**SCOTTISH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PREFERENCES FOR LOCATION, FORMAT OF COUNSELLING AND SEX OF COUNSELLOR**

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**ABSTRACT**

Within the United Kingdom there is a significant revival of therapeutic counselling services in schools. This study looks at three factors which may affect students' willingness to attend such a service: location of the service (school-based or external); format (individual or group); and sex of counsellor. The views of 584 students from four Scottish secondary schools were surveyed. Approximately three-quarters of students expressed a preference for seeing a counsellor in their school. Over 80 percent of students expressed a preference for seeing a counsellor on their own, and this was particularly marked in older pupils. There was also a preference within the sample for female counsellors, particularly amongst female respondents, and most markedly amongst young female respondents. Implications of these findings are discussed in the light of related qualitative research, and methodological limitations of the study are highlighted.

# SCOTTISH SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' PREFERENCES FOR LOCATION, FORMAT OF COUNSELLING AND SEX OF COUNSELLOR

A recent report by Jenkins and Polat (2005) suggests that counselling in schools within the UK is experiencing a 'significant revival', with around three-quarters of secondary schools in England and Wales now providing 'therapeutic individual counselling' for their students. Several in-depth evaluations have now been carried out of these services (Baginsky, 2004; Burnison, 2003; Cooper, 2004; Fox & Butler, 2003; Montgomery, 2003; Youth Access to Information Advice and Counselling, 2001), and these indicate that school students are highly satisfied with the counselling service they receive and experience significant changes from pre- to post-counselling on a range of psychometric indicators. In recent years, several studies have also been carried out to ascertain the views of the wider student community towards a school-based counselling service, and these have focused primarily on the factors that might inhibit students from approaching such a service (Cooper, 2004; Johnson, 2003; Kuhl, Jarkon-Horlick, & Morrissey, 1997; Le Surf & Lynch, 1999; Murgatroyd, 1977; Setiawan, ; West, Kayser, Overton, & Saltmarsh, 1991; Wilch, 1999). Such studies have an important role to play in helping providers tailor counselling services to the needs of school students, and ensuring that the barriers which may inhibit students from attending such services are minimised.

The present study examines three particular factors that might influence students' willingness to attend a school-based counselling service. The first is the question of

whether students are actually willing to attend such a service, or whether they have a preference for counselling within the wider community. The second question is whether students would rather attend a school-based service on their own, or whether they have a preference for attending counselling in a group format. The final question is whether students would prefer see a male or female counsellor.

With respect to the previous literature, none of these three questions have been investigated to any great extent. Regarding the issue of location, probably the most relevant data comes from Masters' dissertation research by Wilch (1999) and Johnson (2003), which indirectly examined the views of 364 English secondary school students and 242 16-19 year old males in a sixth form college, respectively, towards counselling. Here, students were asked how they *imagined* other students would feel towards the counselling service, based on the assumption that this would reveal something of the students' own views (they were not asked their views directly to minimise the intrusiveness of the research). Both studies found that students tended to imagine that other students would prefer a non-school location: Wilch found that 54 percent of respondents thought a young person would prefer to see a counsellor away from the school premises compared with 45 percent at school; and Johnson found that 55 percent of respondents thought an adolescent male would rather see a counsellor outside the college premises compared with just 14 percent inside.

With respect to the format of counselling, Wilch (1999) reports that 58 percent of respondents thought that a young person would rather see a counsellor alone, 37 percent thought that a young person would rather go with a friend, and four percent thought a young person would rather attend with a group of friends. She also found a

slight sex difference here, with young males showing a greater tendency to think that a fellow student would rather see a counsellor alone (63 percent of male respondents compared with 54 percent of females) and young females showing a greater tendency to think that a fellow student would rather go with a friend (44 percent of female respondents compared with 30 percent of males).

