Sources of Stress for School Counsellors: Challenges and implications for counselling

By Lynn Woods and Dr Ann Moir-Bussy

The word ‘stress’ is a highly subjective phenomena which has been used widely in present times to describe distress in varying intensity. Eustress is a positive phenomenon that can motivate and energise. Through a subjective approach using phenomenology, this Qualitative Study used semi-structured interviews with five school counsellors working in Southeast Queensland Schools, to explore their lived experience of stress and response to stress. School counsellors work in an environment that is constantly changing, partly due to the influence of ‘globalisation’. Such constant change and development provides challenges for students, families and staff, and to the counsellor’s role. The finding of this small study are supported by previous research in this area. Stress e.g. role ambiguity and conflict, case load, case notes, isolation etc., were all mentioned by participants. However, the findings from this small sample also highlighted that response to stress initiated a process of positive and sustained change in both personal and work self-care, and the pivotal part this plays in sustaining the unique role of the school counsellor within the demands of an ‘outcomes orientated’ educational system.

Keywords: stress, eustress, school counsellor, balance, globalisation

Introduction

The understanding of how school counsellors in Australia experience and deal with stress, appears to be covered in a limited body of past research. Stress has been defined as ‘the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change’ (Sears & Navin, 1983). Understanding the phenomenological experience of stress is highly subjective in nature, and is generally understood to be interpreted with negative connotations e.g. trauma and burnout (Kirk-Brown & Wallace, 2004), however stress that motivates to achieve, known as eustress, can be a positive phenomenon (Sears & Navin, 1983). A study exploring the relationship between stress and coping (Rowe, 2000), showed that problem focused coping is generally used when there is an expectation of being able to change a situation, and emotional-focused coping strategies when participants felt they had no control over changing the situation.

Background

Rapid growth in technology, and increasing internet access to knowledge and social media, along with the expansion of multicultural connection, brings many challenges to school counsellors. Schools are required to educate a diverse student population to a standard, higher than ever before (Darling-Hammond, 2008). School counsellors provide support within the daily demands of school life,
the increasing mental health issues that accompany life's challenges, along with multifaceted issues and expectations from all the major stakeholders – students, staff, administration, parents and professional bodies (Moran, 2002).

Previous studies on school counsellors and stress, identify underlying issues that cause tension, including the factors and conflicts that arise from role incongruence, and the ambiguity that places pressure on role expectations, time management, and the contribution of ego development (Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks, Johnson, & Solomon, 2005), (Esters & Castellanos, 1998). Studies, mostly conducted overseas, have examined how school counsellors describe and experience their role, affirming a diversity in role description, as opposed to role base, as well as identifying the degree and sources of that stress (Kok, 2014; Sears & Navin, 1983). The difference between initial perceptions of the job description and the counsellor's practical experience of it, is a factor affecting role stress, along with the need to understand the changing and expanding role that school counsellors encounter (Culbreth et al., 2005), (I-Washington, 2007).

Incongruence and ambiguity of role, appears to be identified as a major causality of school counsellor stress in many of the previous studies, showing that multiple demands from a diverse population and need base, can lead to burnout, and an ensuing low sense of self adequacy (Wilkinson, 2009).

Method

It is important when choosing the research method, that the choice is considered the most functional in exploring the research question, and Qualitative Research provides several options with regard to methodology (Maltur, 2001). The theoretical approach of phenomenology, gains empirical insights through embodied experience, and the question of focus can be approached with 'astonishment' rather than preconceived knowledge and theory. This intentional analysis system unfolds understanding through the shared experience of the participants, using open ended and semi structured questions (Aspers, 2004).

Researcher position

Based on a subjective ontological assumption, research in the field of counselling, examines experience within the phenomenon of focus, as the way to discover knowledge. It is therefore not possible for this researcher to function as external observer, simply measuring what is observed, but instead must explore the 'how and why' school counsellors feel about stress, by in-depth emersion within the data.

My epistemological position in relation to this research can be formulated as – 'the perspectives and experience of the school counsellors who were interviewed, contain data that can illuminate the experience of stress in a changing world, therefore I used school counsellors in the collection of this data.' Thus this study sought to intentionally describe the school counsellors experience of stress, rather than simply explain the source of these tensions. Using the method of phenomenology brings perceptions and experiences to the fore, and seeks to be free of perception and hypothesis (Lester, 1999).

