

How Education Counselling Services Are Supporting Teachers and Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about changes in working conditions and roles of teachers and students as they have embraced new digital working practices. Whilst the move to online learning has been a necessary adaptation, it has also introduced new potential stresses for students and teachers alike. The need to support those experiencing stress during the pandemic requires the services provided by professionals such as school counsellors. This paper presents work carried out on stress-related issues and the role of counselling in supporting teachers and students reduce their stress levels during the pandemic. Qualitative and quantitative data was gathered on the experiences of counselling professionals, teachers and students. The research aimed to ascertain how the move to online learning has changed the way counselling for stress is provided, and to gauge its effectiveness in helping students and teachers to manage their stress during the pandemic. It was found that school counsellors have also had to adapt their ways of working during the pandemic, embracing the digital world to support their clients in managing stress. A key challenge that was identified is supporting students and teachers to recognise their stress levels and when they might need to seek the support of a counselling professional in the first place. Most of the participants in this small-scale study had experienced increased stress during the COVID-19 pandemic but had not sought counselling help. Those that had accessed online counselling support reported that the service did help in reducing their stress levels.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, school counselling, students, teachers, digital working practices

Introduction

The national lockdown and social distancing policies and restrictions imposed by the UK government to reduce the spread of COVID-19 forced many professionals to rapidly adapt to new digital working practices. This sudden transition has increased stress levels among teaching staff and students alike, another source of stress among many other adaptations people have had to make in their lives such as adhering to strict rules and regulations staying at home and wearing masks. With the education world moving to online teaching and learning for much of the pandemic, school counsellors have similarly been required to adopt new digital working practices to support those in need of their services.

School counsellors are professionals who are specialised in the field of supporting those going through all forms of problems in schools, at work or home, needing some counselling to cope with it all. These services are available to students, teachers and management going through any form of problems that are beyond their control. The services could be provided with the family, or at work, school and university. Some of the roles could range from coping with stress, mental health, welfare, discipline, exclusion and inclusion and other support needed by the recipients. Counselling could be provided for adults and children, depending on individual needs and demands. For the purposes of this work, the focus is on how the counselling role supports teachers and students experiencing stress during the current pandemic, particularly stemming from their increased workload.

This paper examines the role of school counsellors in supporting young people and teaching staff with stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, as counselling services moved to online forms of delivery (such as Microsoft Teams, WebEx or Zoom). It explores: the role of counselling in supporting staff and students coping with the stress faced using online learning technology; how school counsellors themselves are coping with the new ways of working; and draws on relevant literature to inform the research, drawing from theoretical concepts to critically analyse the nature of the problems and key challenges.

Context

Stress

Most people suffer from stress related issues that they may not be aware of and it impacts on their mental health and wellbeing, particularly if prolonged. Many factors have been attributed to stress related issues that stemmed from work, home or studies. The current pandemic is not making work stress or stress from studies easier with the lockdown making people work from their homes and the distancing rules imposed by governments all over the world, to reduce the Coronavirus pandemic that has rapidly spread across the world (WHO, 2020). The lockdown rules from stage 1-3 at present have resulted in digital working from home. It is obvious that human beings knowing fully well that change is not an easy one to embrace (Kulkarni, 2006), particularly a sudden change as faced today, it has come with positives and negatives leading to stress and mental health challenges for some teachers and students (Kyriacou, 2000).

Stress is defined as the body's response to a certain situation that may be caused by our environments or other circumstances (Ozyilmaz, 2020). Most stress faced by human nature could be expected and may have an impact on mental health or wellbeing. Stress can be faced at work, home or schools and the most important is the individual ability to cope with any form of stress. The adverse reaction experienced by people leading to inability to cope with workloads or demands placed on them is regarded as stress (Health & Safety Executive, 2016). According to Yeh, Tseng and Lim (2020), workplace stress can present negative, physical and emotional

reactions that may occur; due to an employee needs that an employer may not be able to meet (Kinman, 2011). The current demands of employee from the employers to cope with the changes in working practices using digital technology, due to lockdown resulting from the current COVID-19 pandemic, is already causing stress as most employers are struggling to cope with these needs and demands. In education environments, stress is experienced from staff and students at large as they embrace the current changings to online teaching and learning.