Finally, with respect to sex of counsellor, previous research suggests a preference for female counsellors, particularly amongst female respondents. Wilch (1999), for instance, found that 56 percent of her respondents would prefer to see a female counsellor (in this instance, the question was asked directly), with seven percent saying that they would prefer to see a male counsellor and 37 percent indicating no preference. Male and female respondents, however, varied quite considerably in their responses. Specifically, 79 percent of females expressing a preference for a female counsellor, compared with one percent expressing a preference for a male counsellor, with twenty percent expressing no preference. By contrast, the most frequent response for the male respondents was one of no overall preference (56 percent), with 32 percent expressing a preference for a female counsellor and 13 percent expressing a preference for a male one. Here, then, female students expressed a strong preference for female counsellors whilst male students tended to express no overall preference (though a slight favourability towards female counsellors). This is similar to finding in an adult population (Dancey, Dryden, & Cook, 1992), where males respondents have been found to favour male and female therapists equally, whilst female respondents showed a significant preference for female therapists.

**METHOD**

**Respondents**

Respondents were 584 pupils from four secondary schools in Glasgow and the west of Scotland. Two hundred and seventy-four of the respondents indicated that they were female (46.9 percent) and 283 indicated that they were male (48.5 percent), with 4.6 percent of the respondents giving no indication of their sex. Students were distributed across the six Scottish school years of 'S1' to 'S6' (ages 11 to 16 approximately) (see table one), with a high concentration of students in the fourth year of their studies. In terms of ethnic origin, 456 of the pupils (78.1 percent) indicated that they were of Scottish origin, with 487 (83.4 percent), in total, classifiable as being of British origin and 39 (6.7 percent) classifiable as being of non-British origin (primarily Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi). With respect to socio-economic status of the respondents, three of the schools were situated in urban locations drawing pupils from socially mixed communities, with the fourth school situated in a suburban neighbourhood drawing pupils from a largely owner-occupied residential area. Two of the schools were Roman Catholic.

[table one about here]

**Questionnaire**

The three questions for this study formed part of a 16-item 'Confidential Counselling Service Questionnaire', which aimed to ascertain students' views on a range of counselling-related issues, including their willingness to attend counselling; their views on what counselling was; and their beliefs about the factors that might inhibit,

and facilitate, their attendance at counselling. This questionnaire, itself, was part of a wider evaluation of the counselling service established at three of the schools reported here. With respect to this specific report, the three questions of relevance, their fixed responses, and their numerical coding, were as follows:

• 'If you were to see a counsellor, would you rather they were based at your school or outside (for instance, at a youth centre or doctor's surgery)?' 'At the school, definitely' (0) / 'At the school, probably' (1) /' Outside, probably' (2) / 'Outside, definitely' (3)

• 'If you were to see the counsellor at your school, would you rather see them on your own, or as part of a small group?' 'On my own, definitely' (0) / 'On my own, probably' (1) / 'In a small group, probably' (2) / 'In a small group, definitely' (3).

• 'If you were to see the counsellor in your school, which kind of counsellor would you rather see?' 'A male counsellor' (0) / 'Either a male counsellor or a female counsellor' (1) / 'A female counsellor' (2) (nominal scale).

**Procedure**

Guidance coordinators were asked to distribute the questionnaire to one class of students per year in each of the four schools during PSE (Personal and Social Education) lessons. The questionnaire invited students to be as honest as they could be in their answers, to complete the forms on their own, and to take a little time to think about each question. Students were also informed that there were no right or

wrong answers to any of the questions, and that their answers would be treated as wholly anonymous. Students were given the opportunity to tick a box to indicate that they did not want to complete the questionnaire; and were advised that they should approach their student support coordinator if, following completion of the questionnaire, they wanted to talk to someone further about counselling or their feelings.

Data was analysed using a range of SPSS descriptive and inferential statistical procedures. Where students had marked more than one response to a question, this was treated as a non-valid response. Because of the small numbers of pupils from non-British ethnic origins, data comparing responses from British and non-British pupils was analysed independently of sex and school year of respondent.

**RESULTS**

**Location**

Five hundred and fifty-seven students (95.4% of all questionnaire respondents) gave a valid response to the question 'If you were to see a counsellor, would you rather they were based at your school or outside (for instance, at a youth centre or doctor's surgery)?' The modal and median response was 'at the school, probably,' with 73.8% of all respondents to this question stating a preference for seeing a counsellor at the school (see figure one).