Participants

Participants for this study were sourced using purposive sampling, recruiting five counsellors whose experience is in South Queensland Schools and used taped interviews in the collection of data. Participants were initially sent a Research Participation Invitation by email, and counsellors who expressed interest were then sent the Research Project Information Form. The study utilised maximum variation, using both male and female participants, from both public and private school sectors and from different geographical locations i.e. coastal, rural and metropolitan. There was also a spectrum of experience ranging from a counsellor in their first year, to two who have operated in this role for between twenty and thirty years. The researcher acknowledges the limitation of this small sample size in generalising the findings, however it also recognises that allowing quality time to unpack the data through rich description is sufficient to convey the essence of the phenomena investigated (Stark & Trinidad, 2007), (Miller & Salkind, 2002).

Interview schedule

The researcher acknowledges that in these interviews, that the meaning of the participants feedback came through language, and that the formation of a positive alliance was central to collecting data. These indepth interviews followed the guidelines of confidentiality, and invited reflective responses from the participants. An initial general question established connection and rapport, and all participants were then asked the same set of questions. Flexibility was included in this semi-structured interview, using probing questions to further explore genuine experiential feedback from participants.

Transcript and analysis

Personal and professional experience in school counselling and stress was acknowledged by the researcher, in order to be transparent around any perceived bias. Bracketing also included inviting the participants to set aside their ideas about the issues that cause stress, and be open to their subjective experience of this phenomena in the interview. Interviews were recorded on audio tape and unchanged transcripts of the interviews were typed, with sensitivity to non-verbal cues e.g. silence etc. The researcher then listened again to the tapes, becoming immersed in the data and beginning to note perceived initial themes. Proper names were deidentified and participants were given a pseudonym and code. Meaningful units from each transcript were collated into codes, broader categories and then identified and developed into themes that represent the findings of this study.
Case load

Four of the participants identified the demands that come from an escalating case load/management, as a primary source of stress. Participants stated that they are often expected to see an increasing number of students, within the limited time of a school day. One participant referred to a "revolving door of children that have serious issues", and how the impact of their story, and the circumstances of students and families, can have a strong influence on the emotional and physical welfare of the counsellor.

Robert noted -

... then things that happen through the day, could be things that pop up without any warning, and they might be a critical incident it might be something that needs to be seen to straight away, and you've got to push other things back, and you can't talk about it, so you've got to be in control of it. As soon as you feel like you're losing control of your day, or you're losing, ... people trusting you to be in control of your day, then the stress starts to build.

Joanne stated -

I think that in whatever role you are performing, there's organisational stress, and the stress from the role and the breadth of the role, and the number of hours in the week that you've got to do it in, and when other expectations are placed upon you, are they reasonable or do they create a stress internally for you that you in fact have to deal with by confronting it.

And in terms of role expectations, I have found as unpopular as it is, the best way is to confront it, and confront it early. Ah! so that everybody is on the same page.

Sarah's reflection was -

There's always drama so there's something happening every day, there's either some sort of fight, there's problems at home, the level of abuse and reportable incidents are probably higher as the kids are disclosing more and more about their home lives or past experiences ... yeah! so it is quite demanding.

Another participant, Jake said -

The top challenge was having too many children to see and once I got the referral, and I read the story and the need for counselling it was virtually impossible for me to say no.

Rick added... ... because some days - like there's four periods in a day and sometimes I'll see - I'll have eight different sessions in that, you know dividing them in half and then plus lunch times, so it gets a bit, by the end of the day - how am I going to remember everything that was said sort of thing, so I guess, yeah!

Although participants spoke of spending more personal hours on their professional demands, the number of hours in a school day in which children can access the school counsellor is limited. Three participants spoke of spending all of this time, including lunch hours with students and how initially this was leading to a burnout situation. Exploring this with a trusted supervisor initiated a change that was ongoing and more balanced both in number and case type, as well as initiating more positive psychology intervention.

When reflecting on the high level of demand on a school counsellor and time involved, Joanne reflected:

'Classic is the Friday afternoon situation where someone was in on a Friday afternoon because they are going to get beaten the hell out of on Saturday and Sunday. So they're in your office 12.30, 1.00 o'clock and so you're dealing with that and then you're thinking through the safety options for the weekend for them. Are Child Safety going to get to them in time, are they going to make the arrangements, is it expected of me to make some or all interim arrangements if they can’t get out in time – that is high demand, high stress work.'

This high demand for counsellor time, also appears to impact on the effective recording of case notes. Participants spoke of seeing students without being able to have a break, or having the chance to recoup from each session, when case notes should be immediately recorded. One of the participants who is beginning work in this field, spoke of their stress when having to report to authorities around an alleged incident of assault on a student. There was a significant time lapse between the initial counsellor/client contact, and when the report was required. The alleged abusive circumstances were not presented initially by the student, and they spoke of their subsequent awareness for the need to be specific with information in case notes, and the stress of not having this skill taught, or adequate accountability and follow up, around the recording of case notes.