The key purpose here is to find out if teachers and students are stressed, causes at the current time and how the role of professionals – counselling from occupational health, welfare and school counsellors have helped them reduce their stress level. As stated by Khalique et al. (2018), worker stress can arise due to workload and family, coping with line managers, lack of cooperation with colleagues can cause stress for some people. When we talk about stress, we need to know the meanings and what causes it and then look at the strategic role of school counselling to help in managing stress at the current pandemic.

According to the Health & Safety Executive (2016), stress is the adverse reaction that people have when they perceive that they are no longer able to cope with the demands placed on them to do things. Stress can occur in many ways to employees and students which could result from the demands of workload that may be contrary to employee expectations, interests, skills and knowledge in meeting the demands of the job requirements (Soegoto & Narimawati, 2017). Stress has big implications for employees and employers and can have impact on employee performance (Tetrick & Winslow, 2015) and therefore also on organisational performance.

When thinking about stress, we need to differentiate between: the *causes* of stress, for example excessive workload; the *processes* through which individuals feel stressed, for example having to deal with colleagues or customers who are unhappy with an aspect of the individual's or the organisation's performance; the *means* through which specific work practices create these stressful situations, such as staffing levels, training, work environment and so on; and the *outcomes* of stress, such as employees feeling unhappy at work, productivity reducing, impacts on their mental health and wellbeing, unhealthy coping mechanisms (e.g. Alcohol) and time off work.

The current pandemic is a good example of the multi-faceted nature of stress, owing to the significant changes that affected every aspect of people's lives, including having to embrace sudden changes in work practices (the move to online teaching and learning), adjusting to working from home, having fewer social contacts, concern and anxiety for their own health and the health of loved ones who are more vulnerable to COVID-19 and so on. The ability to cope with the demands of an online delivery for staff and students has caused stress to some extent, although some have experienced it as a positive change (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2020).

In this paper, we explore the challenges of COVID-19, the issue of stress, causes and role of school counselling in relation to their support roles in counselling

those affected cope with their stress level. Whether the school counsellors are still effectively providing their supporting roles to deal with stress related issues is a matter of question with the current pandemic. The work will go further to share the experience of the students, teachers and two school counsellors, considering their confidential roles of the school counsellors being very careful on what they could possibly share to an outsider.

The COVID-19 pandemic

In 2019, Coronavirus (COVID-19) was discovered in a market place in a city called Wuhan in China. The initial clinical results of the scientists proved that the transmitted virus could be easily spread to affect the entire world from a person to person (Zhu et al., 2020). The WHO announced it that the World was in crisis of a virus based on testing carried out with the rapid spread of the disease. The announcement resulted to the world lockdown to reduce the spread of the disease (WHO, 2020). The social distancing known as 'mindful increase of physical gap between humans to limit the spread of the virus (Red Cross, 2020) has meant that the school counsellors and all involved in education to comply to the strict government rules and regulations.

The statistical evidence indicates that 95.1m cases and 2.03m deaths Worldwide from disease (WHO, 2020), with the high spread of the virus found in Italy, America, Brazil, UK and India having the largest number of reported cases. In the UK, the impact extends to all businesses, including education sector and services as well as the students leading to embracing online teaching and learning in schools and universities, as an alternative way to continue to educate students online by WebEx, Teams, Zoom and other available technologies to accomplish roles in education sector.

New working practices in education in response to the pandemic

The need to control, track and monitor the virus from spreading more, most organisations including education institutions reverted to digital technology to facilitate teaching and learning activities including student support (WEF, 2020). It is obvious that the use of any form of the digital technology has helped to fulfil some of the roles of professionals such as the school counsellors from the previously face to face contacts in the office. The online digital technology has somehow benefited and helped both the recipients and institutions to learn new ways of working and learning. The digital technology being adopted for personal and organisational use and for education has made it possible to keep in touch with colleagues in case of use of teams, teaching and learning and in contact with the students in the case of WebEx and Zoom, friends and families at large (WEF, 2020).