[figure one about here]

A two-way independent ANOVA using sex and year as fixed factors found no significant differences across these variables ($F(1, 530) = 0.24$, $p = .62$, $F(5, 530) = 2.13$, $p = .06$ respectively) and a non-significant interaction effect ($F(5, 530) = 1.43$, $p = .21$). With respect to ethnicity, $t$-tests found that pupils of non-British ethnic origins expressed a significantly greater preference for a counselling service based in their school (mean = 0.82) as compared with pupils of British ethnic origins (mean = 1.11) ($t(511) = 2.07$, $p = .039$).

**Format**

562 students (96.2% of all questionnaire respondents) gave a valid response to the question 'If you were to see the counsellor at your school, would you rather see them on your own, or as part of a small group?' The modal response was 'on my own, definitely' and the median response was 'on my own, probably', with 84.7% of all respondents to this question stating a preference for seeing a counsellor on their own (see figure two).

[figure two about here]

A two-way independent ANOVA using sex and year as fixed factors found no significant differences across sex ($F(1, 536) = 0.02$, $p = .89$) but a significant difference across year ($F(5, 536) = 4.28$, $p < .01$). *Post hoc* Tukey's test found that students in year one were significantly more favourable towards seeing a counsellor in a small group (mean = 0.91) than students in years three (mean = 0.52) and four (mean = 0.60); and students in years two (mean = 0.89) expressed a similar preference as compared with students in year three. Across the sample as a whole, a correlation

of -.15 existed between school year and preference for small group vs. individual counselling ($p < .01$), indicating that older students had a stronger preference for one-to-one counselling. The interaction effect between sex and school year was non-significant ($F(5, 536) = 0.97$, $p = .44$), and there was no significant difference across ethnicity of respondent ($t(515) = 0.20$, $p = .84$).

## Sex of counsellor

566 students (96.9% of all questionnaire respondents) gave a valid response to the question 'If you were to see the counsellor in your school, which kind of counsellor would you rather see?': 'a male counsellor', 'a female counsellor', 'either a male counsellor or a female counsellor'. Overall, the modal response was 'a female counsellor', with 49.5% of respondents to this question giving this answer. This compares with 9% expressing a preference for a male counsellor and 39.9% expressing a preference for a counsellor of either sex. A significant association existed, however, between the sex of the respondent and their preferences for male or female counsellors ($\chi^2(2) = 77.37$, $p < .01$), with 69.1% of female students expressing a preference for a female counsellor compared with 33.7% of male students, and 2.2% of female students expressing a preference for a male counsellor compared with 15.1% of male students (see figure 3). Chi-squared tests also found a significant association between the school year of respondents and their preferences for a male or female counsellor ($\chi^2(10) = 28.15$, $p < .01$), though this finding must be treated with caution as the count in one cell was less than five. Descriptive exploration here suggests that younger students, and younger female students in particular, showed a particularly strong preference for female counsellors, as compared with older students. For instance, 90.3% of first and second year female students expressed a

11

preference for a counsellor of their own sex as compared with 58.9% of fifth and sixth

year female students. Interestingly, a similar trend occurred in the male students, with

23% of first and second year students expressing a preference for a counsellor of *their*

own sex, as compared with 5.7% of the fifth and sixth year male students.

Chi-squared tests found no significant differences across ethnic origin of respondent

($\chi^2(2) = 0.37$, *p* = .83).

[figure three about here]

## DISCUSSION

With respect to the issue of location, the findings from this study suggest that young

Scottish people – and particularly pupils from a non-British ethnic background – have

a strong preference for seeing a counsellor in a school, as opposed to non-school,

environment. This contrasts with the findings of Wilch (1999) and Johnson (2003),

but given that their findings were only indirect, it is quite possible that students,

themselves, have a preference for seeing a counsellor based at their school whilst

assuming that other students have a preference for an external counsellor.

In terms of why students might have a preference for a counsellor based at their

school, some light can be thrown on this by an in-depth interview study that was

conducted as part of the same overall evaluation as the present study (Cooper, 2004).

Here, former counselling clients were asked about their experiences of, perceptions

of, and attitudes towards, counselling. As in the present study, a majority of the

nineteen interviewees (58 percent) indicated that they would rather see a counsellor in

12

the school (with none expressing an overall preference for seeing a counsellor outside of the school), and a primary reason given for this by almost all the interviewees were in terms of *convenience*. For example:

> I don't think I would have gone [if the counselling had been outside the school].... 'cause, I didn't want to go in the first place, but the idea that it was just here– I thought I would just try it out and see what it was like, but if I, like, had to go to the effort, sort of, to go to the place, I don't think I would have done.