Rick stated -

That whole experience of going to the police for that statement, made it clear how important it was to be very specific with the information that I get and what I write down which I hadn't previously done, because no one really taught me.

When talking about an escalating case load, Rick also verbalised experiencing a sense of dread at times, when hearing someone knock at the door, and a feeling of 'being pushed beyond my limits.' Accessing support under a heavy case load, also introduces confidentiality as a contributing factor to stress. Processing how long information is withheld before

---

8 Summer 2015 | Counselling Australia
action is taken, or the stress of disclosing it under a mandatory approach which the legislation demands from schools, puts the counsellor at risk of losing the client in the process.

**Isolation**

Robert remarked—

In the school counselling, unless you have a good rapport with someone in your workplace, then you really don’t have anyone to bounce it off, because you are supposed to be competent all the time. Most of the time we have people who have no idea what we are talking about. I think the attrition rate amongst counsellors is because they spend so much time trying to justify to other people that they’re actually worthwhile.

Sarah commented—

Within this role, people just assume that you know what you’re doing—off you go, get it done, show us the results and it can have the expectation of results...

While Joanne added—

I don’t really believe that administrators understand totally what we do. They’re outcomes driven they want to see results and in counselling and therapy and school counselling often times the results we don’t see and won't see until the fruit may bear in that student’s life in their 20’s because we’re on about life long learning; we’re not about immediate outcomes necessarily, we’re on about managing the best way possible with that family, a situation, but often times the school has its own... what I call.... ‘back ground conversations, or back ground expectations of what they want from the counsellor. It doesn’t necessarily get articulated doesn’t necessarily get expressed but you run up against it.

In response to feeling misunderstood and isolated, some participants spoke of feeling that the whole counselling/psychology support model doesn’t fit with the expectation of specific behaviours and outcomes. This resulted with some participants acknowledging that they spend significantly more personal hours on their professional role, and acknowledged that the process of this interview helped them to reflect on the need to revisit boundaries as a sustainable factor in their future working life. Making connections through the counselling network appears to counteract the feeling of “floating by myself”, along with maintaining and nurturing professional identity and relationship. A different perspective that comes with talking objectively with another counsellor in a different situation, was identified as providing a space for process that alleviates the burden of feeling isolated and taking the stress home. Robert said,

It’s very hard ... building a friendship or contact is far more relaxing, just someone, you don’t want someone to fix something, you just want to make sure that at least you can actually articulate what you are feeling, because if you can’t, then the feeling just stays with you and it builds... you need someone, they don’t have to fix it, they just have to tell you it’s wrong or it’s right, or ‘yes I understand’ that’s all so you don’t take it home.

**Role – value and respect for the role**

Role incongruence and ambiguity was identified in previous research as a source of stress for school counsellors (Willkerson & Bellini, 2006). It can be inferred from information gathered during these current interviews that, unless there are clear policies and procedures in place for the counsellor role at the school in which they are working, role description and role expectations remains a fluid and interpretive factor around the expectations of school counsellors. Two participants highlighted the significant challenges that come with management and systemic stress when undertaking counselling intervention within an educational system. For example, being asked to take classes, or deal with disciplinary situations can be stressful, in that, a role encompassing a disciplinary aspect, can be at odds with the nature of the counselling role. Being asked to intervene at a point in a behavioural issue, without being included in the whole process that deals with underlying student issues, may contribute to a school counsellor feeling devalued, and misunderstood as to the purpose of their role.

So a devaluing — rather than allow me to share the whole process to recognise that it is something extreme or quite aside from reality, and no, it’s not just a behaviour problem, there is something more underneath it not enough analysis of what’s there (Robert).

Sarah noted—

My role within the school was quite different and it’s taken the young people a little while to realise exactly what I do and open up enough to sort of want to talk to me, because many of them have had experiences of counsellors before and it hasn’t always been positive and many of them are from... they’re already in the high risk category, so there is a lot of distrust there because of that.

This building up of trust for the counsellor and the counselling role, may impact on the possible future counsellor/student relationship, and affect the time taken to open up and want to talk, perhaps at a later phase. The need for ‘unseen time’ such as writing case notes, thinking around assessments, and sometimes research time, can present a challenge to the counsellor who struggles with perception of needing to justify their existence and availability within the school system.

