

# **STUDY OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELLING SERVICE IN NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS**

## **FINAL REPORT**

**Findings and Recommendations**

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## Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners and Elders

We pay our respect to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Nation peoples and traditional owners of the country that is the cultural home to students and communities in the Northern Territory.

We acknowledge the Elders past and present, and those emerging, including those who will arise from among the children and young people in our schools and communities.

We are privileged to hear the stories that emanate from the homelands, traditions and experiences of students, whatever their path so far.

Submission to:

Vicki Bayliss  
Chief Executive  
Department of Education  
Northern Territory Government

This final report represents the findings and recommendations of a Study of the School Counselling Service in Northern Territory Government Schools that has included four documents:

1. *Report into a Study of the School Counselling Service in Northern Territory Government Schools* (Interim Report September 2017; Final Report February 2018)
2. *School Counselling Service Guidelines*
3. *Practice Standards for School Counsellors in the Northern Territory*

Interviews and meetings were conducted in June and July 2017 in various Department of Education locations around the Northern Territory. Jo Lee and Kath Midgley supported the management of the project; Irini Kambourakis accompanied me on the information-gathering journey to Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. The Senior School Counsellor and School Counsellors developed some early written material that has been included in the *School Counselling Service Guidelines*.

I was privileged that the Aboriginal staff members of the Language and Culture Team of Maningrida College took time to teach me how traditional cultural practices build cultural identity, strength and wellbeing.

This Report of a Study of the School Counselling Service in Northern Territory Government Schools, acknowledges the service development, evolution of theoretical approaches and breadth of professional activities achieved by School Counsellors and their program leaders over a decade since the introduction of qualified school counsellors by the Northern Territory Government in 2005-2006.

I appreciate the opportunity to learn about the work of Northern Territory Government schools and School Counsellors. I hope that this report can contribute to the historical record of the *School Counselling Service*, and to its development into the future.



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19 February 2018

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Study of the School Counselling Service in Northern Territory Government Schools was commissioned to review the numbers and placement of School Counsellors, and their adequacy to meet the needs of students as identified in the Gone Too Soon parliamentary inquiry (2012). The report was required to deliver an outline of the current service delivery models in all regions, and make recommendations for School Counsellor numbers, placement and good practice approaches in the Northern Territory context. As an integral part of this study, two newly developed companion documents were submitted in September 2017 to the Department of Education: Northern Territory Government School Counselling Service Guidelines and Practice Standards for School Counsellors Employed in Northern Territory Government Schools.

Young people are best able to reach their potential, contribute to their communities, and share equitably in resources and decision-making on the foundation of successful primary and secondary schooling and learning pathways that lead to employment, training and further education. The essential importance of education is enshrined in the United Nations “*Convention on the Rights of the Child*” (1989) which is adhered to by the governments of Australia, its states and territories.

Many young people have graduated and continue to emerge from Northern Territory Government schools with a strong sense of personal and cultural identity, knowledge and confidence to pursue their personal and communal aspirations. However, far too many have been lost to school non-attendance and disengagement, and even further into drug and alcohol abuse, criminality, juvenile detention, mental health problems, risk-taking, accidental death and suicide before they have had the chance to establish the way forward to achieving their potential.

The *School Counselling Service* provides a specialist practice that complements the work of educators in schools. School counsellors are the unique among other health and wellbeing professionals through their goals and interventions that focus on both wellbeing and learning pathways for students. Safety and wellbeing are intrinsic goals, but the final outcome sought by School Counsellors is education for the achievement of personal potential. They promote student wellbeing and work towards removing the barriers to learning, whether they be found in the individual, peer group, classroom, school, family, community, education or social policies. This report references some of the ample evidence that social and emotional wellbeing is essential to successful student learning. School Counsellors operate broadly across Prevention, Early and Complex Intervention levels, using many strategies other than counselling, with social and emotional wellbeing the mediating goal on the way to school engagement and learning pathways.

The Northern Territory represents a unique population with a large proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and a breadth of multi-cultural diversity. Like other young Australians, young Territorians are impacted by the social and economic difficulties, lack of employment options, family breakdowns, refugee experience, identity disintegration, hopelessness and other factors that can lead to disengagement from school and learning. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are among those who have found success in their education, despite the additional impact of past and present injustices of colonisation, disempowerment, dispossession, displacement from country and traditional cultural practice, and the sadness of the “Stolen Generation”.

Earlier studies for the Northern Territory Government have represented government and community attempts to understand and respond to the serious safety, health and wellbeing issues faced by children and young people. The report of the Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse: *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle* - “Little Children are Sacred” (2007); the report of the Legislative Assembly Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the Northern Territory, *Gone Too Soon: A Report into Youth Suicide in the Northern Territory* (2012); and *A Share in the Future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory* (2014) have each in turn acknowledged the work of School Counsellors. Each report has unequivocally recommended the expansion of the service to address the social, emotional and health needs of the many students who have no access to the *School Counselling Service*.

In fact, the number of School Counsellors has not increased since 2010, notwithstanding increasing student numbers and the urgency of social and mental health problems. Despite apparent intentions, the Northern Territory Government has not yet provided a *School Counselling Service* accessible to more than half of total student numbers. Many schools, large and small, urban and remote, have no access to service except for critical incident response. Participants in this study included regional office management, principals and teachers, and School Counsellors. They overwhelmingly expressed a need for greater student access to an expanded *School Counselling Service*, adequately resourced to provide proactive as well as reactive programs and interventions.

School Counsellors are most effective when they are integrated into a Whole School approach to social and emotional wellbeing, involved in analysis of trends and the development of early school responses to identified difficulties and programs, as well as individual and group support. Students learn best in caring learning communities, where they are supported to grow socially, emotionally and educationally, and where they feel a sense of belonging (Vic. 2002, 2009). School Counsellors work collaboratively with school staff and communities to build and maintain such learning environments.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation 1** proposes an expansion to the *School Counselling Service*, through increased numbers of counsellors and greater access to service by students and schools, with consideration towards providing school-based professional wellbeing, mental health and education support for all Northern Territory students.

**Recommendation 2** proposes the strengthening of the *School Counselling Service* as the professional base. School Counsellors who are working independently, and often in isolated settings, need collegiate connection, professional advocacy, and opportunity to meet together to update knowledge and skills, explore emerging issues impacting on children and young people, and consider innovative responses to meet student needs.

**Recommendation 3** encourages the *School Counselling Service* and School Counsellors to develop and deliver practice that is informed by traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge for wellbeing. The *School Counselling Service* could be poised to develop a service unique in Australian schools, integrating new frameworks and practices, informed by traditional knowledge, and based on the strengthening of cultural identity for wellbeing.

**Recommendation 4** explores some potential means to build school and system capacity in the area of student wellbeing. These are not alternatives to the *School Counselling Service*, but complementary and whole school approaches.

**Recommendation 5** suggests a more thorough archiving of important documents that record the Northern Territory Government development of education, including the *School Counselling Service*.

## KEY AREA 1: SERVICE MANAGEMENT

### RECOMMENDATION 1: Expand the *School Counselling Service*

- 1.1 Develop a strategic plan to expand the specialist *School Counselling Service* to support more adequately and equitably the wellbeing and learning pathways for all Northern Territory students:
  - a. increase School Counsellor numbers
  - b. improve the School Counsellor : student ratio
  - c. deliver regular services to more schools
- 1.2 Assign a full-time School Counsellor to every middle, senior and high school.
- 1.3 Work towards placing a School Counsellor in schools with an enrolment of 500 or more, at least 2 days per week.
- 1.4 Before introducing the *School Counselling Service* into a school, provide professional development, and regular updates for all principals with regard to *School Counselling Service* whole school approach and practice frameworks.
- 1.5 In collaboration with School Counsellors, consider alternative models of service delivery, including frequency, length of visits and small team approaches, to maximise the value, effectiveness, and impact on students, school wellbeing programs and practices.
- 1.6 Develop a *School Counselling Service* organisational model that ensures management by *School Counselling Service* leadership; consistency of service delivery across regions and schools; equity in allocation of service; integrity of *School Counselling Service Guidelines* and practice frameworks; transparency in resourcing and decision-making; and regular professional supervision and learning for School Counsellors.
- 1.7 Appoint a second Senior School Counsellor or *School Counselling Service* professional leadership position, and thereafter one leadership position per 15 School Counsellors.
- 1.8 Collaborate with community leaders and universities to develop a strategic plan for the recruitment, mentoring and support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander qualified social workers and psychologists as School Counsellors.

- 1.9 Employ qualified and experienced social workers and psychologists as specialist School Counsellors who operate theoretically and in practice across a broad eco-systemic model of assessment, intervention and evaluation; and at whole-school, prevention, early intervention and complex case levels.
- 1.10 Consider an employment structure and mentoring program that includes a lower level for new social work and psychology graduates and less experienced practitioners, or other qualifications specific to individual and group interventions.
- 1.11 Qualified School Counsellors who have more than 12 months satisfactory employment are given the option of on-going employment and all School Counsellors work under the same conditions
- 1.12 Unless back-filling time-limited vacancies created by personal leave, no contract is for a term of less than 12 months.
- 1.13 Review the Northern Territory Government School Counselling Service Guidelines and Practice Standards for School Counsellors Employed in Northern Territory Government Schools to include any changes actioned according to the recommendations of this report.
- 1.14 Develop Quality Assurance policies and processes consistent with the human services context of the *School Counselling Service*, and the protocols adopted by Northern Territory Government departments and facilities.

## KEY AREA 2: PROFESSIONAL ISSUES

### RECOMMENDATION 2: Strengthen the *School Counselling Service* as the Professional Base.

- 2.1 The *School Counselling Service* operates as a specialist team across Northern Territory Government schools, with School Counsellors having strong connection to their purpose, *School Counselling Service Guidelines*, *Practice Standards* and professional base.
- 2.2 Allocate at least 2 senior positions to provide professional leadership, support and advocacy to protect the integrity of the *School Counselling Service Guidelines*.
- 2.3 Provide professional learning to principals and administrators, and advocate to ensure that School Counsellors are enabled to practice according to their specialist expertise alongside educators.
- 2.4 Engage School Counsellors in the development of *School Counselling Service* policies and practice.
- 2.5 Provide regular professional learning for practice at the theoretical level of advanced practitioners.
- 2.6 Provide two sets of funded professional learning days per year, at times when all School Counsellors are able to attend.
- 2.7 Provide annual professional learning on topics essential to Northern Territory School Counsellor practice: for example, Aboriginal Knowledge for social and emotional wellbeing; critical incident response and recovery; healing and recovery from trauma; professional supervisor training; suicide prevention.
- 2.8 Allocate defined professional development budgets to individual School Counsellors.
- 2.9 Provide comprehensive induction with intense focus on options for work in schools and communities, and the barriers that may arise
- 2.10 Professional supervision provided by *School Counselling Service* leadership or contracted specialists, according to professional ethics and standards of the AASW and

APS; a new Professional Supervision Framework for Northern Territory School Counsellors; and the identified needs of School Counsellors themselves

## KEY AREA 3: ABORIGINAL & TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER KNOWLEDGE FOR WELLBEING

### RECOMMENDATION 3: Integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge into *School Counselling Service* theoretical approaches

- 3.1 School Counsellors seek to develop and deliver practice that is informed by traditional Aboriginal knowledge for wellbeing.
- 3.2 Cultural identity is the foundation of wellbeing practice.
- 3.3 Programs and interventions at Prevention, Early Intervention and Complex Intervention levels promote connection to family, community and culture.
- 3.4 Provide regular full day induction and regular updates for School Counsellors on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, history, wellbeing knowledge and contemporary issues.
- 3.5 The *School Counselling Service* develops a professional learning and theory development over two years, to incorporate traditional Aboriginal knowledge into practice and service delivery.