In addition to this, three of the participants (16%) said that they preferred having a counsellor in the schools because you could more quickly arrange to see them if you were in immediate need. Two of the participants (11%) said that they liked having the counselling in school because of the greater sense of familiarity and safety. In terms of the disadvantages of having the counselling in school, however, two of the participants (11%) said that they felt it was less discrete and private and that there was more anxiety about other pupils knowing they were attending.

For both this qualitative study and the present study, however, these findings must be treated with caution. First, the fact that both studies were conducted on school premises means that those students who may have been most antipathetic towards a school environment may have been excluded from the sample. Also, the fact that the present study was conducted in a school environment means that that environment may have been experienced as more familiar and safe, and hence rated more positively. Another potential bias arises from the fact that many of the questions on

the questionnaire – prior to the question on location – were concerned with the students' attitudes towards, and expectations of, a school-based counselling service. Hence, again, such a service may have been experienced as more familiar, and a demand characteristic may have crept in here, with students believing that the questionnaire was from their school's counselling service and therefore wanting to rate such a service more positively. In terms of the reliability of this finding, then, it would seem essential to ask a similar question in a non-school environment, such as a youth club, to see whether a preference for a school-based counselling service is maintained.

Nevertheless, what this part of the present study indicates is that a substantial number of young people do seem to have a preference for locating counselling services in their school environment, and this provides strong support for the current proliferation of such services. However, without further research of the type indicated above, it would be a mistake to assume that this implies that community-based counselling services for young people should be minimised. Indeed, even if only a small minority of young people expressed a strong preference for such a service (7.4 percent in the present study), the existence of community-based services would still serve an essential function for such students.

With respect to the issue of group versus individual counselling, this study found a strong preference for one-to-one activity, and this is relatively consistent with Wilch's (1999) findings, though no sex differences were found in the present study. It was interesting to note, however, that younger students were somewhat less aversive to a

group counselling format, though the overall mean remained well within the 'preference for individual counselling' range.

Again, some further light can be shed on these findings from the in-depth qualitative interviews with former counselling clients (Cooper, 2004). Here, again, a similar preference for one-to-one counselling was expressed, with twelve of the participants (63%) saying that they would rather this format, and none expressing an overall preference for group counselling. In terms of the reasons for this, six of the participants (32% of the total participants) said that, had they been in a group, they would have felt more nervous and uncomfortable, worrying about what others thought of them, and consequently disclosing less. Closely related to this, five of the participants (26%) said that they felt a group format would have been more inhibiting because it would have been less confidential.

In terms of the advantages of a group format, however, four of the participants (21% of the total participants) said that they would have valued the opportunity to hear others' experiences: both how they dealt with their problems, how they experienced the counselling; and two of the participants (11%) said that having a group format would have helped them feel less alone with their problems.

These findings, then, suggest that individual counselling should remain the mainstay of counselling services within schools, though there may be some scope for broadening out to group work, particularly with younger pupils. Such work may be most effective when the groups are based around particular themes or issues, such as

'anxiety' or 'bereavement' groups, where the young people can hear about each others' experiences, and how they came to deal with their problems.

With respect to preferred sex of counsellor, the findings of this study closely match those of previous studies: that there is an overall preference for female counsellors; that female students, in particular, prefer female counsellors; and that many male students exhibit no overall preference, though those that do also tend to prefer female counsellors over males. One new piece of information that came out of this study, however, was that the preference for female counsellors amongst female students appears to be most marked in younger females; and that younger male students also tended to express a greater preference towards a same-sex counsellor. Overall, however, what these findings indicate is that a female counsellor is likely to receive a more positive reception by many students – particularly female ones – within a school; and may also serve to reduce barriers to attending, and approaching, the counselling service. Of course, there is no indication here that female counsellors will actually be more effective in their work, and there is also no indication of the strength of the feeling towards – or against – male and female counsellors. For future research, therefore, it may be most important to ask the question: 'If the counsellor in your school were male/female, how likely would you be to attend the service?' If, here, many young people indicated that they would not go if the counsellor were male, this could raise important questions for consideration by schools and counselling services.