The role of advocacy for students has changed through a political shift in Australia under the Goss government in the 1980’s (Slee, 1995), giving control of guidance officers to school principals in the state system. This accountability can create an internal stress for counsellors if the school agenda is perceived to be at odds with the counsellor’s understanding of the process and support of a student. If a guidance officer counsellor feels that they do not have the support of the Principal and staff, then it was identified by participants that this may cause a continuum of stress. Joanne reflected —

The role has changed... the government at the time which was the public service management committee in the late 1980’s under Goss dismantled district guidance officers, they put them directly under Principal’s control, and that meant that you didn’t have support often times when you went in to advocate

The need for ‘unseen time’ such as writing case notes, thinking around assessments, and sometimes research time, can present a challenge...
for students, because the school itself has its own agenda's with regard to that student. It then became a question of, in a state system, I do my role, and I have, on a continuum I guess of stress, I have less stress if I have a good relationship with the principal, to, if I don’t have a good relationship with the principal, well, then it could be a constant source of stress.

In contrast, it was also stated that the support and trust of Principal and staff towards the Counsellor to determine the needs of a student and act appropriately, added to job satisfaction, and validated the value and respect for the role.

Jake noted

I loved it, absolutely love it.... know the principals of the schools where I worked, were very supportive and trusted, you know, my judgement... and trusted that I could determine the need for how often the child needed to see me, and the teachers were very accommodating to that.

Meeting with and advocating for students, dealing with presenting issues involving high risk demands, can mean that the core nature of the counselling role can be seen to be at odds at times, with expectations placed on other staff e.g. extra duties. These expectations may come from a lack of understanding, or lack of value, for the specialist aspect of the counselling role, or as was expressed by one participant, may also come from the financial pressures that some schools find themselves challenged with. It was also identified, that for a counsellor to refuse a directive regarding extra duties etc., it may place them with the added stress of being dismissed. Students often access the counsellor at times that are convenient to them, including lunch breaks, and it can be a source of continuous stress and misunderstanding for counsellor, students, and staff, if sessions are disrupted or postponed because of agency expectations.

Two of the participants acknowledged that previous experience in teaching provided an understanding of the constraints the classroom teacher has in terms of students exiting lessons, and that this experience enabled them to work closer with teachers, reducing the stress factor of class interruption. Jake commented,

I think that having been a teacher, you know of primary school, I was really helpful because I was understanding of what their constraints were and how difficult it was for them to have children coming and going and so I always tried to work very closely with the teacher to make that as easy

Case notes and access and ownership of information

The stress of balancing information shared with school and family, against confidentiality, can produce conflict around the extent and purpose of information shared or stored on a school data system. As Joanne noted,

Types of documents do you share and balancing that with confidentiality so the school may have a system or technology or a data base system that they want to lock

you into, but the difficulty with that is, um what do they want from you in relation to a student, what do they want you to input into that. Balancing that against confidentiality that’s a source of stress, um because some schools want more detail than you’re prepared to give.

One participant acknowledged that a defining factor in sharing information was – did that person need to ‘action’ it. Professional understanding between work colleagues, and the understanding that in Queensland, reports belong to the school, however the information belongs to families, helps to reduce the stress and confusion around ownership of recorded material. New school counsellors may experience stress if there is no support, feedback or clarification as to their appropriateness in keeping case notes. Rick said that

...the unknown, and not really having – like there’s sort of been guidelines but not having someone I directly report to is new for me. So no-one is really checking on my work, so there’s like a ... I guess a sense of uneasiness ... am I doing the right thing as well.

Unpredictability and a changing environment

In the interview, Joanne observed that one of the ‘classic selection criteria for jobs these days, states the need to be able to manage competing demands in a rapidly changing world’.

That is a classic selection criteria that comes up, your ability to actually manage multiple challenges or multiple changes coming at you at once, which does happen. You can have changes coming in the field of counselling where you’ve got to adapt because of new research, or new approaches, at the same time that suddenly, politically, there’s an imperative that’s comes through education that schools have to respond to (Joanne)

New research and new approaches bring changes to the field of counselling intervention, along with a climate of budgets. The need to see results for money spent, is not always compatible with a counselling role that operates in mostly unseen intervention, and often initiates long term changes, not always immediately seen in short term circumstances.

We’re in a climate of budgets that are, have been trimmed here and there and counsellors often are targets, because they aren’t in front of a class, and schools recognise that their first priority is we pay
teachers to teachers in front of a class but if we’re paying a counsellor $ amount of dollars and they’re not in front of a class then, we want to see what’s happening for that (Joanne)

**Technology**

The rapid development in technology was identified as one of the major sources of stress in the changing school environment by a majority of participants. This evolution causes stress for counsellors and staff, particularly if the counsellor works, or has worked at more than one school e.g. is the school a ‘mac’ school or a ‘P.C.’ school. Data bases are often shared in schools, and the issue of confidentiality for the school counsellor is a concern, when information is required outside of what they perceive is appropriate, and this causes stress. As Robert said

And they’re not prepared for it and the changes that come about, the parents don’t understand technology. And the kids don’t understand even though they use it – they DON’T understand and underlining all of that, is the social side of things that they don’t understand, the social repercussions and the normal ‘wooning and frowning’ of social and emotional things, they put in a new data base, and one of the struggles is bringing in new systems without allowing any time or human resource to help you put it in place. So you’re running parallel with your workload all the time trying to put your system in place, trying to remember to put it on that.