## KEY AREA 4: SCHOOL AND SYSTEM CAPACITY BUILDING

### RECOMMENDATION 4: Build school & system capacity for student wellbeing.

- 4.1 Plan strategically to demonstrate the possibilities for schools to increase their own wellbeing services to complement the *School Counselling Service*.
- 4.2 Continue to develop a repertoire of professional learning in the areas of student wellbeing, mental health, social issues, and whole school approaches to student support, for presentation by the *School Counselling Service* and School Counsellors to teachers and other school staff:
  - Foster School Counsellor collaboration in the identification, development and presentation of professional learning
  - Request principals to suggest topics of particular relevance to their schools
  - Provide examples of professional learning that can be offered
  - Actively promote *School Counselling Service* participation in school PD programs
  - Collaborate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teaching Assistants to develop and present workshops designed to provide knowledge and skills for initial response to student wellbeing issues
- 4.3 The leadership team, School Support Services and the *School Counselling Service* leadership collaborate with peak bodies and agency management to maintain an overview of school access to the services of community agencies:
  - Stay informed of actual availability and nature of services
  - Collaborate to develop services relevant to Northern Territory students
  - Promote an understanding the specialist purpose of the *School Counselling Service* and the practice of School Counsellors
  - Promote available agency services to School Counsellors and schools
  - Seek feedback on changed program and eligibility requirements, or the cessation of services
  - Negotiate to fill service gaps relevant to Northern Territory students

4.4 Liaise with universities in Northern Territory and further afield, to secure collaborative relationships to facilitate:

- Further learning in social work and psychology for teachers and other staff
- Social work and psychology student field placements in schools
- Recruitment and mentoring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander School Counsellors

4.5 Consider a plan for certificate training and employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members who have expressed interest in taking on the role of a student wellbeing assistant.

## KEY AREA 5: DOCUMENTS, RECORDS & REPORTS

### RECOMMENDATION 5: Establish secure archiving procedures

- 5.1 Establish a secure archive of documents to maintain a record of the development of educational and wellbeing practice, change and development.
- 5.2 Keep a record of key documents that demonstrate *School Counselling Service* evaluation, policy and program development.
- 5.3 Record the writing of *School Counselling Service* leadership and School Counsellors
- 5.4 Acknowledge those School Counsellors who have contributed to the development of the *School Counselling Service*
- 5.5 Acknowledge those School Counsellors who have contributed to the wellbeing and learning of students
- 5.6 Maintain a historical trace for future reflection, research and service development.

# INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORT

## The Purpose of the Study

This Study of the School Counselling Service in Northern Territory Government Schools includes a comprehensive review of the numbers and placement of School Counsellors and an outline of the current service delivery models in all regions, with a view to proposing recommendations that would inform the further development of a *School Counselling Service* with School Counsellor numbers and practice approaches for the particular Northern Territory context. In particular, the study considered the adequacy of the *School Counselling Service* to meet the needs of students as identified in the Gone Too Soon parliamentary inquiry (2012).

With this report of the study, two newly developed companion documents have been delivered:

Northern Territory Government School Counselling Service Guidelines and Practice Standards for School Counsellors Employed in Northern Territory Government Schools (NT. DoE. Barrett 2017c,d).

An interim report was submitted for consideration and consultation in September 2017; and the final report completed in February 2018.

## The Structure of the Report

The report is organised into 6 sections including an Introduction and 5 Key Areas of findings and recommendations. The Introduction provides some contextual information about the *School Counselling Service*, and details of the methodology of the study.

Each of the 5 Key Areas is opened by a Recommendation and its sub-clauses, followed by the findings that support them. Broadly, these 5 Key Areas have generated recommendations as follow:

Recommendation 1: Expand the *School Counselling Service*

Recommendation 2: Strengthen the *School Counselling Service* as the Professional Base

Recommendation 3: Integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge into *School Counselling Service* theoretical approaches

Recommendation 4: Build school & system capacity for student wellbeing

Recommendation 5: Establish secure archiving procedures

## Overview of Findings and Recommendations

It would appear that the Northern Territory Government has intended to provide a *School Counselling Service* accessible to all students, but this study has shown that in reality many schools, large and small, urban and remote, irrespective of level of need, have no real option of service,

except for critical incident response. Reports such as *Little Children are Sacred* (2007), *Gone too Soon* (2012), and the *Review of Indigenous Education* (2014) have shown appreciation and respect for the work of School Counsellors, and in turn explicitly recommended expansions to the service which have not, as yet, come to fruition.

The lack of practitioner sense of connection to a cohesive *School Counselling Service* as the source of professional theoretical and practice strength, was surprising. It appears that the process of regionalisation unintentionally disconnected School Counsellors from the professional team that had existed prior to 2012. As allied health specialists within schools, with approaches sometimes different from teachers', School Counsellors can feel isolated, and need strong connection to the *School Counselling Service* for their collegiate support, and for the professional learning of emerging theory and practice for changing social, educational, economic, policy, health and mental health environments.

The *School Counselling Service* has an opportunity to learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders and teachers to develop a service unique in Australian schools, integrating new frameworks and practices, informed by traditional knowledge, and based on the strengthening of cultural identity for wellbeing.

## The Context of the School Counselling Service

"*School Counselling Service*", a relatively new title, has been used throughout this report focussing on School Counsellors. The *School Counselling Service* addresses the needs of students in Northern Territory schools, which represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Nation communities and a rich, multi-culturally diverse population. Personal, family and cultural differences contribute to the diversity of school communities and impact on student wellbeing and learning.

A 2016 report into the wellbeing of more than 5,000 students in years 4, 6 and 8 across Australia, revealed that most young people were positive about their futures, enjoyed school and reported good health. Around a quarter of young Australians are seen as "marginalised" by disability, being young carers, poor, or Indigenous. Young people from this group reported lower levels of wellbeing higher levels of physical and psychological health problems, more bullying and school absence. Family disability, mental illness, alcohol and drug addiction increased health and emotional problems. Poverty, hunger, transience, remoteness and out-of-home care were strongly related to poor school engagement, but for these students, the strength and size of supportive family and social networks was associated with higher wellbeing (Redmond, Skattebol, et al 2016a, 2016b).

The *School Counselling Service* principles of relationship centred, strengths based and trauma informed practice can contribute to the support needed by those children whose wellbeing is low.

World-wide, the focus on strengths, prevention, education and health is replacing an emphasis on ill-health (NSW 2011b, NT SEL, 2017, WHO). With many young Territorians, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, demonstrating resilience in the face of historical and current barriers, including poverty and racism, school counsellors contribute to whole-school efforts to strengthen social and emotional supports to improve wellbeing and learning.

Schools are located within particular urban, remote and very remote communities that inform teaching, learning and student support environments. Within these contexts the *School Counselling Service* is influenced by factors such as student social and emotional wellbeing, school and community needs; cultural environments; access to services and other resources. Consequently, there is flexibility in School Counsellor practices and variations in service delivery to meet local conditions. Nevertheless, irrespective of local differences across the Northern Territory, the *School Counselling Service* provides support for student wellbeing and learning, from a consistent whole-school perspective, beginning with prevention. The title *School Counselling Service*, may lead to some confusion and misrepresentation of its scope of student support activity. School Counsellor practice is flexible for student and school situations, and their roles are far broader than counselling.

## The Purpose of the School Counselling Service

The primary purpose of the *School Counselling Service* is to promote the social and emotional wellbeing that underpins student engagement, their best learning outcomes and the achievement of their personal goals and potential.

*A child can't learn unless their wellbeing's intact ... Their schooling is enriched and they're more likely to reach their potential when wellbeing is strong. This is a learning environment ... a school. They're here to learn and obviously barriers will pop up that stop their learning ... so my job is to help them engage in learning. (School Counsellor)*

This is achieved by collaborating with schools to increase their capacity to enhance the mental health and wellbeing of students through whole school approaches to policies, practices and prevention; the provision of individual counselling and support; and small group education and support.

The Northern Territory *School Counselling Service* shares its mission with similar services across Australia where governments have recognised the importance of providing complementary wellbeing services to students and schools (Barrett 2014; Vic. DET 2012; NSW. DEC 2011b). Comparatively, the Northern Territory *School Counselling Service* is in an early developmental stage: in Victoria, the services of social workers and psychologists have been consistently provided in school and student support services since 1948 (Barrett 2014).

Education is a key factor in self-determination, opportunity and choice (Vic. DET 2016). Health, social and emotional wellbeing and connectedness to school, family, culture and community have been identified as essential pre-requisites for positive learning outcomes (Vic. DET 2012; MCDDECYA 2010; NT SEL), including learning for wellbeing:

*Schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians... (Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, 12/2008, cited in MCDDECYA NSSF 2010).*

Moreover, the school is a logical site for universal and non-discriminatory access to wellbeing services (Vic. DET 2014; NSW. DEC 2011b). School Counsellors can be providers, managers and conduits of services. Students have the opportunity to achieve their potential in responsive, respectful, safe and inclusive education environments that celebrate cultural identity and reflect diversity, and where students feel connected, confident and competent (MCDDECYA NSSF 2010; NT SEL; Vic. DET 2016). The *School Counselling Service* and its School Counsellors support the evolution and maintenance of such educational environments.

## The Uniqueness of the School Counselling Service

The Department of Education *School Counselling Service* delivers highly specialist professional practice that complements the work of educators. School Counsellors have expert knowledge in focussing on the student in their school, family and community environments, with the goal of facilitating wellbeing and learning. This specialist focus on students and their learning environments is not shared by practitioners from community and other government agencies.

In the past 30 years there has been a proliferation across Australia of the community agencies that support families, provide mental health, drug and alcohol counselling, enact child protection responsibilities and support out-of-home care. Most have service and eligibility parameters linked to funding for their specialist services. Northern Territory School Counsellors and schools refer to their services where they are available and appropriate. School Counsellors are uniquely placed and have the knowledge not only to make appropriate referrals, but to ensure that the goals of the student as learner are included in the considerations and case planning of other professional services. However, other services cannot replace the specific purpose and breadth of approach of the *School Counselling Service*.

School Counsellors have an ecological-systemic approach and broad skills for identifying problems at individual, school, family, community and policy levels. They have access to students in their every-

day school, family and community environments, and can easily support or facilitate school-based interventions at the Prevention, Early Intervention and Complex Intervention tiers.

*Schools have become recognised as important locations for addressing student wellbeing, with advantages including their reach and familiarity to students and families, and the increased opportunities they afford for mental health promotion and prevention efforts. (NSW. DEC 2011b)*

School Counsellors bring specialist knowledge to their membership of school wellbeing teams, alongside other education experts, to engage in school and community development through collaborative efforts to improve student wellbeing and success in learning (AASW 2011; APS 2016; Barrett 2014).

*(We) build capacity of schools to respond to social and emotional wellbeing of kids that impacts their ability with learning. What is different about practising in schools? You start in a community development way as well as getting referrals. It's about having a good understanding of how to be proactive, how to be an effective service and how you don't get bogged down in your room (counselling). (School Counsellor)*

Outside of the child protection and juvenile justice systems it is rare to find a specific focus on children and young people, rather than on the adults around them. School Counsellors bring this focus to students. While adult counselling is more readily available, child and youth counselling is a rare and specific skill. School Counsellors are able to address the social, health and emotional issues as they are defined by students, outside of the health and mental health diagnosis regime. When students are managing pressures of friends, family, self-doubt, out-of-home-care or the legal system, the School Counsellor represents an unbiased adult to whom the student can bring their own experience, thoughts and feelings.

*Young people don't get taken seriously. Only the School Counselling Service provides support to young people. (School Counsellor)*

Most importantly, the School Counsellor is accessible to the student population, without the necessity of a referral to a counselling agency that requires suggestion or proof of mental illness.

## **Student Wellbeing**

The *School Counselling Service* purposefully addresses the social, economic, emotional, health, educational, policy and cultural factors that impact on wellbeing (AASW 2011, 2015; APS 2016; NSW. DEC 2011b; NT 2017).

