking a Master's degree. This type of activity would be severely restricted due to the controls in place on social mixing. All the students felt stressed, uncertain as to whether to defer on carry on and as mentioned above, angry about the high costs for online study. It is clear that the need for support and reassurance had grown exponentially during the Covid crisis, but little has been said about increasing the provision of support and counselling to university students. Certainly, it is doubtful to see if university counsellors could do much to alleviate many of the problems students faced, such as the type of teaching, restricted social lives and loss of part-time employment.

However, the effects of the pandemic did not only manifest themselves with those starting university and facing lockdown isolation online, but also the possibility of catching the virus from other young people who refused to socially distance and behave sensibly. Many newspaper reports condemned the 'selfish' attitudes of the young who continued to mix, party and ignore the rules, believing in many cases they were not going to suffer badly if they caught the virus. Possibly the constant publicity that older people were the ones more likely to die, or be seriously ill, was too strongly circulated. However, many were afraid, feeling cut off from support and this led to a great rise in reports to mental health charities, of suicidal thoughts, loneliness and self-harm. As they were generally not on campus and often in small groups, who might or not be their close friends, counselling became even more important, but more difficult to access.

In addition, the crisis also impacted those leaving university having gained their qualifications. Many students did not have the joy and pleasure resulting from being watched by their families at degree ceremonies and having a sense of achievement they could share with friends, who have travelled with them through the university years. BBC Panorama (2020) reported the devastating effect of the pandemic on employment prospects. Young graduates featured in the programme spoke of careers ruined, due to cut backs in areas such as theatres, air transport and the hospitality industry. So, instead of starting new careers, many young people

found that the jobs they had hoped for had vanished due to lockdown and companies retrenching and cutting numbers of employees. This, the programme reported, had led to depression, a sense of helplessness and a feeling that their hopes and dreams had been dashed, with little chance of their being more opportunities in the future. The rate of unemployment and job losses even of part-time work used to help with living costs, had risen much more sharply for people aged under twenty than for older workers. Therefore, those attempting to start out on careers were instead, spending their time applying for numerous jobs each week, many of them not at graduate level. Experts on the Panorama programme suggested that this situation, if it continued would build up many problems for this group in future years. For these young people access to counsellors is even more difficult, as they have to either pay to be privately treated, or hope the National Health Service, already under massive pressure could offer mental health services, but these pre the pandemic had already been stretched to breaking point.

Research interviews with a first-year university student and a PhD student

First-year student

The first-year student had found the university experience interesting, but sometimes difficult after his first five weeks in halls of residence and beginning his studies. In common with many students, he did not enjoy the online learning, preferring face to face teaching. However, he felt lucky that doing a practical subject (chemistry) he had to be in the laboratory each day, meaning he did not have all his lessons online. He said he had struggled with those, as some of the tutors seemed badly prepared and not used to teaching in this way. This he felt, added to the stresses that students were already suffering from missing home, having to make new friends, learning to be self-sufficient and be self-responsible for working and submitting assignments. He said first years had been offered the support of fourth years as student counsellors, to help them settle in and he had decided to apply for that support. His student helper had already contacted him and he was grateful that he now had a more experienced student to ask for advice, about issues of which he was uncertain. Many universities use older students to support new ones and it generally proves a very useful aid in helping new students settle. This is a way of providing help and to some extent informal counselling, from the experienced to the inexperienced. It is commonly known as a 'buddy system'. He also talked of his concerns for a student living on the fourth floor of his halls of residence, who never seemed to mix with anyone, had it appeared, not made any new friends, as he had and appeared to play on his Xbox all day and not do any work. He had not considered suggesting that this particular student should self-refer to the counselling service, as he felt he did not know him sufficiently well to discuss personal problems. He discussed the anger of some students at paying full fees for lessons, that in some cases were recorded and just available to access if you bothered, with no one checking

up as at his FE college, that you had done the work. The process of self-reliance is to many young English people, something that they have not really faced, before going away from home to university.

PhD student

The woman was in the process of doing final thesis corrections, before being awarded her PhD. She was in her early thirties and described the stress of living with two other students, also PhD candidates, in a small terraced house near to the university. They spent most of their time in their rooms, where they also slept and sometimes ate. There was one small sitting room where they could relax, break away from their studies etc. but it was so small that they had decided to have a rota system of who could use it and when. She felt isolated and dispirited, despite being about to be awarded her doctorate. There would be no graduation ceremony with her proud family in attendance and her delight at successfully completing years of hard work she felt, had been stolen away from her. Looking into the future she was afraid of not being able to find a job commensurate with her qualifications, after years of living on very little money, from part-time employment in menial tasks. Her future in fact she saw as bleak, until the country's finances recovered from the Covid crisis and no one could predict when that would occur. She was doing everything she could to be positive but it was very difficult. She did not want to return home or become a burden to her family and had not felt that her situation should be one to take to the university counselling services, as they could not alter the situation she and they were in at the present time.

Maybe the question which should be asked is, do we look after our children too well and prevent the adult emerging from the childhood state? Thereby making the need for universities to have to provide so much support, which in the past would not have been required by young people. Formerly, they had to learn early to be independent and be responsible for themselves. Certainly, those who in the past did National Service, were expected to cope with harsh military practices and few visits home, particularly if they were posted overseas. No counselling existed then and those young men had to cope as best they could, with whatever occurred and life was often harsh and fraught with difficulty for them. They were expected to manage the new life and mature during their service. Do we expect the same of our university students or do we still treat them as children?

Conclusion

At this stage in the pandemic, as a further wave of the virus is taking its toll all over Europe, it is impossible to say what the long-term effects on the lives of young people this will have in years to come. Employment prospects have been decimated in the arts, retail, hospitality and travel for example. However, the need for teachers, scientists and technologists, has increased enormously. The problem is many of these young people have studied or are studying for what looked to be

promising career subject areas, which now lie in ruins. The future does not look bright for the Covid generation (as they are being called), with countries in serious debt, companies retracting and more people wanting employment than is available. We can only hope that the tide will turn and they will find more hope and opportunity in future.

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