Joanne commented

So technology up front, in your face is a stress. And the thing that I’m finding is that it’s affecting all staff.

Changes in technology and the escalating bullying issue was discussed in this research by one participant. The amount of time taken up to deal with this challenge, and the ongoing extent of it, was identified as source of diminishing job enjoyment at times, particularly when this issue dominated the case load.

Emails and other conversational media is increasingly replacing face to face communication, resulting at times in miscommunication or messages being misinterpreted, and participants identified that stress and conflict arises, when the meaning in a message is misunderstood from what was intended.

One of the things that I’m finding in my current administration is that face-to-face communication is losing out and um miscommunication, or messages are being misinterpreted um when in fact, you don’t want a meeting for a meeting sake, but there are places for meetings to clarify things and sometimes I think we’re using technology and emails as a substitute for face-to-face communication. But also avoiding conflict... (Joanne).

A world connected instantly through technology enables media to bring critical and often graphic images and incidents into the home or school environment.

And what I found, like some of the interventions that I did in the classrooms, I realised as I progressed with that, that there was this great need that I hadn’t really anticipated, um, around anxiety, even in really young children, because what I found was, I started going in and saying ‘Who has nightmares’? now these would be seven and eight year olds and ninety-nine percent of them have nightmares so I came to realise, yea, you know they’re kind of privy to information and fears and movies and things that we

---

**2016 TRAINING DATES/LOCATIONS**

**MASTER NEGOTIATOR™**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>Feb 12, Mar 4, May 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Feb 15, Apr 14, Jun 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perth</td>
<td>Feb 18, Jun 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brisbane</td>
<td>Feb 26, Apr 19,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin</td>
<td>Mar 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>Mar 4, May 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adelaide</td>
<td>Mar 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newcastle</td>
<td>Apr 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canberra</td>
<td>Apr 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Townsville</td>
<td>May 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albury</td>
<td>Jun 9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**1-2-3 MAGIC & EMOTION COACHING**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>Mar 7, May 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toowoomba</td>
<td>Mar 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Mar 14, May 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brisbane</td>
<td>Mar 21, Jun 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geelong</td>
<td>May 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canberra</td>
<td>May 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Townsville</td>
<td>May 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brisbane</td>
<td>Jun 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robina</td>
<td>Jun 16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ENGAGING ADOLESCENTS™**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>Mar 8, May 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toowoomba</td>
<td>Mar 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Mar 15, May 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brisbane</td>
<td>Mar 22, Jun 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geelong</td>
<td>May 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canberra</td>
<td>May 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Townsville</td>
<td>May 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robina</td>
<td>Jun 17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

One Day Professional Training

Equip yourselves with the skills to facilitate our comprehensive methods-based behaviour management and emotion coaching programs to parents of children and youth, or secondary school students.

**New in 2016 - Master Negotiator™**

Teach Year 11 & 12 students to reduce stress by developing the communication and negotiation skills to manage expectations with authority figures.

Enrol now or call 1300 738 278. Active PD points apply.

www.parentshop.com.au
SOURCES OF STRESS

weren’t when we were young. (Jake)

Enmeshed in this, is the situation where children have access to watching horror movies etc., including those that contain material where it is difficult for children to separate reality from fiction. Children can sit in their bedroom and access graphic images emanating from global sources, and this stress invites a shift in thinking for the counsellor, as to how to approach the stress that comes from these effects on children, who do not have the understanding to process the reality of what they are watching. One participant spoke of a heightened sense of anxiety built up due to the television repeatedly showing the same footage of 911 over and over, and small children thinking that each of these footages was a separate and ongoing attack.

Sexuality and drugs

Personal confusion, and a global political agenda around sexuality, also permeates into school relationships and experience. The school counsellor can experience stress and dissonance when navigating support of students who are working through their sexuality, while being sensitive to the ethos of the school in which they are employed. This also includes the area of students taking and experimenting with drugs.

