British Journal of Guidance & Counselling

Personal construct psychology model of school counselling delivery

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With increasing focus on the mental health of young people by schools, greater attention is directed to the responsiveness and effectiveness of models of psychological practice in schools. A model will be presented with a coherent theoretical structure within which the school counsellor can understand the diverse psychological symptoms and problems of the school students and professionally deliver counselling services to effectively meet these needs. The model, developed from personal construct theory and psychology, is framed around a set of principles which are outlined through the propositions of the model while the counselling processes are operationalised through the strategies.

Keywords: personal construct psychology; counselling in schools; children; adolescents; counselling psychology

Introduction

Despite international reports of the increasing prevalence of mental health symptoms amongst children and adolescents (Bhatia & Bhatia, 2007; National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence [NICE], 2005; Raphael, 2000; Sawyer et al., 2000), there continue to be barriers making it difficult for young people to seek professional help (Wright & Jorm, 2009). With a significant gap between the mental health needs of young people and the services available to meet those needs (De Jong & Griffiths, 2008; Hilt-Panahan, Kern, Divatia, & Gresham, 2007; Manning, 2009; Trussell, 2008; Weist, Rubin, Moore, Adelsheim, & Wrobel, 2007), schools are increasingly recognised as important locations for addressing the well-being needs of students. When young people do seek help, they will usually turn to friends and family (Sheffield, Fiorenza, & Sofronoff, 2004) who will often direct them to their school counsellor/psychologist or doctor (Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007). Schools are accessible and familiar to students and family members and services located in schools have the benefit of providing interventions in a 'real-world' setting (Bacon, Brophy, Mguni, & Shandro, 2010). In addition, adopting a strength-based rather than deficit-based conceptualisation of well-being, research studies provide empirical evidence for the positive impact of student well-being on academic achievement (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Franklin, Kim, & Tripodi, 2009), an important consideration with the increasing pressure on schools to improve academic outcomes.

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School counselling in Australia

Generally the model of school counselling delivery across Australia (Faulkner, 2007a) is a school-based service providing counselling in a cluster of schools ranging from pre-school to the final year of secondary school, a model identified by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, 2007) as meeting their recommended model of best practice and good service delivery. The role of the school counsellor usually includes the functions of individual and group counselling of students, psycho-educational student assessments and report writing, the provision of consultancy advice on effective behaviour management programmes, liaison and referral processes with external health care service providers, implementation of prevention and intervention programmes and the evaluation and management of critical incidents (Armstrong et al., 2000; Australian Psychological Society [APS], 2009; Faulkner, 2007b). While the training requirements of school counselling vary internationally, school counsellors in Australia require a university degree in psychology and an approved postgraduate school counselling qualification (Jimerson, Graydon, Curtis, & Staskal, 2007). They are also required to fulfil the equivalent of two years' full-time teaching experience.

An important consideration of school-based mental health services rests on how to deliver psychological interventions to adequately cater for a diverse student body (Friedrich, Mendez, & Mihalas, 2010; Frisby & Reynolds, 2005). Also, schools differ widely based on factors such as cultural and linguistic diversity, the prevailing school philosophy, the quality of the professional personnel and community norms and values (Merrell & Buchanan, 2006). However, models of service delivery make it possible to address these diverse needs and to generalise from one young person to another or from one school population to another (Viney, 2006). To serve school populations, a useful model of school counselling delivery should be able to implement and apply a method of practice, a set of principles, processes and interpersonal relationships (Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008) across a broad range of psychological needs and school populations. In response to these requirements, the following model of school counselling delivery is developed. While it is considered a useful model for the entire school population from 4 years to 18 years, the vignettes and/or situations used in the article to highlight the functions of this model are drawn from casework material of students aged 9–18 years, who were previously engaged in counselling with the first author. In each case, full informed consent was obtained from young people and their parents, and identifying details have been amended to protect their confidentiality.