Student wellbeing has been defined as:

*... a sustainable state of positive mood and attitude, resilience, and satisfaction with self, relationships and experiences at school.* (Australia. DEEWR 2008)

*... the achievement of expected developmental milestones and the establishment of effective coping skills, secure attachments, and positive social relationships.*

*Psychological and emotional distress ... has an impact on the child's successful learning at school.* (NSW. DEC 2011b)

*... the degree to which a student functions effectively in the school community.*  
(MCEETYA 2008).

The *Northern Territory Social and Emotional Learning Trial Curriculum* (NT SEL) has conceptualised student wellbeing in terms of the experience and expression of connectedness to school, self and others, through a lens of cultural understanding and strength (NT 2017). The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective enriches the Department of Education consideration of wellbeing for all students irrespective of background, and respects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge in the area of wellbeing, resilience and healing:

*Social and emotional wellbeing can be understood as the **experience** and **expression** of connections to different domains, including mind and emotions, family and kinship, body, ancestry, country, culture and community* (Gee et al., 2014 cited in NT 2017).

*Keeping our children and youth connected to their communities and strong in their identity and culture is essential to their wellbeing and the cornerstone of resilience.*  
(Andrew Jackomos, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, cited in Vic. CCYP 2015)

*Cultural identity and safety is fundamental to a child's overall wellbeing. It affects how the child sees themselves in relation to others and how the environment impacts upon their sense of safety* (CCYP 2015).

This study has developed the following comprehensive definition, with School Counsellor input:

*Student wellbeing involves a strong and proud sense of identity, whether Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or through membership of other diverse cultural and sub-cultural groups.*

*Student wellbeing describes the degree to which a child or young person feels safe, strong, included, hopeful, heard, culturally acknowledged and respected in school relationships, curriculum and procedures. The sense of connectedness to school and community associated with wellbeing allows the student to function confidently and competently in complex learning environments, build positive relationships and problem-solve. Social and emotional wellbeing together with inclusive and accessible school and community environments allows the student to use strengths to break through any potential barriers and participate fully in school, family, community and society.*

# COLLECTING STORIES, INFORMATION & DATA

## Review of the Literature

A reference list at the end of the report includes those documents, primarily from Australian sources, that have contributed to the context and findings of the study. References are cited throughout the body of the report, rather than in a separate section, in order to enhance the thematic coherence and integrity of the written account of the study.

## Focus Groups and Interviews

Face-to-face focus groups and individual interviews conducted 5-21 June 2017, with key informants, identified strengths and gaps in responding to student wellbeing and school engagement, mental health, family and social issues across Northern Territory government primary, middle and senior schools. The Senior School Counsellor mapped out an itinerary of data gathering visits to stakeholders. Three telephone interviews were later completed, and a meeting with 2 School Counsellors took place on 17 July 2017.

Interviews were conducted at the Department of Education, Mitchell Centre, Darwin, and in schools and regional offices in the Arnhem, Barkly, Central, Darwin, Katherine, Palmerston & Rural regions. Twenty-seven digital recordings were transcribed and analysed and will be destroyed three weeks after completion of the report. Three meetings with Aboriginal participants were openly recorded by hand, and some content checked, out of respect for reported previous experience of the use without permission or the misrepresentation of digital recording content in media situations. Focus groups and interviews lasted 45 minutes - 1hr 45 minutes. A brief interview schedule (Appendices 1 and 2) and a broad introductory question was used, but the conversations and the themes introduced were directed by the participants, with further clarification sought where necessary.

Participants have included:

- 21 School Counsellors (*School Counselling Service*)
- 3 school counsellors (school-employed or formerly employed by *School Counselling Service*)
- 10 Principals / Assistant Principals
- 3 Teachers
- 1 School Council President / parent
- 2 Regional Student Support Managers
- 7 Regional Management Staff
- 2 Parents/clients
- 6 Aboriginal Culture & Language team members
- 1 Department of Education school linguist

The timing of the study did not adequately allow for the voices of students, parents and teachers. With commencement of the study so close to the June-July break, and end of semester sport and other activities, it was difficult for School Counsellors and school staff to engage students and parents, especially with regard to ensuring the time to manage an ethical approach to consent. The researcher suggested some methods for the collection of those voices, with the following returned by School Counsellors during Semester 2 for inclusion in the report: 3 middle/senior student comments; 1 primary student drawing; 1 parent comment.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice has been represented by Maningrida College parents and staff who spoke with great clarity during a meeting to teach the researcher about the relationship between traditional practice, cultural identity, wellbeing, strength and school counselling matters. They described the value of the *School Counselling Service* to the school and the wider community. While recognising cultural differences across traditional lands, languages and skin groups, there is nevertheless commonality that has been included in the study.

## Principal Questionnaires

A questionnaire was circulated via Regional Managers to principals (Appendix 3). Twenty-two were completed and returned. One school council letter was contributed as part of the response. Principals were not asked to identify their schools, but those who did represented 5 out of 6 regions, some urban but mostly remote schools.

Five schools had regular *School Counselling Service* time:

Average Time Allocation	Number of Schools
1 day/week	4
1 day/term	1
No allocated service	17

Student enrolments covered FAFT to year 12 (0-18 years).

Enrolments	Number of Schools
0-99	3
100-199	4
200-299	4
300-399	5
400-499	3
500+	4

## Department of Education Consultation

The initial phase of the study involved documenting numbers and placement of School Counsellors; and current service delivery models in all regions. Recommendations for the further development of the *School Counselling Service*, School Counsellor numbers, service management and practice approaches would be made on the basis of those findings, and within the opportunities and limits unique to the particular Northern Territory Government schools context.

Consultations with members of the leadership team, School Support Services, and the Senior School Counsellor generated information including: Department of Education and *School Counselling Service* organisational developments; education policy and strategic planning; current priorities; new program developments; financial and human resources; Northern Territory social and political contexts.

## Collection of NT Department of Education Documents and Data

Somewhat surprisingly, despite reference to them in available documents and reviews, it was difficult to find some of the reports that have been produced within the Department of Education over the past 10-15 years. Some documents important to the development of the *School Counselling Service* have not actually being found and cannot be referenced. This might be attributed to *School Counselling Service* and Department of Education organisational restructure; regionalisation of school counselling and other services; lack of systemic archiving processes; changing government and education policy.

It would be reasonable to expect that formal reviews and reports, and professional writing by School Counsellors, *School Counselling Service* leadership and other concerned parties, might, with a certain amount of luck, be retrieved. Several people within the Department of Education took considerable time to find most of the nominated documents. One School Counsellor had kept a valuable digital archive which has contributed to the study.

The Student Services Information Database (SSID) provided information about presenting issues addressed by School Counsellors. There was record of current School Counsellors and their locations, but not necessarily a central record of the schools they serviced, and schools within the particular region that were either not serviced or could be considered under-serviced. There was no central record of School Counsellor attendance at critical incidents.

There was no current policy relating to critical incident preparation, response and management, due to the fact that it had been withdrawn for updating. Earlier versions have been referenced in this study.

## Analysis

Transcriptions of digital recordings, notes, questionnaires and documents were thematically analysed for categories, themes and sub-themes which form the basis of the findings and recommendations. Data, maps, School Counsellor schedules and reports were analysed for new information, or how they contributed to themes and sub-themes found in participant contributions. As detailed analysis continued, there were some consistent themes and sub-themes in the material gathered, contributing to a rationale for the recommendations.

## Recommendations: Development and Context

Recommendations have been developed on the basis of analysis of the information gathered and resultant findings. In particular, important sources of information included:

- Interviews with School Counsellors, principals and Department of Education management
- Principal questionnaires
- Department of Education consultations
- Earlier reports completed for the Department of Education
- Current and archived Department of Education documents
- Review of relevant literature

The findings of the study clustered in within several themes:

- The seriousness and complexity of the wellbeing, mental health and schooling needs of the children and young people of the Northern Territory, especially for those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who disengage from school, or who enter the out-of-home care or justice systems.
- The high quality service delivery of the *School Counselling Service* and individual School Counsellors, and the commitment of the Northern Territory Government and Department of Education to establish and continue the service.
- Numbers and distribution of School Counsellors, creating inequitable student and school access to service.
- Conditions that are unique to the Northern Territory, including a large proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with experience of past and contemporary loss and trauma; a population dispersed in towns and communities across vast distances, with little or expensive public transport; recruitment difficulties and high representation of transient professional staff; staff inconsistency and vacancies in the non-government sector.

Consideration was given to the framing of recommendations that would generate greater student access to the *School Counselling Service* while being achievable in the complex social, geographical, financial and human resource environments of the Northern Territory.

## Response to Recommendations

The study was required to deliver a comprehensive review of the numbers and placement of School Counsellors, with a description of current service delivery models, to underpin recommendations that would inform the further development of a *School Counselling Service* for the particular Northern Territory context, and in light of student needs identified in the Gone Too Soon parliamentary inquiry (2012).

The findings pointed to both strengths and deficits in the purpose and delivery of the *School Counselling Service*. Recommendations therefore focussed on the consolidation and expansion of the *School Counselling Service*, and it is acknowledged that significantly increased funding rather than budget neutrality will be required.

It is anticipated that the Department of Education and Northern Territory Government will respond to the report and the recommendations contained therein, and develop an implementation plan for those that are accepted or modified. The socio-educational needs of Northern Territory students are extremely high; and professional recruitment is difficult, especially in remote areas. Fluctuations in Australian education and Northern Territory schools funding since 2012 have not kept pace with Consumer Price Index and wage increases (NT. DoE 2017b). The particular Northern Territory context includes both high student wellbeing and learning needs and scarcity of human and financial resources, and it is within that challenging context that a determined path towards expansion of the *School Counselling Service* will be need to be negotiated.

## KEY AREA 1: SERVICE MANAGEMENT

### RECOMMENDATION 1: Expand the *School Counselling Service*

- 1.1 Develop a strategic plan to expand the specialist *School Counselling Service* to support more adequately and equitably the wellbeing and learning pathways for all Northern Territory students:
  - d. increase School Counsellor numbers
  - e. lower the School Counsellor : student ratio
  - f. deliver regular services to more schools
- 1.2 Assign a full-time School Counsellor to every middle, senior and high school.
- 1.3 Work towards placing a School Counsellor in schools with an enrolment of 500 or more, at least 2 days per week.
- 1.4 Before introducing the *School Counselling Service* into a school, provide professional development, and regular updates for all principals with regard to *School Counselling Service* whole school approach and practice frameworks.
- 1.5 In collaboration with School Counsellors, consider alternative models of service delivery, including frequency, length of visits and small team approaches, to maximise the value, effectiveness, and impact on students, school wellbeing programs and practices.
- 1.6 Develop a *School Counselling Service* organisational model that ensures management by *School Counselling Service* leadership; consistency of service delivery across regions and schools; equity in allocation of service; integrity of *School Counselling Service Guidelines* and practice frameworks; transparency in resourcing and decision-making; and regular professional supervision and learning for School Counsellors.
- 1.7 Appoint a second Senior School Counsellor or *School Counselling Service* professional leadership position, and thereafter one leadership position per 15 School Counsellors.
- 1.8 Collaborate with community leaders and universities to develop a strategic plan for the recruitment, mentoring and support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander qualified social workers and psychologists as School Counsellors.

- 1.9 Employ qualified and experienced social workers and psychologists as specialist School Counsellors who operate theoretically and in practice across a broad eco-systemic model of assessment, intervention and evaluation; and at whole-school, prevention, early intervention and complex case levels.
- 1.10 Consider an employment structure and mentoring program that includes a lower level for new social work and psychology graduates and less experienced practitioners, or other qualifications specific to individual and group interventions.
- 1.11 Qualified School Counsellors who have more than 12 months satisfactory employment are given the option of on-going employment and all School Counsellors work under the same conditions
- 1.12 Unless back-filling time-limited vacancies created by personal leave, no contract is for a term of less than 12 months.
- 1.13 Review the *Northern Territory Government School Counselling Service Guidelines* and *Practice Standards for School Counsellors Employed in Northern Territory Government Schools* to include any changes actioned according to the recommendations of this later report.
- 1.14 Develop Quality Assurance policies and processes consistent with the human services context of the *School Counselling Service*, and the protocols adopted by Northern Territory Government departments and facilities.