Sarah reflected

Some things that are happening in the community do automatically come into the school. There’s the different kinds of drugs, it’s what might be the preference of drugs at the time, and I know just recently there’s been a lot of glue sniffing, paint sniffing and ice we’ve got problems in those areas so that certainly comes to the school and I think that within the community and some of the families, that are involved in the school, some drug taking is acceptable so it’s something that we need to struggle with, sort of go well, how do you actually try to get a clear message to the young people, when they’re getting a distorted message not only the community, but sometimes the family, so that can sometimes be challenging.

The challenge is for the school counsellor to reflect clearly on how they stand on certain issues personally, and in their counselling role, while remaining open and non-judgemental to the journey of those that they counsel.

When you make a decision you need to consider all of those you know, what all of those different sections might comprehend your decision to mean, or might, or whether they are actually going to be on board with some of those decisions, or whether more likely to complain about something that I might have said or done. All of that has to be considered... (Sarah)

One of the current global messages that influence health workers is a holistic approach to intervention. Participants identified that schools may believe in remedial learning, and enrol students with needs in particular areas, however they are not necessarily employing the resources necessary to adequately support the challenges of these students. This may add stress and confusion around the boundaries and role of the school counsellor.

Strengths from challenges

Each of the participants spoke of a time when they were personally aware of heading for stress and burnout, however they also reflected on the positive long term changes and strategies that evolved from this experience. Self-doubt, systemic mistrust and unhealthy coping behaviours, are not always easy to identify when working under stress in the school counselling role.

I guess one of the big questions that I had to answer was actually asked by a friend one time and they said, well why do you do it? You know because I was so stressed and um and then of course, getting to that point of burnout... (Jake)

I recognised that I had to deal with stress differently, and it was really clear to me when I did professional development training they say at the end of one of the days “What are you going to do after this to look after yourself...” Just recognising that I have to look after myself before I can look after anyone else. (Rick)

I’ve been so wound up with this role as well as other, you know, other pressures you know with other areas, that I hadn’t started considering what this stress might look like in the long term, so I think it’s good, it’s valuable to start recognising that when someone is asking those right questions... (Sarah)

I think the older you get, the more you actually have to recognise your psychological resources and the limitations of that. You also have to recognise, for want of a better word, your mortality, your health and you know, the old saying, you know, you pick your battle, becomes more of a thing to be conscious of. (Joanne)

I am not sure that you can separate what is stressful and what is a challenge, because if it is stressful then it’s a challenge. (Robert)

Letting go of issues that may be handled in a different way, or not stressing out over confrontation, strengthened a perspective that built trust in working together with other administration and staff. Being aware also of past personal mental health issues, and how these were experienced and dealt with, allowed the counsellor to be alert and add to their thinking around self-awareness and eustress. Presenting issues within the cases dealt with by the counsellor, may trigger unresolved emotions that encourage the counsellor to seek personal counselling and support, and consequently strengthen their self-awareness and coping strategies.

Jake noted

I have to say you know there was a time when I really burnt out because, for some reason at that particular time, I was getting children who had, or were coming in with issues you know that had to do with an issue that I hadn’t fully resolved for myself, my own personal um issues... and so these children just seemed to have one after the other... and I kept thinking 'I can do this’ 'I can do this' (laughs) and there came a point where I couldn’t do it. So for me then, how did I cope, I had to, you know I had to go and get help - I had to seek my own counselling on top of the supervision of course and get the help of colleagues.

Managing their environment, both physically and emotionally was a positive theme of the participants of this research.

Sarah said

When I walked into the office that I got, it was so cluttered... and the walls were stark and really old ancient posters from probably ten years prior, so I actually gutted the room and made curtains and tissue box covers and cushions and threw some really bright rugs over the lounges, orange carpets, like everything really bright. I’ve got some of the art work of the kids and their names all over the walls and I’ve got some Tibetan meditation music and that plays through my office and there’s plants and a fish tank, so it’s a really calming room to be in and the kids have sort of expressed that as well, so I suppose I get a little bit of stress relief through the day.

I know that when also I’m stressed I – my environment around me reflects that. (Rick)
After experiencing periods of stress, two participants spoke of deliberately choosing to renew their focus in part, on the positive psychology aspect of their role that improves student functioning and helps them to thrive. They spoke of how a workload that primarily deals with high risk, high demand cases, can produce feelings of hopelessness and more of just helping students to cope, whereas a balance of proactive, positive interventions along with the other more demanding aspects of school counselling, restores a sense of job satisfaction and joy to the role. Participants verbalised a recognition of how a reduction of counsellor stress, and recognition of balance, flowed on to benefit clients.