Personal construct psychology

George Kelly (1955/1991a, 1955/1991b) developed personal construct theory, publishing *The Psychology of Personal Construct Psychology* (Volumes 1 and 2) in 1955. The effectiveness of personal construct psychotherapy has been established for clients of varying ages and clinical problems (Holland & Neimeyer, 2009; Holland, Neimeyer, Currier, & Berman, 2007; Metcalfe, Winter, & Viney, in press; Viney, Metcalfe, & Winter, 2005; Watson & Winter, 2005; Winter, 2003b). The effectiveness of personal construct counselling for young people in a school setting has also been indicated (Jackson, 1992a, 1992b; Metcalfe et al., in press; Truneckova & Viney, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2012; Viney, 1998; Viney & Henry, 2002; Viney,

Henry, & Campbell, 2001; Viney et al., 2005; Viney, Truneckova, Weekes, & Oades, 1997, 1999), but the majority of investigations focus exclusively on group work.

Based on personal construct theory and psychology, the function of this model is to make relevant parts of a complex theory available to the school counsellor so that they can be understood and utilised to provide a more effective school counselling practice. The principles of this model are enunciated through a set of propositions, while the processes are described through strategies employed by the school counsellor. Interpersonal relationships are embedded in both the propositions and the strategies. As a working model, the principles and processes are attuned by the counsellor to the needs of each young person, such that some propositions and strategies are in the foreground while others are in the background. Two case examples will be provided identifying how some of the propositions and strategies were employed by the counsellor.

Propositions

Four propositions enunciating the principles behind the model are presented in Table 1.

Proposition 1. There are alternative ways of looking at any event

Central to the psychology of personal constructs is the implementation of the philosophical assumption, constructive alternativism (Kelly, 1955/1991a). The first proposition involves the school counsellor approaching each event or context with the assumption that no one has direct access to the truth; there are potentially alternative ways of making sense of each other, ourselves and our worlds. There is an implicit understanding that young people will differ in their constructions of events and experiences. The school counsellor views the behaviour of the young person as attempts to work things out, to know. Impulsive, moody or aggressive behaviours, for example, carry their own unique meanings for the young person and rather than make assumptions, the school counsellor will attempt to understand the young person's own meanings.

Table 1. The propositions in the personal construct model for the delivery of school counselling services.

Propositions

1. There are always alternative ways of looking at any event.
2. Experiences are tested out through behaviour and behaviour becomes the principle instrument of enquiry.
3. Psychological disorder occurs when there is consistent invalidation along with the exclusive use of particular construing strategies.
4. Professional constructs:
    (1) Verbal and non-verbal construing
    (2) Core and peripheral construing
    (3) Emotions as experiential transitional states
    (4) Cycles of experience, creativity and decision-making

Proposition 2. Experiences are tested out through behaviour, which is the principle instrument of inquiry

The second proposition in this model asserts that the testing out of experiences takes place through behaviour and, for the school counsellor, behaviour becomes a principle instrument of inquiry (Kelly, 1955/1991a). Through behaviours, the young person poses questions and compares their own meanings with those of others (Kelly, 1955/1991a). For the school counsellor, a young person's behaviour is experimental rather than reactive, and behavioural choices reveal much about the construing of self. The school counsellor is asking, What is the young person not doing by doing what he/she is doing? (Fransella & Dalton, 1990).

Proposition 3. Psychological disorder occurs when there is consistent invalidation along with the exclusive use of particular construing approaches

The next proposition moves to the definition of a psychological disorder in personal construct psychology. The school counsellor views psychological disorders as constellations of behaviours/characteristics that are problematic for the young person. According to Kelly (1955/1991b), the young person exhibits a psychological disorder when faced with consistent invalidation of their constructions and, with no alternative constructions available, believes there are no other choices of behaving. The definition was later broadened by Kelly, indicating that a psychological disorder can include any structure that fails to accomplish its purpose (Walker & Winter, 2005). The school counsellor understands the psychological disorder/problem of a young person as the result of thinking and feeling they have no alternative options. The psychological problem produces a repeating pattern of troublesome behaviour (Goncalves, Ribeiro, Mendes, Matos, & Santos, 2011).