## FINDINGS: Service Management

Service management includes the development, administration, leadership, policies, staff deployment, work practices and expectations, staff support, quality assurance, feedback, evaluation and improvement cycles within the *School Counselling Service* as an organisational entity. Individual School Counsellors are also responsible for service management, in their delivery of the *School Counselling Service*, but also in the daily management of their own direct practice, communication, collaborative, administrative and other tasks.

## School Counselling Service 2005-2012

The Qualified School Counsellor Program was implemented following the *Report on Future Directions for Secondary Education in the Northern Territory (Future Directions, 2003)* and the consequent *Building Better Schools* initiatives whereby 19 professionally qualified school counsellors were appointed to every secondary school (NT 2005).

*Future Directions* had documented the increasing number, complexity and seriousness of unaddressed social, emotional, welfare and mental health issues faced by young people. Under a *Building Better Schools* initiative, School Counsellors would be part of system-wide response to student need and support for schools to develop capacity to meet educational, social and emotional needs. It was envisaged that School Counsellors would be able to work long-term with students to address their personal needs, offer group programs, consult with and advise teachers, and collaborate with staff to develop wellbeing programs and practices. From its very inception, the *School Counselling Service* has operated at the Prevention, Early and Complex Intervention levels, with an intensive specialist focus on student wellbeing support, school support and capacity-building.

*The School Counselling Service is there to help young people be the best possible learners they can be. That can be done in many different ways. For some kids it could be group work, mediation, upskilling teachers, talking with parents a whole lot of different things.*

(School Counsellor)

Under the Remote Secondary Education Initiative, DEET had submitted to the Department of the Chief Minister, Family Violence Partnership Program, a proposal to employ Indigenous Counsellors in selected remote schools (NT 2005).

Primary schools were not allocated services, although: *there was widespread support for the appointment of qualified school counsellors in all primary and secondary schools* (NT 2005). However it was considered in the initial stages that the sharing of a School Counsellor between a secondary school and its feeder primary schools would be adequate, and remote schools were not covered. At the time there was concern about whether arrangements could be made so that the Darwin School Counsellors would be able to service Northern Territory Open Education Centre, Henbury Avenue and Don Dale Centre (NT 2005).

The Qualified School Counsellor Program developed organisationally, under a central schools system structure, currently, "Department of Education". The leaders of the *School Counselling Service* managed all aspects of the organisation, including: human resources, recruitment, deployment, leave, salaries; program budgeting and accountability; professional development and team-building (digital documents pre-2012, School Counsellor personal archive).

## **"Little Children are Sacred"**

The work of School Counsellors was highlighted in the April 2007 report of the Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse: *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle - "Little Children are Sacred"*. The report followed eight months of in depth research and community consultation. The inquiry cut through superficial descriptions of people's lives to demonstrate the

complicated dynamics of life and work in the Northern Territory, and the complex historical precursors of stress and distress in Aboriginal communities. “*Little Children are Sacred*” emphasised the importance of empowerment and self-determination, and community-based education. The Inquiry noted the great strength in the work of School Counsellors, not only in individual and family counselling, but consultancy with teachers and school-community development.

*The Inquiry was also impressed with the work of School Counsellors but, unfortunately, they were few and far between. These counsellors work closely with the children as well as teachers and are able to give constructive advice to teachers in dealing with perhaps difficult Aboriginal children or those facing family problems. The work of these counsellors is invaluable in assisting the learning and understand (sic) between pupil, the school community and teachers. They are essential to providing quality professional assistance to Aboriginal children experiencing difficulties. All schools should have access to a school counsellor. Some schools could share a counsellor or a counsellor could service two to three schools in close proximity to each other.*

The Inquiry’s *Recommendation 52* focussed on the wealth of existing knowledge in language and culture, the need to have good teachers, healthy and secure students and ownership of the educational system by the local communities. *Recommendation 52c* continued:

*... appoint 20 additional school counsellors to service those schools currently without such counsellors i.e. the major remote towns, the town camps in the regional centres, and one in each group school (i.e. those schools in remote areas which supply services to a number of smaller schools in the area).*

Prime Minister Howard’s highly contentious Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act, commonly known as The Intervention, ignored the recommendations for community consultation and leadership, and instead catapulted army troops on to Aboriginal country; re-traumatised people with their own or intergenerational memories of dispossession and dislocation; and suspended legislation that upheld the freedoms, welfare and land rights of Aboriginal people (Scott & Heiss 2016, Gray 2015).

Prime Minister Rudd’s somewhat modified programme, *Closing the Gap*, with continuing questionable processes and outcomes (Gray 2015) nevertheless funded a further 10 School Counsellor positions and one senior position (School Counsellor recollection) under the auspices of the Northern Territory Department of Education, Employment and Training (NT. DEET 2008). DEET had already established and supported the development of a school counsellor programme with a

high quality model for practice, as noted by the Board of Inquiry. The Northern Territory Government committed to continuing the funding (School Counsellor recollection). It might be realistically imagined that those new School Counsellors faced conditions of heightened trauma and distress in Aboriginal communities. In terms of the *School Counselling Service* capacity to meet need, this would appear to have brought the total number of School Counsellors to 29.

In 2010 there was a team of 26 School Counsellors in the School Counsellor Service. Their role was: *to increase the capacity of schools to enhance the mental health and social and emotional wellbeing within their school community*, through the provision of individual counselling and support, including engaging families; small group and targeted interventions; and whole school approaches including preventative measures (NT. DET 2010).

A 2010 web-site statement articulated the collaborative School Counsellor purpose:

*School Counsellors, through mutually respectful partnerships, improve, maintain and promote emotional, social, physical and mental well-being and support whole school approaches that encourage and enhance life-long learning. (NT. DET, dated 2010 by School Counsellor informant)*

## **“Gone Too Soon”**

A Legislative Assembly Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the Northern Territory presented their report in March 2012. The Assembly was motivated by the individual, family and community pain and devastation that accompanied suicides, especially those of young people. The youth suicide rate was 3.5 times the national average. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people represented 75% of child suicides, and 50% of all suicides.

*Gone Too Soon: A Report into Youth Suicide in the Northern Territory* (*Gone Too Soon*, 2012) documented the efforts of agencies and communities to support and strengthen young people, and recommended linked-up services more likely to identify and meet need. Recommendations included increased numbers of School Counsellors to allow adequate provision of service.

Evidence presented by the Northern Territory Coroner stated the importance of young people being able to access a counsellor attached to schools “*where they have to go*” ... “*there on the ground*” (p.122). Northern Territory Police, on the basis of feedback from Youth Engagement Police Officers and school students, also suggested that an increased number of counsellors might “*reduce potential harmful outcomes*” (p.123).

*Gone Too Soon* references the *Every Child Every Day Strategy 2010 – 2012* (p.52-53), including Key Priority #3

*Ensuring that schools are safe and welcoming places for children and young people to attend, through building strong relationships within the schools and ensuring that, if needed, children are referred to the appropriate help and support.*

*This is of direct relevance to suicide prevention because children and young people need to feel that school is a safe, supportive and welcoming place and if they are struggling with any issues, they can access help through their school.*

A key strategy under this priority was: *the expansion of the Remote School Counsellor program*. *Gone Too Soon* implicitly affirmed this strategy by casting high rates of suicide by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the context of poverty and disadvantage, particularly in remote communities where difficulty accessing health services was created by language barriers, inappropriate services and systemic community control. Community leadership, including young people, in initiatives to build strength and wellness would impact positively on mental health and suicidal behaviour.

The General Manager Student Services, NT Department of Education and Training (DET), informed the Legislative Assembly Select Committee, that the primary role of school counsellors was to:

- Identify and understand issues facing students;
- Initiate and manage preventative mental health programs and interventions;
- Assist teachers and students to resolve issues and problems; and
- Adopt a rigorous follow up and evaluation approach.

The Committee noted inequity in the distribution of school counsellors, with significant workload stress for some counsellors. The Northern Territory Department of Education and Training acknowledged the need for counsellors to be available in primary schools, but these were only provided where middle and senior School Counsellors had “the capacity” (p.123).

The Chief Executive Officer, NT DET, said that in remote areas in particular, there was a need for:

*more social workers, more counsellors, people with that dedicated experience to ensure the kids have the wellbeing and strategies so that they can take advantage of their schooling.*

He thought that a further 20-30 full-time counsellor positions would be required in order for the department to adopt a more holistic approach to the education of young people (p.124).

Recommendation #9 of the 2012 *Gone Too Soon* report reads:

*The Committee recommends that the Department of Education and Training determine an optimum ratio of students per school counsellor for primary schools, middle schools and high schools and allocate counsellors on that basis.*

The evidence presented and the recommendations within the report, called for an increase in School Counsellor numbers, and certainly allocation to primary schools in their own right.

## Models of Service

The documents considered thus far indicate that while therapeutic counselling and individual support are part of the School Counsellor repertoire, there has been, since 2005, an expectation and actual provision of consultation, advice, professional development and collaborative, proactive, preventative, whole school approaches that more accurately address the needs of students and schools.

## School Counselling Service 2012-2017

The School Counsellor Program was centrally managed by a team: Senior School Counsellor and Professional Supervisor. The program had developed a Health Promoting Schools approach (School Counsellor interview) which had been promoted by the World Health Organisation in 1995 as a model to: *strengthen (school) capacity to promote healthy living, learning and working conditions* (WHO). The model included a tiered approach for service delivery that is reflective of the current Response to Intervention framework within the *School Counselling Service Guidelines*. The model was also taken up in other parts of Australia (NSW 2011b, Vic. 1998, 2012).

## “A Share in the Future: Review of Indigenous Education”

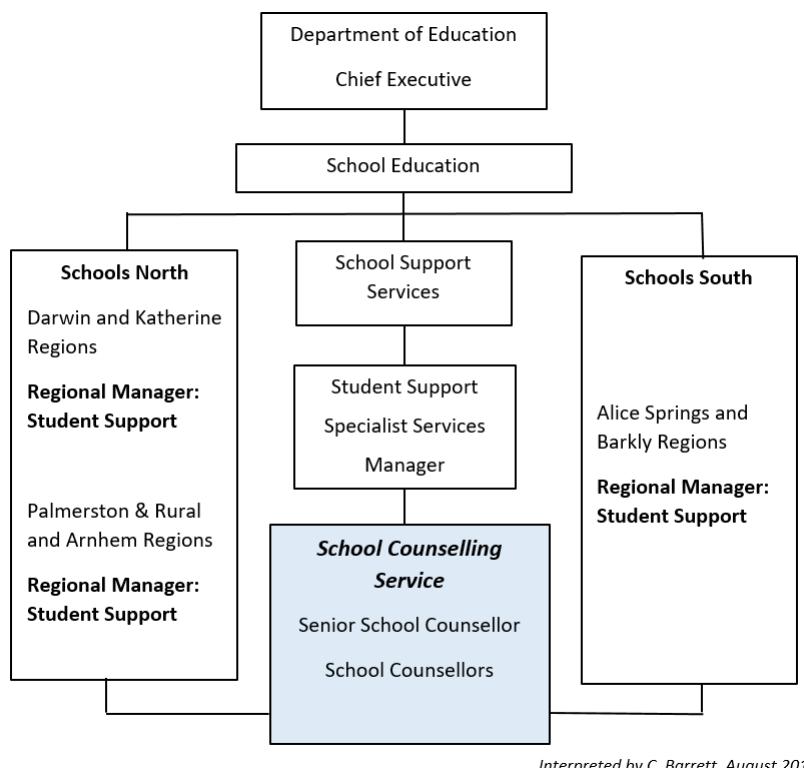
*A Share in the Future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory* (NT 2014) points to the difficulty in determining equitable School Counsellor to student ratios across schools with complex intersections of disadvantage, socio-economic situations, family and community considerations, enrolments, attendance rates, literacy and numeracy achievement, student developmental readiness, home language, distance from centres, community resources and services, teacher access to professional learning and specialist services (p.48-50).