The new digital technology has also brought about positive and negative impact on the nature of delivery and support for students and teachers. Some of the receivers' have found the benefits while others have had negative impact in their journey of learning. One of the impacts of COVID-19 is stress related issue resulting

from government imposition of lockdown and embracing new ways of learning. The lockdown resulting from distancing has meant new ways of doing things, and for the teachers and students, it has increased their workload and stress level (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2020).

Implications for school counselling services

The government policy of lockdown to reduce the effect of coronavirus has had tremendous impact on teachers' and student's workload as some teachers has complained that their workload has increased more than ever working from home. Students have found the change drastic, sudden and now are prepared for the change. Some have found it difficult to embrace, particularly for the international students who have little or no knowledge of digital learning from home countries; this obviously had an effect on their stress level and in some cases, their mental stability (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2020). In a situation of this, the role of counselling becomes more relevant to assist those in need to reduce stress levels. The key questions here to address:

- How can the specialist roles of education counsellors or therapists support teachers and students to reduce their stress level?
- Are teachers and students recognising the support role of school counselling to manage their stress level?
- How can the specialist roles of school counselling at this current COVID 19 pandemic and lockdown help to reduce stress for the teachers and students?

Many researchers are working day in day out to find out the level of support given to young people in schools to deal with stressors that could impact stress and mental health and how the role of school counselling can help reduce stress and improve mental health, particularly at this current time of COVID 19 pandemic crisis and lockdown.

An example from an ongoing research literature that has been developed by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), and Professor Mick Cooper and Dr Jess Bryant of the University of Roehampton in their research that targeted up to 10,000 counsellors and psychotherapists working in primary and secondary schools and further education colleges across the UK. The work focused on how the profession is responding to COVID-19 and how many practitioners have been able to continue their sessions with children and young people (ages 5–18 years old), in what forms they have been able to deliver counselling, as well as what barriers have prevented some counselling sessions continuing in order to inform policy. Their survey indicates that COVID-19 seems to have changed the landscape of mental health service delivery for children and young people considering that 100,000 would see a counsellor every year. One of the causes of mental health is stress. As the research indicates, the children and young people are no longer in schools, it became more of a concern about the levels of mental health support that they are now receiving—and likely to receive while restrictions are in place considering the importance of support for the young people with mental health and practitioners to

continue to support them through counselling sessions (University of Roehampton, 2020).

Although, the research focused on mental health, stress is one of the causes of mental health if prolonged and therefore, need to be arrested from onset, of which the counselling services of the professionals such as the school counsellors is realised in helping to deal with stress related mental health in education, homes, individuals and organisations. An important aspect of school counselling roles is that it provides opportunity for intervention for young people going through stress and mental health support, also, can act as a liaison with external services (Farmer et al., 2003). Counselling services help to reduce the stress some teachers and students go through due to problems faced, resulting from workload, discrimination, family problems and many others leading to stress. Counselling services are provided at workplace, homes and education institutions. However, one of the barriers in people owning up to receiving the services is pride, confidentiality issues, costs in the case of going private, availability and recognition of the existence.

Methodology

The mini research originated from the stress level experienced by the participants resulting from the current pandemic and the role of school counselling to support people to reduce their stress level. Work relied on qualitative and quantitative data to share the experiences of professionals, teachers and students to ascertain how the digital world has altered the way they received counselling to cope with any form of stress, also if the services received has helped to reduce their stress level at the current pandemic era of COVID 19. Secondary data from varied sources using books on counselling, journal articles, reports and google scholar search provided prior knowledge on available literature. The qualitative method comprised of a semi-structured interview by WhatsApp, using 15 open-ended questions used to seek the opinion of the participants (Gearon & Parsons, 2019). The interview questions have encouraged the respondents to provide their information, although, strictly reassured them of confidentiality, considering the nature of counselling profession in relation to dealing with stress related issues. Ethical protocols were observed regardless of the size of the target group to comply with the research ethics, principles and Data Protection Act (2018), hence coding the participants' comments and this has helped to protect their identity.