Proposition 4. Professional constructs

The fourth proposition in this model of school counselling concerns the ways in which the school counsellor sets out to understand the young person and how the school counsellor uses professional constructs to assist in organising their understanding of the personal constructs of the young person. For the school counsellor, these professional constructs assist the school counsellor to guide the young people to develop more open rather than constricted construct systems.

(1) Verbal and non-verbal construing

Kelly (1955/1991a) asserted that constructs can be communicated by both verbal and non-verbal means, and the acknowledgement of both verbal and non-verbal constructs is a professional construct for the school counsellor. Within non-verbal constructs, Kelly identified preverbal constructs, which begin in infancy when there is little language construing. According to Kelly, preverbal constructs continue in the present as feelings because no word symbol was developed for these constructs. The professional construct implies that the school counsellor will not only attempt to construe the young person verbally and non-verbally but will employ both verbal and non-verbal techniques and strategies to facilitate the expression of thoughts and feelings.

(2) Core and peripheral construing

Another professional construct is the distinction between core and peripheral constructs (Kelly, 1955/1991a). Core constructs are those constructs by which the individual maintains their identity, their 'maintenance processes', while peripheral constructs are 'those which can be altered without serious modification of core structure' (Kelly, 1955/1991a, p. 356). Like the cognitive schema in cognitive therapy (Beck, 1976), affective problem markers in emotion-focused therapy (Goldman & Greenberg, 1997) and the core conflictual relationship theme in psychodynamic perspective (Luborsky, 1997), core constructs refer to a pattern of behaviour which manifests itself in several areas of the young person's life, from thoughts, actions and feelings to significant relationships. Core constructs drive and contribute to the young person's sense of identity and reality of the world in which they live (Hardison & Neimeyer, 2012). The school counsellor understands that peripheral constructs can be altered without serious modification of the young person's core structure, their understanding of themselves. On the other hand, core constructs are harder to change as they are the means by which young people understand themselves and develop their self-identity.

(3) Emotions are experiential transitional states

The proposition that emotions are experiential transitional states is the next professional construct. Kelly integrated emotional experiences within his theory, seeing 'personal construct theory as no more a cognitive theory than it is an affective or a conative one' (Kelly, 1966/1970, p. 15). Emotional experiences are part of the young person's construction of experience. As young people are construing, they are experiencing and feeling. Kelly labelled four experiential transitional states important in clinical work: anxiety, guilt, threat and hostility. Anxiety is felt when the young person experiences events they find difficult to understand or predict. As a professional construct, anxiety can be seen by the school counsellor as a precondition for change, a trigger for the young person to make revisions in their construction system. The school counsellor understands that guilt is experienced when young people behave in a way that they believe is not like them, not how they construe their character.

Threat occurs when the young person foresees that events confronting them are going to result in considerable change to their core constructs. 'Hostility [by the young person] is the continued effort to extort validational evidence in favor of a type of social prediction which has already proved itself a failure' (Kelly, 1955/1991a, p. 375). Instead of revising the construction which has been invalidated, the hostile young person exhorts evidence that they were right all along. The school counsellor views the behaviour of the hostile young person as acts whereby they are trying to alter events to make them conform to their own original expectations (Fransella & Dalton, 1990).

(4) Cycles of experience, creativity and decision making

In adopting and implementing the personal construct psychology model, the school counsellor draws on the professional constructs dealing with the therapeutic change process. It is proposed that these cycles of change form the next professional construct.

Psychological difficulties result if the constructs of the young person are impermeable, behavioural positions which are currently unable to be tested or changed. Kelly (1955/1991a) described three cycles that are central to the change process: experience, creativity and decision making. These cycles guide the school counsellor in encouraging the young person to explore and resolve their ambivalence about change. While the three cycles overlap to some extent, there are fundamental differences between them. The experience cycle, which has five phases, begins with the phase of anticipation, where the young person looks forward to what is to come. The second phase consists of a commitment or self-involvement by the young person; the young person is now open to experimenting with a new event or experience. The next phase comes when the young person encounters the new event and the experience is fully construed, bringing either confirmation or disconfirmation of the expected outcome. In the light of this, the young person will revise their understanding of themselves and the world. In this final stage of constructive revision, the young person's anticipations may be largely confirmed, or it may be that the young person will need to take a fresh look at their long-held views of themselves.