The report explicitly and frequently recommends greater access to school counselling to address the gaps in services, with time and resources to support whole school wellbeing models and consult with individual teachers (p.26, 175, 185). It was noted that schools with on-site School Counsellors and other specialists were more likely to facilitate support services for students, but were too often swamped by high caseloads that prevented proactive, preventative models (p.178).

## Regional Management

In 2012, line management of the service was regionalised along with other parts of the Northern Territory schools system. The change of name to *School Counselling Service* has since occurred. The Senior School Counsellor is located centrally in the Mitchell Centre. Decisions about deployment of School Counsellors, budgets, professional development, resource provision, performance review and service difficulties are determined by Regional Managers. It is unclear to the outsider where the regional budgets for the *School Counselling Service* come from, how numbers and allocations to schools are determined. The common response is that it is "historical".

Figure 1: Organisation of the *School Counselling Service*, September 2017



The study found no current evidence of whole of Northern Territory rationale in planning for the *School Counselling Service*. Apparent inequities between regions and schools are unexplained. There is no centralised list of schools serviced and not serviced. There is apparent tension between some regions and central Department of Education management in relation to the operation of the *School Counselling Service*, particularly with regard to resourcing unfilled or new positions. While management is now closer to the schools, it appears to have weakened service overview, coordination, documentation and financial and human resource clarity.

Management of the *School Counselling Service* is reportedly clear to regional and departmental managers, but to an outsider and some of the School Counsellors, it seems just a little chaotic. There are organisational and work expectation differences across and even within regions. Job descriptions

have not always been consistent. To date, this study has failed to find clarity about the source of funding for the *School Counselling Service*, whether there is an amount quarantined specifically for School Counsellors, and how decisions are made at the central and regional levels to allocate limited services.

The notion of administration at the regional level to service schools did not in itself raise significant complaint. Two regions had not been assigned Regional Managers for considerable time, so that others in the regional management team might assume aspects of the role, nevertheless leaving School Counsellors without direct support and somewhat “in limbo” with regard to administrative and resource issues. School Counsellors in full-time school positions appreciated being able to deliver services effectively and efficiently within one of the most important environments in the lives of children and young people. Those who were co-located in regional offices to deliver part-time services to groups of schools enjoyed some measure of collegiate support.

However, there was not complete confidence that Regional Managers or their representatives where they were not assigned, would advocate for School Counsellors’ professional practice issues that were outside the area of educators’ professional expertise. Regional management could mean decreased consultation and the imposition of changed work conditions that impacted on service delivery effectiveness. There were indications of some complex dynamics between regional staff and principals, raising the possibility of lower priority on advocacy for School Counsellor stances on practice issues.

Those who needed to travel between schools had difficulty booking shared cars. One described deliberately loitering in management space to get attention for resource support. One said that the only option was to use a private car, although this would not be covered in the case of an accident, and there would certainly be no reimbursement of costs. There were differences across regions and schools about access to professional development and time for administration, data entry, updating and filing case notes, planning and collegiate meetings.

## Records of *School Counselling Service* Delivery

While School Counsellors are required to record their completed work on the Student Service Information Database (SSID), regional and central records of actual service delivery, service management decisions, unmet referral requests, gaps in service and crisis intervention responses were not found. Arguably, the absence of central records can obscure inadequate access to the *School Counselling Service*, and prevent forward planning for best quality and equitable support for students in Northern Territory schools. With such documents lacking, the tables below indicating the distribution of the *School Counselling Service* have been cobbled together from various available documents presented to the researcher.

## Professional Leadership

Those School Counsellors who remember earlier times prior to regionalisation lament the loss of the authority of a Senior School Counsellor to hold an overview, make decisions and advocate for the professional integrity of the service. The reduction of the number of leadership positions to one, currently the Senior School Counsellor, with the loss of the Professional Supervisor, meant that essential responsibilities such as, for example, professional supervision, professional learning, advocacy, debriefing, policy development, professional writing or service evaluation could not be properly fulfilled.

With regionalisation, School Counsellors, like their counterparts elsewhere in Australia, called for management by a social work or psychology practitioner with a shared professional understanding. It was suggested that line-management and work plans with an allied health professional, preferably an experienced school-based practitioner, reinforced professionally based work practices and ethical decisions.

Irrespective of the line of management back to the centre, School Counsellors opted for the *School Counselling Service* as the professional base that organisationally and theoretically connected the team of practitioners and maintained standards and consistency of service.

## Qualifications and Other Requirements

At the time of data gathering in 2017, the majority of School Counsellors within the *School Counselling Service* were fully qualified social workers, eligible for membership of the AASW. A small minority were psychologists affiliated with the APS; or qualified counsellors. The Northern Territory Government School Counselling Service Guidelines and Practice Standards for School Counsellors Employed in Northern Territory Government Schools, that were developed as part of this project, and submitted in September 2017, included the shared values and practice requirements of the AASW (2010, 2011, 2013), APS (2007, 2016) and ACA (2012, 2016) in order to reflect the professional status of those currently employed in the *School Counselling Service*.

Only the AASW and the APS have documents that specifically and in detail theorise and document practice in schools (AASW 2011, APS 2016). In particular, the AASW and APS focus on inclusion and equitable access to learning, within a social justice context. The AASW and APS describe the complexity of school practice within an ecological-systemic approach, with knowledge of pedagogy, classroom behaviours, school practices, mental health, theories for intervention and activities that go well beyond essential individual counselling and group work, to include, for example: the breadth of whole school wellbeing policy and program development; direct practice and case management with students and families; prevention, including classroom programs; teacher consultation and professional development; and collaboration with community agencies. This breadth is consistent

with current *School Counselling Service* purpose and current practice, and meets the expressed needs of most principals, who recognise the whole school approach, prioritising prevention and early intervention, as the most effective approach to student wellbeing.

On the other hand, the ACA *Scope of Practice* (2016) limits professional activity to psychological treatment interventions relevant to a mental health context, rather than the more complex assessment and interventions, including counselling, required to address interdependent social, economic, emotional, health, psychological, educational, policy and cultural barriers to wellbeing and school engagement.

As interviews progressed, it became increasingly clear that some level of professional experience or practice wisdom were also pre-requisites for School Counsellors who are the student wellbeing specialists responsible to deliver the *School Counselling Service* in Northern Territory government schools. School Counsellors needed to exercise independent professional practice, with excellent communication skills, a broad repertoire of knowledge and skills, flexibility, adaptability, confidence and resilience. Their stories located School Counsellors in professionally, and often geographically isolated settings, where they were addressing complex social, economic, student, family and school issues, along with the culturally respectful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander focus. Professional wisdom and confidence were particularly important in some schools where educators expected the child to be “fixed”, without allowance for the school and other environmental changes that required intervention. While there is a common ground of shared values and goals in their practice, educators who deliver the core business of the school could sometimes try to shape the professional practice of the School Counsellor.

An unexpected finding was that there were no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander *School Counselling Service* practitioners assigned to schools, especially since they have been contributing to social work and psychology practice, knowledge development and cultural understanding (Lowitja Institute) in health and wellbeing sectors. Any circumstances that facilitate employment exclusion should be eliminated, alongside active recruitment and mentoring of suitable candidates in order to build diversity, theoretical understanding and practice developments within the *School Counselling Service*.

New graduate and less experienced social workers and psychologists can enrich and strengthen a service with their fresh perceptions, knowledge and ideas for practice. At this stage of *School Counselling Service* development, it seems appropriate to employ a cohort of experienced practitioners. In planning for expansion, consideration might be given to opening the employment structure so that fully qualified but less experienced candidates have access to an entry level where

they can be mentored by and engage in professional learning with more experienced School Counsellors.

## Contracts

Certain conditions of recruitment and employment did not always give the professional and personal security that underpins a School Counsellor's long-term commitment, and therefore security to the *School Counselling Service* itself. Some School Counsellors were employed on contract, with no guaranteed option of on-going employment after satisfactory performance. Contracted employees needed to look elsewhere towards the end of their term, in case contracts were not renewed. They might be skilled practitioners well-integrated into the school's wellbeing program, committed to their positions, and professionally satisfied. They were well aware that others held on-going positions. The only reason uncovered in the course of the study was that it was "historical", arguably an inadequate argument for continuing employee inequity. Other short contracts were legitimately created to back-fill time-limited vacancies created by various categories of personal leave.

The security of on-going employment also gives school communities the confidence that the School Counsellor might stay with them. It was often said that people in remote communities assumed a School Counsellor would be seen only once, due to repeated experiences of "fly in-fly out" professionals who were not seen again. Only after several recurrent visits by the School Counsellor would confidence and trust be established.

## Quality Assurance

Department of Education consultations with the *School Counselling Service* and School Support Services revealed their intent to write a Quality Assurance Framework, although there was not yet a Northern Territory Government protocol to guide its development.

There was an initial tendency for some to define quality assurance in terms of managing School Counsellor performance, but this study has conceptualised it more broadly as reciprocal accountabilities engaging the Department of Education, *School Counselling Service* management, School Counsellors, school communities and client groups in service relevance and improvement. The extent to which stakeholders sought participation in this study indicates their desire to be heard and included in service evaluation and development. The lack of existing feedback, including from students and families, indicates the need for the development of communication channels within quality assurance protocols.

The *Northern Territory Government School Counselling Service Guidelines* (Barrett, 2017, pp.15-16) offers some preliminary considerations (verbatim below) for the formulation of a Quality Assurance Framework.

"The *School Counselling Service* is responsible to build itself organisationally to be consistent with principles of student safety, cultural safety and inclusion.

*Organisations with strong, collaborative team cultures have greater employee engagement and satisfaction, and greater staff retention. This leads to workplaces that are more inclusive and innovative, and ultimately more productive.* (Stronger Smarter Institute, Workplaces Program, retrieved 9 July 2017).

"The National Safe Schools Framework (MCEECDYA 2010) can equally inform the *School Counselling Service*, for example in its organisational support for safe environments for children and School Counsellors; inclusive culture, communication and procedures; resource capacity for proactive and reactive services; professional learning for School Counsellors.

"The *School Counselling Service Guidelines* focus on the frameworks and Guiding Principles that determine the organisational structure, resource allocation, operation and quality evaluation of the *School Counselling Service*. A quality assurance framework will suggest measures to evaluate and document the extent to which the *School Counselling Service* achieves its core objectives and Guiding Principles. Areas for consideration might include:

- *School Counselling Service* leadership, management and organisational practices that maximise engagement, wellbeing and learning outcomes for students
- Student and school access to services and resources in a timely manner and on the basis of need
- Flexibility for cultural responsiveness to the diversity of individual student and school community need
- Safety, wellbeing and rights of students and other service users
- Evaluation, feedback and complaints processes that lead to improvements in service delivery
- Human resources management of recruitment, induction, line management, appropriate resourcing, professional development, health and safety, professional supervision and supportive performance management.

*Based on Human Services Quality Standards, Dept of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, Queensland Government)*

The process of this study has introduced stakeholders to opportunities to express their needs and concerns, and suggest service improvements. Given that this study has found deficits and inequities in access to the *School Counselling Service*, a newly drafted Quality Assurance Framework should formalise the reciprocal accountabilities within the schools system with regard to student wellbeing. It is important to keep communication open and collaboration prioritised especially in the face of

potential frustration with a service that is unlikely to meet immediate demand because of limited resources.

The development of Quality Assurance Framework for the School Counselling Service should be driven by School Support Services management, and include the input of School Counsellors who not only deliver services to students and schools, but experience the line and service management issues that will inform quality assurance. School Counsellors are best placed to know the concerns of their clients. The *School Counselling Service* Quality Assurance Framework should be consistent with the Northern Territory Government public sector quality assurance policies and protocols.