With respect to limitations of the present study, one important question to ask is whether the findings presented here are actually representative of those students who would be *willing* to attend a counselling service. Indeed, given that the wider survey

found that 77 percent of respondents 'probably' or 'definitely' would *not* be willing to see a school counsellor, it could be argued that many of the viewpoints presented here are irrelevant. For this reason, the data was re-analysed using only the responses of those students who said that they 'probably' or 'definitely' would be willing to talk to a counsellor at their school. This, however, produced no meaningful differences in the pattern of responses. Similarly, the data was re-analysed using only the responses of those students who said that they knew 'a moderate amount', or more, about counselling. Again, no meaningful differences in the results were found, suggesting that the findings presented in this paper *are* representative of those who would be willing to attend, and understand about, counselling.

**CONCLUSION**

The present study found a marked preference amongst Scottish secondary school pupils for a one-to-one counselling service, based in their school, and delivered by a female counsellor. Such findings have important implications for the provision of counselling services to young people, though there is a need for further validation of the results. In particular, as well as asking these questions in a non-school environment, it would seem important to assess their generalisability by carrying out similar surveys in non-school locations and with students from different socio-economic backgrounds. The research presented here, however, provides a firm basis from which further research can be conducted.

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## TABLES

**Table 1: School years of respondents**

|  | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|
| S1 | 106 | 18.2 |
| S2 | 89 | 15.2 |
| S3 | 99 | 17.0 |
| S4 | 159 | 27.2 |
| S5 | 72 | 12.3 |
| S6 | 43 | 7.4 |
| Missing/spoilt | 7 | 2.7 |

**FIGURES**

Figure one: Preference for location of counselling

Figure two: Preferences for format of counselling

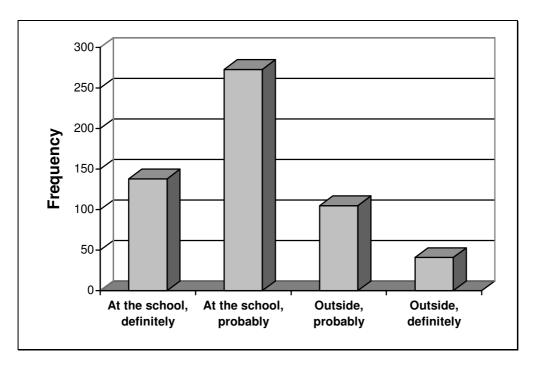Figure three: Preferences for sex of counsellor by sex of respondent

**FIGURES**



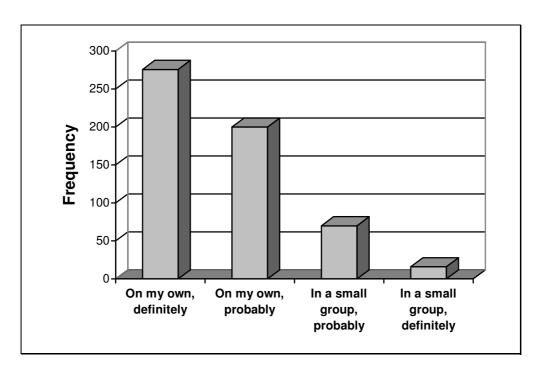Figure 1: Preference for location of counselling
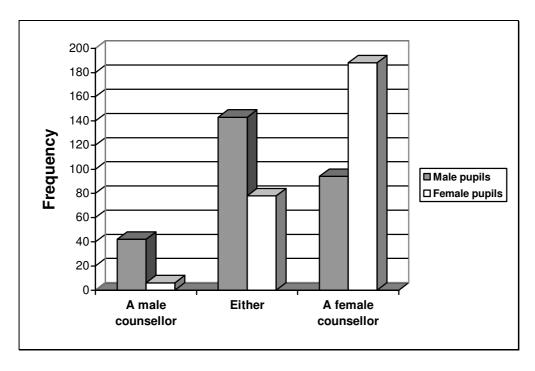
**Figure 2: Preferences for format of counselling**

**Figure 1: Preferences for sex of counsellor by sex of respondent**