The second change cycle is the creativity cycle. This initiates the process of change through the back and forth movement from tight to loose construing. The young person is encouraged to consider different ideas or options, to loosen up their construing. Once this has taken place, the young person is assisted in narrowing down their options, to choose which revision in meaning they wish to adopt, to tighten their construing, so that decisions can be made.

The third change cycle, the cycle of decision making, involves circumspection, pre-emption and choice (known as the CPC cycle). The cycle begins with circumspection, where the young person looks at all the issues entailed in decision making. Pre-emption occurs when the young person begins to order the importance of the issues. This is followed by choice, when the young person decides on the action to be undertaken. It is proposed that the school counsellor uses these cycles of experience, of creativity and of decision making, to encourage the young person to firstly entertain the notion of change and then to take part in the process allowing change to happen.

Strategies

This personal construct approach to school counselling is 'designed around the problem of reconstruing life, but it is not a system built upon psychopathology' (Kelly, 1955/1991b, p. 192). Working within such an approach requires the school counsellor to assume responsibilities for the welfare of the young person, as well as understanding of the reflexive nature of the theory. This means as the young person changes their construing of events, the school counsellor will be changing as well. The school counsellor encourages the notion that the young person has the right to be heard, and that their meanings are revered (Adame & Leitner, 2009). Attributes such as empathy, positive regard, warmth and genuineness (variables accepted by most schools of therapy; Lambert & Ogles, 2004) are central to the counselling relationship being developed. Similar to the client-centred therapy of Carl Rogers (1951), the relationship between the young person and the school counsellor is central to the personal construct approach. The counselling connection will then be developed by the school counsellor into a role relationship, the cornerstone of personal construct counselling. In personal construct counselling, a role relationship

exists whenever a person attempts to construe the construction processes of the other person, a process of actively trying to understand the other person. It is a relationship where emotional closeness is balanced with mutual respect for the roles and selves of both people. Within this relationship, the counsellor balances roles of 'following' and 'working' alongside the young person while also 'guiding' or 'leading' them through the change process. This possible disjunction in roles is reconciled as the counsellor leads the young person by actively facilitating and encouraging him/her to decide on the change proposals. Together the counsellor and the young person will elaborate on these with the young person always remaining the author of the reconstructions.

Strategy 1. The school counsellor adopts a credulous approach

Adopting a credulous approach is the first of four strategies provided in this model of school counselling delivery (see Table 2). The credulous approach rests on an attitude of acceptance (Kelly, 1955/1991a). Like 'positive regard' and 'empathic understanding' (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2010), it is an attitude of seeing the world through the eyes of the young person. The school counsellor makes no assumptions about what the young person means. Rather, the school counsellor engages in a process of subsuming the young person's construing system within the personal construct system of professional constructs. The school counsellor tries to put their own construing on hold while attempting to 'step into' the construing world of the young person (Butler, 2009), seeing the world as they do. This requires the school counsellor to engage in a process of continually checking out that he/she is understanding the young person's meanings. 'It is about exploring with their clients their perceptions, fears and concerns, without prejudice, without putting them at a disadvantage by appearing to understand them better than they do themselves' (Dalton & Dunnett, 2005, p. 121). Even when the young person's constructions are challenged, the school counsellor will not deny their validity, but merely explore alternative constructions. The young person's constructions are not discounted, but viewed as one of many alternative meanings that are open to exploration.

   This is a strategy that can be effective with reluctant and hostile referrals. For example, a young person may be referred by the school executive following a suspension from school for violence against another student. The referred young person is a reluctant participant, anticipating that their construing of the altercation will be denied as it appeared when he/she was suspended. By adopting a credulous attitude, the school counsellor encourages the young person to tell how

Table 2.   The strategies in the personal construct model for the delivery of school counselling services.