## **Regional Distribution of the *School Counselling Service*, August 2017**

With no existing central source of data, the regional tables of *School Counselling Service* below have been constructed from 4 different lists, albeit with gaps. School Counsellors completed school and time allocations not within these records:

1. *NT Government Schools by Regions, June 2017*
2. *School Counsellors by Region, June 2017*
3. *School Counsellors Employed and Vacancies, July 2017*
4. *Average Enrolment and Attendance by School, Term 1 2017 and 2016*

Regional tables give a simple overview of the coverage of the *School Counselling Service*. They should not be assumed to be totally accurate given the difficulty of finding the data, but irrespective of any flaws, they give quite a clear general indication of the state of the *School Counselling Service*. Shading indicates regular service. There is great variation in service, except that School Counsellor positions in middle, senior and high schools have been generally maintained since the very beginning of the Qualified School Counsellor program. Tennant Creek, Nhulunbuy and Katherine High Schools are noticeably under-serviced in comparison. Many remote schools, large and small, receive no service at all. Barksly Region covers all schools, but with considerable time restriction.

At the time of writing, there was no complete central record of the deployment of critical incident response teams, despite their priority for the *School Counselling Service* and Regional Managers. School Counsellors provided some local information, although they don't necessarily have a Regional Manager's complete overview. Critical incidents loom large in the minds of educators, mental health professionals and the media, and while each incident represents great sadness and distress, requiring the application of high level professional knowledge and skill, statistical and qualitative evidence would contribute to improved planning.

The study is also unable to document requests to Regional Managers from feeder primary and other schools without regular service, for programs, PD, group work, student counselling, referral to other agencies, phone consults and critical incident response. Some would have been successfully actioned by delegation to School Counsellors, others re-directed or not actioned. Interviews gave anecdotal evidence that requests have been followed through, even if services to schools without allocated School Counsellors have been severely limited. Numbers of such requests have not been provided and therefore assumed to be, but are not necessarily, incomplete. "n/a" indicates regular service without need for special request to Regional Managers.

The shaded areas on the tables below indicate those schools where there is some level of regular service.

Tables: [\*The School Counselling Service\* by Region](#)

Figure 2: Alice Springs Region

Figure 3: Arnhem Region

Figure 4: Barkly Region

Figure 5: Darwin Region

Figure 6: Katherine Region

Figure 7: Palmerston & Rural Region

Figure 2: ALICE SPRINGS REGION

School	NTG Remote Definition Remote Category (RC)	Enrolment Term 1 2017	Frequency of regular service	Critical incident responses to Aug 2017	Actioned requests/ referrals* to Aug 2017
Centralian Senior	Urban	383	1.0 EFT		n/a
Centralian Middle	Urban	318	1.0 EFT	1	n/a
Bradshaw PS	Urban	520	1 day/week	1	n/a
Braitling PS	Urban	279	1.5 days/week		n/a
Gillen PS	Urban	270	3 hours/week		n/a
Larapinta PS	Urban	353	2 days/week		n/a
Ross Park PS	Urban	499	3 hours/week		n/a
Sadadeen PS	Urban	260	1.5 days/week		n/a
Ntaria School	RC 3	192	nil		
Yuendumu School	RC 3	250	nil		
Alcoota School	RC 2	18	nil		
Amoonguna School	Urban	27	nil		
Areyonga School	RC 2	39	nil		
Bonya School	RC 3	<12	nil		
Finke School	RC 3	34	nil		
Haasts Bluff School	RC 3	37	nil	1	
Harts Range School	RC 2	71	nil		
Impana School	RC 2	19	nil		
Laramba School	RC 2	60	nil		
M'Bunghara School	RC 3	<12	nil		
Mount Allan School	RC 3	78	nil		
Mutitjulu School	RC 1	37	nil		
Nyiripi School	RC 3	35	nil		
Papunya School	RC 3	149	nil		
Titjikala School	RC 2	29	nil		
Wallace Rockhole School	RC 2	23	nil		
Walungurru School	RC3	63	nil		
Watarrka School	RC 3	<12	nil		
Watiyawananu School	RC 3	42	nil		
Yulara School	RC 1	62	nil		
Acacia Hill Special P-12	Urban	77	nil	1	

Alice Springs School of the Air P-9	RC 3	140	nil		
Alice Springs Steiner School		185	1.5 hours/week	1	
<b>Alice Springs Region cont.</b>					
Regular service from <i>School Counselling Service</i> : 3,067 students					
<b>Nil regular service: 1,518 students</b>					

Figure 3: ARNHEM REGION

School	NTG Remote Definition Remote Category (RC)	Enrolment Term 1 2017	Frequency of regular service	Critical incident responses to Aug 2017	Actioned requests/ referrals* to Aug 2017
<b>SCS position vacant</b>					
Nhulunbuy HS	RC 1	272	nil		
Nhulunbuy PS	RC 1	430	nil		
Yirrkala	RC 1	185	nil		
<b>School Counsellor 1</b>				1	n/a
Maningrida College	RC 3	705	8 days/fortnight		
Ramingining	RC 3	309	2 days/fortnight		n/a
<b>School Counsellor 2</b>					
Alyangula Area School	RC Special	178	1 day/week		n/a
Alyarrmandumanja Umbakumba School	RC 3	82	1 day/week		n/a
Angurugu School	RC 3	190	2 days/week		n/a
Milyakburra School	RC 3	36	1 day/fortnight		n/a
Numbulwar School	RC 3	171	3 days/month		n/a
<b>School Counsellor 3</b>					
Shepherdson College	RC 3	669	1.0 EFT		n/a
Baniyala Garrangali School	RC 3	38	nil		
Gapuwiyak School	RC 3	240	nil		
Milingimbi School	RC 3	420	nil		
Warruwi School	RC 3	81	nil		
Yirrkala Homeland School	RC 1	106	nil		
Regular service from <i>School Counselling Service</i> : 2,340 students					
<b>Nil regular service: 1,772 students</b>					

Figure 4: BARKLY REGION

School	NTG Remote Definition Remote Category (RC)	Enrolment Term 1 2017	Frequency of regular of service	Critical incident responses to Aug 2017	Actioned requests/ referrals* to Aug 2017
<b>School Counsellor 1**</b>					
Tennant Creek HS	RC 1	237	9 days/term		n/a
Tennant Creek PS	RC 1	402	11 days/term		n/a
Elliot School	RC 1	87	6 days/term		n/a
Alekarenge School	RC 2	130	5 days/term		n/a
<b>School Counsellor 2**</b>					n/a
Alpurrurulam School	RC 3	112	3 days/term		n/a
Ampilatwatja School	RC 3	123	4 days/term		n/a
Arlparra School	RC 3	213	7 days/term	1	n/a
Canteen Creek School	RC 3	79	3 days/term		n/a
Epenarra School	RC 3	37	3 days/term	1	n/a
Murray Downs School	RC 3	21	1 day / term		n/a
Neutral Junction School	RC 2	28	1 day/term		n/a
Sterling School	RC 2	17	1 day/term		n/a
Ti Tree School	RC 1	96	4 days/term		n/a
Willowra School	RC 3	65	4 days/term		n/a
Mulga Bore School	RC 3	23	on request		0
Newcastle Waters School	RC 1	13	on request		0
Rockhampton Downs School	RC 3	25	1 day/term		n/a
** based at Regional Office					
Regular service from <i>School Counselling Service</i> : 1,651 students					
<b>Nil regular service / on request only: 36 students</b>					

Figure 5: DARWIN REGION

School	NTG Remote Definition Remote Category (RC)	Enrolment Term 1 2017	Frequency of regular service	Critical incident responses to Aug 2017	Actioned requests/ referrals* to Aug 2017
Darwin Senior	Urban	1344	5 days/week	1	n/a
Casuarina Senior	Urban	975	5 days/week		n/a
Darwin Middle	Urban	759	5 days/week		n/a
Dripstone Middle	Urban	526	5 days/week	1	n/a
Nightcliff Middle	Urban	252	5 days/week		n/a
Sanderson Middle	Urban	393	5 days/week		n/a
Alawa PS	Urban	255	on request		
Anula PS	Urban	409	on request		
Jingili PS	Urban	325	on request		
Karama PS	Urban	196	on request		
Larrakeyah PS	Urban	483	on request		
Leanyer PS	Urban	593	on request		
Ludmilla PS	Urban	88	on request		
Malak PS	Urban	257	on request		
Manunda Terrace PS	Urban	169	on request		
Millner PS	Urban	203	on request		
Moil PS	Urban	250	on request		
Nakara + Hospital School	Urban	591	on request		
Nightcliff PS	Urban	589	on request		
Parap PS	Urban	537	on request		
Stuart Park PS	Urban	622	on request		
Wagaman PS	Urban	289	on request		
Wanguri PS	Urban	358	on request		
Wulagi PS	Urban	246	on request	1	
Nemarluk Special P-6	Urban	143	2.5 days/week		n/a
Henbury Special 7-12 school-employed	Urban	114	2.5 days/week		n/a
NT Distance Ed. 10-12	Urban	342	nil		
Malak re-engagement Centre	Urban	257	5 days/week		n/a
Regular service from School Counselling Service: 4,763 students					
Nil regular service/on request: 6,802 students					

Figure 6: KATHERINE REGION

School	NTG Remote Definition Remote Category (RC)	Enrolment Term 1 2017	Frequency of regular service	Critical incident responses to Aug 2017	Actioned requests/ referrals* to Aug 2017
Katherine HS *	Urban	622	3.2 days/week		n/a
Casuarina St PS	Urban	381	nil		
Clyde Fenton PS	Urban	225	nil		
Katherine South PS*	Urban	394	0.5 days/week		n/a
MacFarlane PS*	Urban	242	1 day/week		n/a
Borroloola School	RC 3	239	nil		
Kalkaringi School	RC 3	165	nil		
Lajamanu School	RC 3	229	nil		
Minyerri School	RC 3	146	nil		
Ngukurr School	RC 3	324	nil		
Amanbidji School	RC 3	17	nil		
Barunga School	RC 2	95	nil		
Bulla Camp School	RC 3	19	nil		
Bulman School	RC 3	62	nil		
Jilkminggan School	RC 2	92	nil	1	
Kiana School	RC 3	14	nil		
Manyallaluk School	RC 2	20	nil		
Mataranka School	RC 1	40	nil		
Pigeon Hole School	RC 3	27	nil		
Pine Creek School	RC Special	42	nil		
Robinson River School	RC 3	51	nil		
Timber Creek School	RC 2	51	nil	1	
Urapunga School	RC 3	23	nil		
Wugularr School	RC 2	139	nil		
Yarralin School	RC 3	57	nil		
Kintore St School	Urban	44	nil		
Katherine School / Air	Urban	163	nil		

\* Counsellor employed independently by Regional Office, not as part of *School Counselling Service*