Technology was identified as a stress that comes with a growing global digital age, however Joanne also stated that some of the changes did work in her favour. Being able to email students with information, rather than having to chase them up personally, was an advantage, along with emails to and from administration and teachers. This participant however also identified that personal emails in the same arena can be misinterpreted, and cannot always replace face to face communication.

Supervision, support, mentoring

All participants verbalised a need for supervision, however presenting factors within such a relationship can also contribute significantly to school counsellor stress, especially in times of a critical incident, where clarification of process needs to happen immediately.

It’s knowing the consistency of who to turn to or who to trust, it’s as if everyone’s got a different agenda and it’s difficult because anyone who is assigned to you as a supervisor or anything like that is doing a job, and you can recognise what they’re doing, so in a way I guess you don’t trust them, it’s very hard, actually building a friendship or contact is far more relaxing... (Robert)

Participants identified that an internal supervision structure e.g. line management, deals mainly with case management, and that the advice from a supervisor within the system, can in some cases, push the counsellor past the limits of what they can handle in the school day. This raises the issue of trust and respect in relation to all parties navigating the demands and expectations of the system, within the supervisory relationship. It was reflected by one of the participants in terms of the counsellor needing to be consistently aware of who to turn to, or who to trust, especially in times of a critical incident, where clarification of process needs to happen immediately.

I think that every counsellor should have an external supervisor even if they have an internal supervisory structure that exists within the state system, because the issue of trust comes up between, if you’re being supervised by someone of the system what remains confidential in the system, and I came to the conclusion very early on that it’s better, you know it’s mandated that you get supervision, but the type of supervision is basically case supervision, not personal supervision, and that’s why I think you need to have personal supervision for your own management of stress. (Joanne)

Being immersed in a highly demanding and confidential role, can mask the emotional and physical drain that comes from constant student needs. Effective supervision provides ‘another set of eyes’ to look at the situation objectively for the care of both counsellor and client. Four of the participants also identified the need to access outside supervision and counselling for their own personal management of stress. Sharing with friends or co-workers, while navigating the boundaries of confidentiality, can allow the counsellor to vent and then move on, and this was seen by participants as a viable parallel process at times, to formal supervision sessions.

Balance and self-care

Sarah spoke of being aware that the counsellor themselves can systematically ‘raise the bar’, and therefore the school’s expectations of what the counsellor will deliver within the role. Spending more personal outside hours to accomplish the work adds to the stress, and one participant observed that this is not sustainable, and would inevitably lead to burnout. Recognising and addressing high self-expectations as school counsellors, helps to provide a sustainable work/life balance. Counsellors, often go home still emotionally connected to stressful issues of the day. Situations of high risk, that involve the immediate safety of a student or a case of high level intensity, can produce a high level of adrenaline that may still be present in the body when returning home.

If you’ve dealt with a child abuse case or potential child abuse case between the hours of 12 and 3.00 your adrenalin is really flowing through your body, and is still flowing through your body because of the high demand of the situation, the at risk situation, the immediate safety of a person, you could still at 6.00 at night have this incredible amount of adrenalin and somewhere you have to turn into a
Sources of Stress

I think you can tune out to a certain degree but I've had the experience where I'm actually physically present, but mind and emotions are still with the case I was dealing with between 12 and 3. Um and that's because of the high level intensity nature of the case. (Joanne)

All participants identified that these situations of high intensity reflect in their home environment, and spoke of the need to deliberately take steps to compensate and restore calm to their bodies, preferably before re-entering their personal space.

I think the big point is knowing that the expectations of the organisation I need to find a balance between their expectations and my own expectations, and then come to some sort of, I suppose, a level that I'm happy to be able to say, that is going to have to do, and be able to walk away from work, so that I can maintain the balance throughout life not just the work environment. (Sarah)

One participant spoke of counsellors who are also parents, and their belief that it is important to give themselves space to 'get your head right to face your kids and give them what they deserve'. They believe counsellors need to be able to recognise these signs of stress for themselves and take appropriate measures. These participants spoke of a change of their role when returning home, and each of the participants in this research, have thought about and identified strategies that they use when experiencing heightened stress. These include, understanding that, although there is an element of vocation to the role of school counsellor, it is a job, being able to let go of, and walk away from situations, and understanding boundaries of role responsibility and control. Accessing regular personal supervision, or meeting regularly with other counsellors, helps to offload personal baggage from cases, and means this is not taken home. Several participants spoke of attending to proper diet and targeted exercise, including meditation and mindfulness as a way to release stress from the body. Journaling, watching a good movie, camping and fishing, organising their environment, creating a measure of distance either by deliberate holidays away, or purposefully enjoying travel time to and from work, becoming grounded and in a better head space and attending professional development were some of the strategies these participants use in management of self-care.