Strategies

1. The school counsellor adopts a credulous approach.
2. The school counsellor adopts the role of enquirer rather than expert and promotes hypothetical and provisional ways of thinking.
3. The transitive diagnosis generates treatment implications for the school counsellor.
4. The school counsellor guides the young person to reconstruction by disconfirming their unhelpful constructions while validating their selves and their construing/meaning making.

they 'saw what happened'. By acknowledging their distress during the events, the perspective of the referral issue becomes much wider than merely the altercation and the immediate steps that led to it. The focus of the counselling is on understanding the anger of the young person and how the young person has managed their anger throughout their lives. The counsellor draws on the cycles of change to understand how ready the young person is to consider changes in the way they react to provocations. If there is a willingness to continue, the counsellor can use the cycles to guide the young person through the process of changing their construing. If the young person is uncertain and not sure if they want change, then the cycles of change provide the counsellor with a developmental change model similar to the transtheoretical model of change by Prochaska and Norcross (2001), where the process unfolds over time with the young person progressing through stages of change.

Strategy 2. The school counsellor adopts the role of enquirer rather than expert, and promotes hypothetical and provisional ways of thinking

The school counsellor at all times communicates the view that the young person themself is the expert who has the inner resources and capabilities to accomplish change. The school counsellor also communicates in a way that promotes hypothetical and provisional ways of thinking, asking questions and inquiring to learn more. This approach is openly conveyed to the young person, and they are encouraged to adopt a similar way of thinking. The prevailing attitude in personal construct counselling is that asking questions and trying to understand the other is a revered way of approaching difficult situations. The school counsellor as the enquirer also adopts the role of catalyst, encouraging reactions in the young person without imposing anything from themselves (Dalton & Dunnett, 2005). This therapeutic process involves the encouragement by the school counsellor for the young person to think in hypothetical and provisional ways and to test out what they think they know. It is also about accepting that things may or may not work out, emphasising that the young person will be able to cope regardless. The school counsellor will encourage and assist in designing experiments in the outside world for the young person to try out their new understandings and attitudes. The school counsellor recognises that it is necessary for the young person to feel anxiety while overcoming the invalidated construction. But as the young person feels confused and unsure, the school counsellor is simultaneously strengthening their construing of self by encouraging the young person to explore other avenues of self-confirmation and their capacity to cope and be effective.

Disjunctions of perception are often the focus of school counselling. Conflicting young people often believe their view of the situation is the real truth and they mobilise their core beliefs and attitudes to support this view no matter what. The school counsellor, rather than 'seek to find some absolute truth' (Salmon, 1995, p. 65), will seek to negotiate a new way of interpreting the conflict. This might take some time but once the young person recognises that they have been heard and understood, the school counsellor will encourage the conflicting young person to reflect on the different ways they and others construe their realities. The next stage will involve the school counsellor giving his/her interpretation of the conflicting situation. The young person is then encouraged to reflect on this along with the other perceptions that are provided. Meanings throughout the counselling are negotiated and revised by all the participants.

Strategy 3. The transitive diagnosis generates treatment implications for the school counsellor

Instead of providing an approach built on psychopathology, Kelly (1955/1991b) advocates a system of psychological disorder based on diagnostic dimensions of construction and transition. Unlike the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders' conceptualisation of psychological diagnosis, where the client is classified in terms of disease entities and as suffering from a mental illness (Winter, 2003a), Kelly introduces the term 'transitive diagnosis'. With transitive diagnosis the school counsellor endeavours to capture an understanding of the person's experience, reality and construing or meaning-making processes (Leitner & Faidley, 2002). Such an approach allows the school counsellor to conceptualise psychological disorder not as *who* needs treatment but *what* needs treatment (Kelly, 1955/1991b). It is the behaviours of the young person and their meanings of these behaviours that become central to the psychological conceptualisation.