Regular service from *School Counselling Service*: 1,258 students

**Nil regular service: 2,665 students**

Figure 7: PALMERSTON AND RURAL REGION

School	NTG Remote Definition Remote Category (RC)	Enrolment Term 1 2017	Frequency of regular service	Critical incident responses to Aug 2017	Actioned requests/ referrals* to Aug 2017
Palmerston Senior	Urban	480	5 days/week		n/a
Taminmin High	Urban	1098	5 days/week		n/a
Rosebery Middle	Urban	628	5 days/week		n/a
<b>SC1 RO** vacant</b>					
Bees Creek PS	Urban	365	nil		
Howard Springs PS	Urban	281	nil		
Milikapiti School	RC 2	74	nil		
Pularumpi School	RC 2	49	nil		
Mamaruni School	RC 3	67	nil		
Peppimenarti School	RC 3	36	nil		
Nganambala School	RC 3	29	nil		
<b>SC2 RO**</b>					n/a
Batchelor Area	RC Special	132	1 day/week		n/a
Humpty Doo PS	Urban	407	1 day/week		n/a
Middle Point School	Urban	28	1 day/week		n/a
Woolianna School	RC 2	63	1 day/week		n/a
<b>SC3 RO**</b>					n/a
Girraween PS	Urban	527	1 day/week		n/a
Berry Springs PS	Urban	243	1 day/week		n/a
Belyuen School	RC 2	26	½ day/week		n/a
Dundee Beach School	RC 2	22	½ day/week		n/a
Nganmarriyanga Sch.	RC 3	154	1 day/week		n/a
Bakewell PS	Urban	846	5 days/week school employed		n/a
Adelaide River	RC Special	52	nil		
Douglas Daly School	RC 2	<12	nil		
Driver PS	Urban	501	nil		
Durack PS	Urban	492	nil		
Gray PS	Urban	384	nil		
Moulden PS	Urban	360	nil		
Rosebery PS	Urban	575	nil		
Tipperary Station Sch.	RC 2	<12	nil		
Woolaning School	RC 2	<12	nil		
Woodroffe PS	Urban	436	nil		
<b>SC vacant (recent)</b>					
Jabiru & Gunbalanya	RC Special RC 3	251 301	N/A recent vacancy		
Forrest Pde School	Urban	61	nil		

**Palmerston and Rural region cont.**

\*\* School Counsellor based in Regional Office

School employed School Counsellor Bakewell PS: 846 students

Regular service from *School Counselling Service*: 3,808 students

**Nil regular service: 3,798 students**

Figure 8: Total Service Estimates

Students in schools with a regular <i>School Counselling Service</i> commitment	16,887
Students in schools with nil regular <i>School Counselling Service</i> commitment	16,591
Percentage of Northern Territory Government students not able to access <i>School Counselling Service</i> except by special referral or request	49.6%

## A Northern Territory Whole-School Model of Practice

A strength of the Northern Territory *School Counselling Service* is the consistency of a model where schools are allocated regular service time. This model is most likely to facilitate Department of Education, School Support Services policy and commitment to whole-school approaches to wellbeing and learning. It places the School Counsellor in the school as part of its existing wellbeing program, and best supports the *School Counselling Service* three level, eco-systemic frameworks. Regularly allocated service time increases the likelihood of consultation, collaboration to identify emerging student issues and preventative strategies; and early intervention with students with difficulties.

When *School Counselling Service* response is referral driven, there is the risk of exaggeration of student problems, or failure to refer until the problem is complex and entrenched. Encouragement of pre-referral consideration of existing or new school-initiated preventative and early intervention or professional development in a whole-school approach to wellbeing is preferable.

Despite the fact that in some schools individual referrals fill School Counsellor time, and there are schools that are missing out, it is worth developing service expansion strategies that maintain the regular service model that is consistent with a whole-school approach to wellbeing and learning

## Regional Models of Practice

Darwin and Palmerston and Rural Regions urban senior, middle and high School Counsellors provide limited services to feeder primary schools on request. Their workloads preclude greater work with primary schools. They reported that they had been directed to offer brief assessment and referral services, rather than counselling, and there could be a 12 week wait. They do not offer regular service to feeder schools, but attend to serious cases, critical incidents and mandatory reporting training for staff. Most middle and senior School Counsellors are in positions long-established, but they acknowledged that primary schools need their own School Counsellors in order to be able to collaborate with school staff, work with students and groups, provide advice on developing positive teacher-student relationships as a basis for learning, and engaging with families and the school community.

In regions where School Counsellors work full-time in one school (senior, middle, high), they generally reported being able to develop effective models of mixed practice, integrated in to the school wellbeing culture. They were able to take a whole school approach to student wellbeing, along with direct counselling and group work roles and other responsibilities within the wellbeing program of the school.

One school counsellor in collaboration with the school and its primarily Aboriginal community, has not embarked on a counselling role, due to community preference and language difference. She has worked with various parts of the community to facilitate the development of a health and wellbeing resource in language, illustrated by a local artist. This has become a highly-regarded community achievement, and will be used locally and more widely in other communities. As the students and community get to know her, she will continue to work creatively for the health and wellbeing of students, and her role will unfold in continuing collaboration with school and community.

Located within Palmerston, Barkly and Alice Springs Regional offices and one Arnhem Region community, there are currently seven School Counsellors who deliver the *School Counselling Service* to clusters of primary or remote schools. Their first task is to negotiate with the principal about the needs of students, possible models of practice and time available. Ideally, the larger schools have wellbeing teams already established. In smaller schools it is the principal who carries the responsibility for student wellbeing.

Remote schools in Alice Springs, Barkly and Katherine Regions are scattered across vast distances. Of these, except for the Barkly Region, no remote school, irrespective of size, has access to the *School Counselling Service*, except for phone consults and critical incidents. All but two Barkly Region remote schools have some level of regular service, with School Counsellors offering between one and

seven days per term. Two schools receive service by request only. Seven schools receive 3 or fewer days per term. One interviewee stated that at least three of the remote Barkly schools could use their own full-time School Counsellor. Many students are living in abject poverty and deprivation; new infrastructure can be linked to mining and increased policing for minor infringements. But there is also beauty and strength. Sometimes School Counsellors enjoy the privilege of an invitation to walk or hunt, or to share a kangaroo tail. When they stay overnight in the school, it is an opportunity for informal contact with children and adults if it is offered.

Brief access time creates professional and ethical dilemmas for Barkly School Counsellors, who nevertheless, develop models to maximise support within short on-site timelines. Journeys are planned to encompass more than one school. Schools make referrals for individual students, but the School Counsellors take a whole-school view. Ideally the school is ready for the visit. Classroom observations, meetings with teachers, family visits with community guides have been planned. Other issues, needs, solutions or professional learning are raised. Notes are made for teacher use after the School Counsellor has departed. The delivery of counselling in remote areas has ethical problems related to raising with children distressing issues, or matters they can't control, without returning to meet regularly on a weekly or fortnightly basis to develop a client centred professional relationship.

For the regionally-based School Counsellors who have a regular visiting routine of one day per week or a little less, it was easier to integrate into the school, though most reported inadequate time. Some School Counsellors had followed school requests to fulfil counselling and group work roles, although several principal questionnaires included an understanding of the limitation of this approach, and advocated for increased time for consultation and preventative service, rather than the focus on reactive responses. School Counsellors reported that some principals allowed no other involvement in the school apart from counselling or group work. Some questionnaires also indicated that principals defined the *School Counselling Service* only in terms of direct supportive or therapeutic counselling.

The preferred model for *School Counselling Service* delivery in response to limited time at a school included emphasis on whole-school benefits, consultation, professional development and collaboration to develop policies, programs and practices with wellbeing teams or teachers charged with that responsibility. Mixed with some individual counselling and group work, this was a logical model with maximum impact. School Counsellors reported that many principals appreciated this approach.

However, while some schools understood the *School Counselling Service* frameworks for intervention, others did not understand the role or did not seem ready to trust the School Counsellor or their professional judgement. One School Counsellor was working collaboratively in several

schools, but found it difficult to get referrals properly completed and generally make collaborative progress in one particular school. Within any week, School Counsellors might be working in these different scenarios, as illustrated by one regionally-based school counsellor:

*Some schools are open to interacting and sharing information and participating in professional learning. The principals are open and supportive, value the School Counselling Service, and provide a safe space for student to meet with the School Counsellor. Other schools might be led by sceptical principal or teachers, who block contact with parents in case they are offended, and request only counselling with students, without providing a confidential space (from School Counsellor interview, not verbatim).*

The earlier tables (*Figures 2-7*) show where decisions at regional level have determined that there are inadequate resources to provide regular service to many urban and remote schools. Barkly Region has made a commitment to offering universal service, albeit sometimes at the expense of adequate time for impactful and lasting change. All children in their schools and communities have a right to the expert professional wellbeing support provided in other Northern Territory schools by the *School Counselling Service*. School Counsellors can apply their knowledge, skills and flexibility to maximising the value of infrequent visits, but they carry the burdensome professional knowledge that despite their best efforts, such limited service time is not best practice for supporting students most effectively.

Within a *School Counselling Service* process of review and evaluation, there is scope for considering whether there are alternate models of practice. For example, except where School Counsellors collegiately support one another for particular programs or purposes, they work independently in schools. There may be some instances where a service model incorporating a team approach would be useful. Such review discussions, generation of models and decisions should only be made with participation of the School Counsellors who are currently delivering services, know the needs of students and have some familiarity with the sometimes quirky internal dynamics of particular schools.

## *School Counselling Service Frameworks*

The *School Counselling Service* is part of a Northern Territory wide whole-school approach to student wellbeing and learning. School Counsellors have specialist knowledge and practice specifically for the school setting. Compared to other health and wellbeing professionals, they have unique access to the most significant aspects of life for children and young people: school, family and community. They have the specialist skills for counselling children and young people. School counsellors are integrated into the school's wellbeing program, not solely to contribute to the safety and wellbeing of students, but to collaborate with educators to achieve the best learning and life outcomes for young Territorians.

Recommendations for an increased *School Counselling Service* need to be based on a certainty that School Counsellors provide a unique, specialist and valued service within the Department of Education and the schools system. This discussion of frameworks and models for service delivery continue the evidence for such recommendations.

Consistent frameworks unify theory and practice to create a solid foundation for the delivery of the *School Counselling Service* across the Northern Territory. Three frameworks below are described in more detail in the *School Counselling Service Guidelines*.

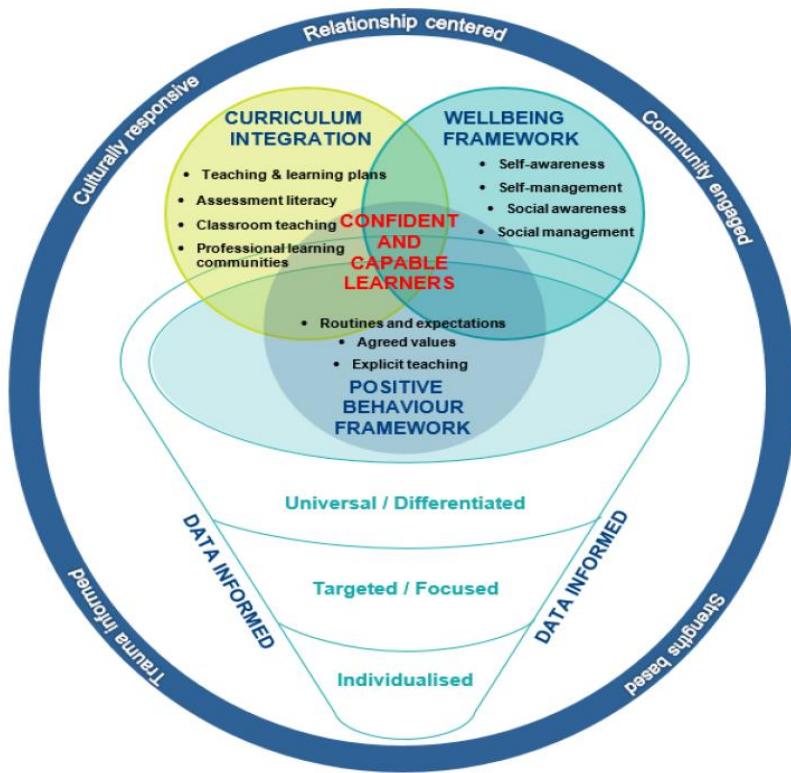
### **1. The Evidence-Informed Approach**

The Wellbeing, Engagement and Behaviour Team, School Support Services, has developed an evidence-based, whole-school approach to identify the interrelated domains specifically relevant to the Northern Territory student wellbeing context. “*Confident and Capable Learners*” will flourish through learning and wellbeing initiatives that deliver interconnected Curriculum Integration, Wellbeing and Positive Behaviour Frameworks embedded within a three-tiered model, and guided by **5 Key Principles** to be:

- culturally responsive
- relationship centred
- community engaged
- strengths based, and
- trauma informed

The *School Counselling Service Guidelines* describe frameworks, principles and approaches that are grounded in the Evidence Informed Approach, and pertinent to the specific purpose of the *School Counselling Service* and the specialist practice of School Counsellors.