Supervision that supports reflection on the bigger picture in the journey of a school counsellor, helps the counsellor to develop a clear understanding of the warning signs of their potential stress and burnout. Counsellors can then structure their work to maintain self-awareness and opportunity to reflect on the big questions in life that gives meaning to their choice of work as a school counsellor.

Discussion

This research, investigated the experience of stress and school counsellors in a rapidly changing environment. It identified and explored their coping or adaptive response to tension, recognising that this response can be reflected on as impacting personally and professionally in a negative way, or alternatively, as positive change in perception and behaviour. While the effect of these factors cannot be measured in numerical data by this small qualitative phenomenological study, participants expressed a conscious awareness of the significant shifts in their emotional, physical and spiritual resilience that produced ongoing and long term changes to themselves, their work and their clients.

Past research in the area of stress and school counsellors has primarily used Quantitative Research to gain an understanding into the relationship between variables such as ego development and the degree of burnout (Lambie, 2007), coping strategies and rising levels of stress (Wilkerson, 2009), collective professional self-esteem and burnout (Butler & Constantine, 2005) The various dynamics underlying the causes of stress for school counsellors appears to be consistently identified in these and present studies, supporting such factors as role ambiguity and conflict (Kirk, Brown & Wallace, 2004), ego development (Lambie, 2007), intrapersonal and organisational factors (Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006), supervision (McMahon & Patton, 2000) etc. This research, however, built on these past studies, to uncover the essence of the experience of the participants to the phenomena of stress, using in depth face to face interviews.

This research acknowledged the rapidly changing environment that school counsellors operate in, and participants identified a system that is increasingly affected by outcomes, budgets, political imperatives, and changes in the Australian Educational Curriculum. The parallel process of supporting students, families and staff navigating the social and emotional challenges of living in a digital age of expanding communication, while dealing with growing social and relationship issues that come with being a citizen of this digital age, creates stress for school counsellors. This may contribute to an increasing rift between expectations and definition of role by administration, and school counsellors.
maintaining the essence of the core of the nature of their role, compassion v performance. Past studies have looked at the growing diversity of demands on the role of the school counsellor and the pressure this puts on them to prioritise and best perform their tasks (Wilkinson & Bellini, 2006). This research identified that the challenge of understanding the role of school counsellor remains at times, misunderstood, and a source of systemic stress for the counsellor. Perhaps future research may explore how counsellors working in a school agency, can maintain the uniqueness of their intervention, which seeks to elicit lifelong learnings as opposed to immediate tangible results as measured by a school system. Research may also explore how finding a fit or cultural match, between counsellor and the school’s culture and ethos, contributes to the possible success of this experience.

Supervision featured strongly in the reflection of participants in this research, however different facets and effectiveness of this support were also a major reflection in feedback. Participants identified that there were sometimes negative aspects to a supervisory relationship, such as lack of trust or respect, dual responsibilities of an agency supervisor, or even ‘bad advice’ that exacerbated an already overwhelming situation. Conversely good supervision continues to be identified as beneficial, both in past studies (McMahon & Patton, 2000), (Vallance, 2004), (Edwards et al., 2005), and in this present research. The school counsellors in this study highlighted the importance of finding different areas in a support base e.g. clinical supervision, personal counselling, friends and colleagues, and understanding their needs and appropriate accountability for themselves, their families and their clients.

One of the major outcomes from this study was the need for life/work balance and self-care. Participants reflected on and explored the high demand, high stress nature of their role, along with the unpredictability of the nature or severity of a case, or case load. This research found that stepping back to view the larger picture, most often in positive supervision, facilitated a process in which self-awareness ‘meaning of life’, reconsolidated personal and professional values and boundaries for the participants. In this limited study, all participants identified times of escalating stress as agents of deliberate and positive change, while recognising that this change is also a process.

**Conclusion**

Operating in an environment of constant change, the school counsellor is stretched and challenged to respond to new and varied demands. There are numerous stakeholders that compete for counsellor time and intervention, however it appears that for these participants, their response to job stress in a world of escalating knowledge, communication, change and crises, is to implement and practice balance in both their personal and professional life. Perhaps it is the ability of school counsellors to understand and maintain the nature of the core of who they are, that will preserve their valuable and unique role within an evolving educational structure. Dr Ann Moir-Bussy is Senior Lecturer and Program Leader in Counselling at the University of the Sunshine Coast and worked closely with Trish as Supervisor of her research project.

Lynn Wood has completed her research as part of her Masters of counselling through University of the Sunshine Coast, she is a School Counsellor at Caloundra Christian School Lyn also runs a successful private practice.

**References**


**SOURCE OF STRESS**