As a guide to assisting change in the young person, transitive diagnosis, the third strategy, comes into play. Like the therapeutic process of the stages of change (Prochaska & Norcross, 2001), transitive diagnosis is used by the school counsellor to determine the stage of the change cycle a young person is at. As part of the transitive diagnosis, the school counsellor will ask 'at what stage of the experience cycle has the client become "stuck", so that constructive revision of his/her system has become impossible?' (Neimeyer, 1987, p. 7). The school counsellor will draw on comparable approaches used by other psychological models of therapy to facilitate revision by the young person. In personal construct counselling, the comparable approaches 'are chosen and used according to the anticipation of the processes they can encourage rather than represent means for gathering of information' (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2010, p. 101). The difference is in the meaning given to the utilisation of these approaches. At this stage the school counsellor can also draw on personal construct assessment techniques (Caputi, Viney, Walker, & Crittenden, 2012). These may include repertory grids, structured interviews to assess how the young person views others and events in their lives (Butler & Green, 1998; Fransella, Bell, & Bannister, 2004; Kelly, 1955/1991b). Other techniques include laddering interviews designed to gain central core values (Burnham, 2008; Neimeyer, Anderson, & Stockton, 2001), and self-characterisations written by the young person to explore self-constructs (Butler & Green, 1998; Kelly, 1955/1991b; Winter, 1992). Particularly with adolescents, the transitive diagnosis allows the school counsellor to be flexible in the techniques employed, as the focus of the treatment will change while the adolescent explores further layers of their life. The depressed adolescent will be experiencing difficult interpersonal relationships across an array of social contexts and the transitive diagnosis encourages the school counsellor to be flexible in the way they respond to the varying issues and events, always keeping the adolescent in mind rather than the symptoms.

It is also the transitive diagnosis that will influence the techniques the school counsellor will use with the hostile young person to expedite change. In personal construct psychology, hostility is considered a desperate attempt by young people to 'protect' themselves. Instead of getting caught up in 'the language of complaint' (Salmon, 1995, p. 79) and focusing on the unpleasant effects a particular behaviour may have had on others, the school counsellor will try to see what the young person was trying to achieve by the hostile act. Rather than seeing the hostile behaviour as

an in-built problem of the young person's character, the school counsellor will ask what stage of the experience cycle the young person is at, and what core constructs of the young person are under threat. Often the young person's presentation of the problem is limited and constrained with restricted avenues for solutions. The school counsellor reinforces the notion that change is possible in a perceived impossible situation and the hostile young person is responsible for their future development. In the early stages of counselling, it is important that the school counsellor offers a context of support. By facilitating the emotional expression of the hostile young person within a framework of emotional containment, the hostile young person can begin to understand rather than react. Exploration of those threatened core constructs by the school counsellor and the young person is more possible. The counselling session for the hostile young person becomes a context for inquiry rather than a prescription of how to live their lives (Hoskins, 2002). There is a shift of focus to the position of both problem responsibility and problem resolution as the young person is relieved of blame and opprobrium, and is now invested with the responsibility for change (Steenbarger & Pels, 1997, p. 113).

Strategy 4. The school counsellor guides the young person to reconstruction by disconfirming their unhelpful constructions while validating their self and their construing/meaning making

For change to occur during school counselling, it is necessary for the young person to also experience a certain amount of invalidation and this invalidation needs to occur within an overall climate of validation (Kelly, 1955/1991b). Reconstruction involves the anchoring of new understandings into the young person's existing ways of seeing things, that they are connected with what is already meaningful. The fourth strategy accounts for the role of invalidation and reconstruction. This strategy states that the school counsellor guides the young person to reconstruction by disconfirming their unhelpful constructions and at the same time validating their self and their construing or meaning making. In counselling, young people are more likely to reconstruct their beliefs and attitudes if these beliefs and attitudes are invalidated while their beliefs about themselves (self as object) and about their construing/ meaning making (self as subject) are validated (Carter & Viney, 2006). Although the young person's personal interpretations are honoured, they are also challenged by the school counsellor (Ravenette, 1999).

In the personal construct model of counselling, invalidation becomes the key to reconstruction. As the young person struggles with the difficult problem and experiments with new meanings and behaviours, there is a moment when they suddenly seem to 'get it'. However, the young person finds outside the counselling room that what they thought would work does not work. For the young person, the testing out of the new interpretations fails to provide the leverage to anticipate how things will actually turn out. While reconstruing can empower the young person by opening up new avenues of understanding and action, it is also about confronting events that are difficult to interpret or predict. These unsuccessful outcomes, these failures by the young person when putting their new understandings to the test, are necessary for learning to develop.