Findings

Comments below represent some of the findings selected from a few of the participants from the overall interview response.

Q1. What is your view about the current pandemic and impact on your stress level?

A period of upheaval for me with increased workload, isolation due to lock down and not something to think about and the worst period of my life, as I have never experienced anything like now, horrible. (Student 1)

Q2. Have you experienced stress in your job or studies?

I have but now am worse, because of increased workload, sitting down at home with swollen legs is stressful. The worst is that, you don't know when it will end. (Teacher 2)

Q3. What were the causes of the stress?

What is on now, embracing online, not going out and working from home can be very challenging. I am an active person and can't stay a week without visiting the gym, now I can't. I need to stretch my legs after work. The stress is increasing with indoors and straining eyes online. (Teacher 3)

Q4. What is your understanding of counselling service and what type of service do they provide?

Counselling helps to give you some tips on how to cope with problems discussed with them. They are very private and you can air out your problems and cause of it to them. They can suggest ways to help reduce discussed problems but not sure if they can provide the final solution to it. For instance, some of them are specialised in their various fields, if your problem does not fall within their specialism, they cannot help, although they may recommend or refer your case. I have never used their services. (Student 6)

Q5. How would the specialist roles of education counsellors or therapists support to reduce your stress level?

The service can support you if you agree with their recommendations, but it is not easy to open up to them, which is why it is difficult to appreciate how the service can help. Stress is something that people may not know that they are going through stress and in some cases; it is left so late to deal with, hence landing people into a mental home. This is the area where their support can be very important to help in reducing any kind of stress if you can open up to them with no bias. (Teacher 4)

Q6. Do you or your students recognise the support role of counselling to manage stress level at this period of pandemic?

The role is recognised but how much people use the support is questionable due to issue of bias and confidentiality; people try to keep their problems private and not very open to share things which could be the case with the students and teachers. It all depends on individual, the degree of stress, referrals process and resources to be seen. (Teacher 6)

Q7. How can the specialist roles of school counselling at this current COVID 19 pandemic and lockdown help to reduce stress for the teachers and students in general?

Well, their service is important to all that are facing stress this pandemic period. But how do you receive the service with the lockdown? A person with stress related mental health may not find it easy to receive counselling service unless with some support from the career, how about the ones living alone? It is a big challenge at the present time. However, some have managed to see their clients using any available digital or virtual technology which works for me. (School counsellor 1)

The pandemic has created a new way of embracing our practice on line. Going digital still gives you similar counsel to recipients, also for privacy to see your clients in a privately booked online room. The digital World has become the norm for all organisations. We don't really have a choice at the present time with the government policy on lockdown; we need to embrace the change to do our jobs. It is same as teaching online for everyone at present. I book a private room as I would do seeing clients face to face. However, some support is better offered face to face, as you may not know who else is listening on the receiving side. It is a difficult time for all. (School counsellor 2)

Conclusion

The comments from the mini research indicates some stress related issues that required people to seek counselling to help reduce the impact. Some of these issues are related to the impact of COVID-19 in trying to embrace changes in working practices, particularly, embracing virtual work practices previously done by face to face contact in the office and the stress of working from home due to lockdown rules. This paper has explored the role of counselling in supporting people during the current COVID-19 pandemic, sharing prior and literature and participants' comments. School counsellors have had to adapt their ways of working during the pandemic, embracing the digital world to support their clients in managing stress. A key challenge that was identified is supporting students and teachers to recognise their stress levels and when they might need to seek the support of a counselling professional in the first place. Most of the participants in this small-scale study had experienced increased stress during the COVID-19 pandemic but had not sought counselling help. Those that had accessed online counselling support reported that the service did help in reducing their stress levels. However, a large scale research is required involving more counsellors, teachers and students focusing on each group at a time. The findings will inform further research and will be carried out in stages with each of the groups.

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