Facilitating the anchoring of new understandings within existing ways of seeing things is necessary. The school counsellor understands that for new understandings to be taken up by the young person they need to be anchored to the young person's

existing ways of seeing things; they need to be connected with what is already meaningful. Change is not achieved in a straightforward linear manner but is full of attempts that don't work out. The school counsellor is aware that for something to make sense and to be taken in by the young person, many different ways of looking at events need to be tested out by the young person. This is when the school counsellor provides validation for the young person's self-identity and their ability to have a go while continuing to invalidate their problematic meanings which led the young person into difficult waters. When bullying occurs and the young person is feeling lonely and scared, the school counsellor validates the young person's sense of self and his/her understandings of how they feel. The school counsellor then provides other interpretations of events that do not directly contradict the meaning making of the young person but provide other windows by which to see the event. This approach allows space for alternative actions and allows the counselling to also respond to the emotional state of the young person. It reduces the paralysing sense of responsibility the young person feels for being the victim of bullying. Ignoring the teasing barbs of the bully is often impossible for the young person while he/she is feeling very vulnerable.

Case illustrations

The following two case examples are provided to illustrate the principles, processes and interpersonal relationships that frame this model of school counselling practice. The propositions and strategies employed are identified and underlined.

1. Jason, 14 years old, a secondary school student

Following suspension from school for violence, Jason agreed with the school executive to try counselling at school. Jason arrived at the counselling office and slumped into the chair, making it clear he didn't have much to say. The school counsellor adopted <u>a credulous approach</u> by asking Jason to tell her what had happened. By actively listening, the school counsellor was able to encourage Jason to provide his interpretation of the events that had led to his suspension. For Jason the most important event was not his violent reactions but rather the fact that the other student swore about his mother and family. The school counsellor actively refrained from providing behavioural choices for Jason, instead encouraging Jason to look at the fighting event from different perspectives. The school counsellor <u>adopted the role of enquirer</u>, allowing Jason to lead the discussion. The school counsellor anticipated that allowing Jason to lead would assist him in feeling more engaged in counselling. A leadership role is one that Jason is comfortable with at home. Jason is the eldest child of three living with his mother and has no contact with his father. He feels responsible for and close to everyone at home. The counselling relationship began when Jason asked if he could make another appointment. In the subsequent appointments, greater emphasis was placed on encouraging Jason to elaborate further on his interpretations of his family relationships. The predominant <u>experiential transitional state</u> for Jason was threat; his identity since his father left had been one of protecting and taking responsibility for his mother and siblings. His core construing was challenged by the other boy in the fight when he made profane comments about his mother and family. It was also challenged by the punishing reaction of the school to his attempts to do what he deeply believed was

the right thing to do. Jason didn't like violence, he saw his father as a violent man and he didn't want to be like him. He <u>understood something needed to change</u> but change at this time seemed impossible. The school counsellor understood that for there to be change in a way that would make sense to Jason, his core constru-ing needed <u>to be loosened</u>. Again using a collaborative approach, this was done by <u>disconfirming unhelpful constructions</u> such as that his mother and siblings could not cope without him. At the same time, the school counsellor was validating his identity, his core values of loyalty and love along with his capacity to try and understand himself and others.

2.   *Anna, 9 years old, a primary school student*

Anna appeared to hate the world. She was uncooperative at home and school, rude and dismissive of her peers, and had no friends. Her mother was suffering from cancer, and requested that the school counsellor provide Anna with support during her treatment and expected recovery. Anna made it clear at the onset of counselling that she did not want to have counselling and therefore was not going to talk. The school counsellor looked for <u>alternative ways</u> to engage Anna and this began by offering play activities such as drawing and using play dough. Under-standing that <u>experiences are tested out through behaviour</u>, the school counsellor developed the <u>transitive diagnosis</u> that Anna's world as she knew it was being <u>consistently invalidated</u> by her mother's illness and that she was very angry as a result. The school counsellor understood Anna's hostile behaviour as attempts to <u>exhort evidence</u> that adults are untrustworthy and will let you down: 'I will get hurt if I get too close to them, and so it is safer to aggressively push them away'. The treatment implications became trying to connect with Anna within the parameters of the counselling context. This connection began by the school counsellor asking Anna to provide a fictional or reflective story at the end of the play activity. The school counsellor responded by also providing a reflective story which slowly introduced relational constructs. The treatment then transitioned to one of facilitating Anna's reconnection with her 'feeling loved' constructions. The drawings in particular provided the therapeutic window into how Anna's construing of herself and her relationships was changing. Her <u>non-verbal construing</u> portrayed through her pictures moved from <u>unhelpful constructions</u> of herself as unlovable and therefore weird to ones where she portrayed herself reacting in various ways to different situations. With her construing loosening, Anna began to value her achievements at school and to form friendships. The next big step for Anna was to begin to put into words the changes that were taking place in the way she was understanding events. While Anna did not draw her mother, she was able to talk about her mother's treatment and setbacks. When her mother died, Anna was able to say goodbye believing she 'was loved'.

Challenges for the school counselling model of service delivery

Research findings indicate that school-based interventions can prevent or treat a variety of emotional, behavioural and social problems including anxiety, depression, disruptive behaviour problems and substance abuse (Forman & Barakat, 2011). However, the challenge for the future delivery of school counselling services relies on transporting evidence-based programmes into school settings. Evidence-based

practice is defined as interventions which demonstrate improved psychological outcomes for young people based on consistent scientific evidence (Drake et al., 2001). Zoellner (2009) writes about how schools may not easily conform to mental health models of evidence and the ways these models work. Consideration for the implementation of these programmes needs to rest on the likely match of these interventions to the needs of the particular students and also on the aggregated evidence regarding their effectiveness and the conditions under which they are most likely to be effective. While our model of school counselling delivery allows for the implementation of evidence-based interventions, it cannot provide the tightly controlled conditions necessary in studies of efficacy. Measuring the amount and quality of the intervention delivered will be the challenge when analysing the impact/ effectiveness of the school counselling intervention.

Counselling under 'real-world conditions' has its challenges. School counselling interventions often have to contend with adverse pressures arising from the everyday life of the school environment. These challenges can involve changes in school routines, absent teachers and the impact of relief teachers, peer and/or teacher conflict inside the classroom or outside in the playground, and domestic conflicts that carry over into the school yard. On the other hand, working within the real world facilitates the accessibility of psychologically based services and in so doing encourages the continuing participation by young people in mental health services. As noted by Durlak et al. (2011), 'interventions are unlikely to have much practical utility or gain widespread acceptance unless they are effective under real-world conditions' (p. 407).

Conclusion

As personal construct psychology is essentially an idiographic approach, our model is well positioned to understand the diversity of needs of students and schools. The model sets out to address this function by developing a method of practice through a set of principles, processes and interpersonal relationships. The model attempts to make available to the school counsellor personal construct theory and psychology in a form that can be understood and utilised. Central to our model of school counselling delivery is the assumption there are always potentially alternative ways of making sense of each other, ourselves and our worlds. It is about developing a sensitivity to the possible ways in which these differences in meaning making may impact on students' mental health and well-being, and on academic achievement. Working within the model, the personal construct school counsellor understands that students have diverse meanings for similar problems and effective psychological treatment of the problems requires a flexible approach in the choice of psychological interventions. It is a counselling approach that focuses on the positive indicators rather than the deficit indicators of psychological well-being. The school counsellor builds on the skills and capacities of the young person rather than focusing on correcting problematic behaviours. Working within this model, the school counsellor sets out to build up the ability of the young person to cope with stressors, to develop autonomy and trust, constructions of self-other (including self-esteem and identity), empathy and positive social relationships, all indicators of positive well-being (Lippman, Anderson Moore, & McIntosh, 2011).

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