Figure 9: The Evidence Informed Approach



## 2. The Response to Intervention Framework

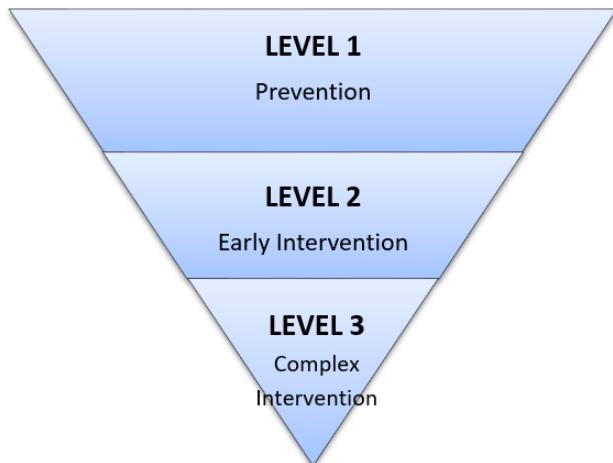
The *School Counselling Service* operates according to a Response to Intervention (RtI) framework, to maximise the effectiveness of schools' wellbeing and learning efforts. The *School Counselling Service* is responsive to school needs with evidence-based and sustainable programs and interventions. The Response to Intervention framework requires the targeting of efforts at Prevention and Early Intervention, in order to prevent the establishment of longer term and more complex personal, family, social, emotional and school engagement difficulties.

Among social systems and institutions, schools are the most appropriate site for the identification and targeting of services and supports for children and young people. The *Little Children are Sacred* and *Gone too Soon* reports gave evidence to that. Not only do students present regularly at the school, but the classroom is a core site for the delivery of preventative social and emotional learning, moral development, self-understanding and confidence. Teachers are well-placed to identify emerging personal, family or school problems; implement school wellbeing processes; or collaborate with the School Counsellor to respond with individual or group work at the Early Intervention level.

The necessity for Level 3 Complex Interventions might indicate: failure to recognise early difficulties not addressed by whole school social and emotional wellbeing approaches; the absence, ineffectiveness or need to reactivate earlier support; or the need collaboratively to develop school and community supports for students.

Figure 10: Response to Intervention Framework

School Counselling Service framework for wellbeing, mental health and learning support



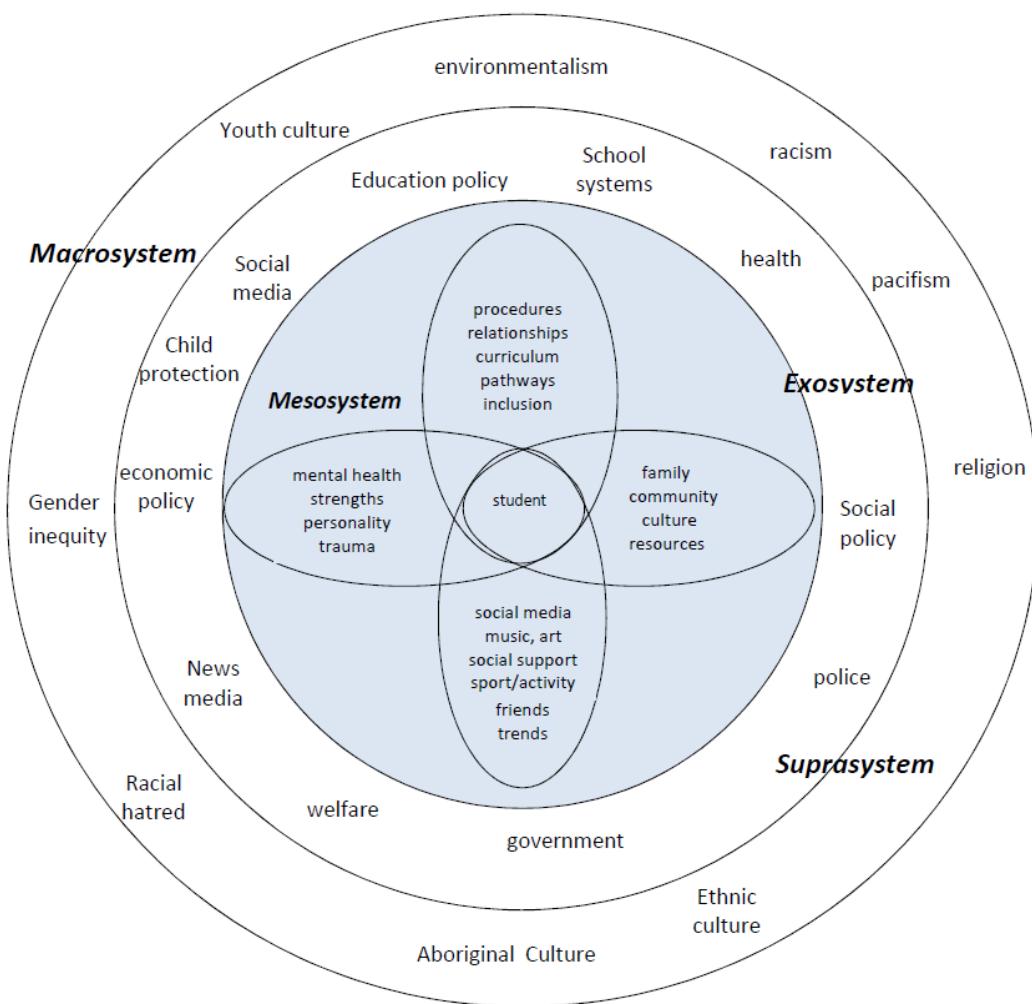
School social workers and educational psychologists have knowledge and expertise for operating at each level (AASW 2011; APS 2016). Other states have also developed their student support services according to a similar model (Victoria. 1998, 2012). Northern Territory School Counsellors have over a decade already developed their models of practice not around supportive and therapeutic counselling, but around the flexible and effective counselling and other interventions, at Prevention, Intervention and Complex Intervention levels that address student needs.

### 3. The Ecological-Systemic Approach to School Counselling

The *School Counselling Service* uses an ecological-systemic (eco-systemic) theoretical approach to service delivery, incorporating the connection of ecological and systems theories. Students do not come into the school as isolated and disconnected children and young people, but bring with them their own ‘internal’ environments of complex characteristics and the other ‘external’ environments including people, places, cultural practices and activities with which they have important connection. Wellbeing and learning are enhanced when those environments function well and interact constructively to support the student, especially within the home-school-community relationship.

School Counsellors draw from a broad repertoire of skills in order to define and address the complexity of environmental and systemic factors that impact on student wellbeing and learning. They define problems and plan a range of appropriate and connected interventions focussed on the student; the points of interaction between their environments; and social and policy change (Allen-Meares, 2010a; Bowen, 2010; Barrett, 2014).

Figure 11: the Eco-Systemic Approach



(Barrett 2017)

## Implementing the Frameworks

During interviews, in the discussion of their work, School Counsellors gave examples of their understanding of the effectiveness and implementation of interventions, often at more than one level of eco-systemic complexity. The three level approach to intervention is applicable to most issues presented to the *School Counselling Service*, and demonstrates how School Counsellors are specialist practitioners in the school setting.

For example, “trauma” was approached at multiple levels:

Level	Activity
<b>Prevention</b>  Whole school, year level or class group education and prevention programs	Professional development, consultation and advice for staff regarding: brain development and learning; positive communication with troubled children; working with strengths; mindfulness practice for the classroom; calming activities for the morning home-school transition; trauma-informed understanding of behaviour.  Participation/consultation in the preparation of social and emotional learning curriculum and programs  Collaboration with school leadership and staff in the identification of problems and the development of wellbeing policy and programs  Parent and community education, development and collaboration, liaison with community agencies
<b>Early Intervention</b>  Brief, targeted intervention with identified students	Group work: social skills, emotional skills, cultural connection & identity, anger management, problem-solving, self-awareness, group play  Teacher consultation, liaison with CLONTARF, Girls Academy  Liaison with parents or carers, and with government and community agencies  Referral and case management  Counselling, play therapy, art, craft, sand play, cultural activities
<b>Complex Intervention</b>	Referral to medical or mental health therapy specialists  Case management  Counselling, play/art/narrative therapy, CBT, cultural activities

School Counsellors allocated as full-time staff in middle, senior and high schools reported greater opportunity to be part of the wellbeing processes of the school at every level. Some took a predominantly counselling, group work, professional development role, using a three-level eco-systemic perspective. They had particular responsibilities such as chairing the wellbeing team and overseeing the implementation of particular programs (eg Mind Matters). They felt valued and integrated into the wellbeing culture of the school. However, two were frustrated by restriction to individual counselling and group work, when they could see that their knowledge and expertise could additionally contribute more effectively to wellbeing processes and planning.

The relationship with the school principal has most impact on the ability of the School Counsellor to engage in the breadth of *School Counselling Service* activity. Some principals appear to be pressured by the sheer numerical demand for complex interventions, so that there is only room for the

“reactive” counselling responses without time for the proactive and support work they knew to be essential.

*The School Counsellor’s day is full of seeing individual students, and at times there is not enough time for me to have conversations with her, to help relay the needs of students or talk to teachers. (Principal)*

Most principals broadly conceptualise the possibilities of School Counsellor work:

*Social groups, individual counselling, teacher support, family support, leading professional development, supporting class teachers. (Principal)*

Some principals limit the role to supportive or therapeutic counselling, which is perhaps not unreasonable given the title of the service and its professional staff. There is some expectation that counselling will inevitably produce change, without the recognition that children and young people have just as much difficulty as adults in changing thinking, emotions, behaviour and habits.

*Can you come into my classroom and fix this kid? (School Counsellor)*

There is “*no therapeutic wand – magic fix!*” (School Counsellor). Counselling a student does not change their social, economic, family and community circumstances.

Having made their assessment and applied their professional judgement, School Counsellors may decide that counselling is not the right approach, or that it should only occur alongside other interventions. For example, healing and learning after trauma come about in the context of positive relationships and the development of self-esteem and success at school. Challenging behaviour is seen as having a function within the student’s relationships, including those at school. In taking a multi-level, eco-systemic approach, School Counsellors will ask to consult with teachers and wellbeing teams, implement classroom strategies or provide professional development. Several stories from School Counsellors and others indicated that the lack of educators’ understanding of the *School Counselling Service* frameworks for intervention, and consequent failure to collaborate, led to frustration on the part of School Counsellors and principals.

*If you’re working in a school where the school culture or the school leadership’s looking for a “quick fix”, we’re doomed. If we’re working in an environment in a school that’s happy to sit down and plan... That says well, things will take time... Where do we want to be this time next year? What are the steps we need to take to get there? That’s when we’re more likely to have success in the school... when we’re accepted as part of the school team. They know we can’t just walk in with a magic wand and make everything better. (School Counsellor)*

## Flexibility

During interviews, School Counsellors revealed themselves to be independent, creative and adaptable. Their professional maturity is demonstrated in their practice wisdom, which underpins reasoned flexibility.

*Practice wisdom informed service acknowledges the accumulation of practitioner experience that identifies, reflects on, repeats and refines those approaches, methods and programs that are most effective in responding to student wellbeing needs and facilitating re-engagement with learning. Practice wisdom represents the theory building in practice, creativity and flexibility that allow for diversity in the work of School Counsellors. (NT. DoE. School Counselling Service Guidelines, 2017)*

The flexibility in practice relates to being able to choose from a broad repertoire of interventions and skills in order to respond to problems clearly defined in their complexity. The combination of School Counsellor direct counselling and group work practice with students, consultation and professional development with teachers, and liaison with family and community, are part of the linked-up services that best support students. Direct practice with students is targeted to particular needs, so that counselling methodologies, and group work content will vary according to the goals of individual and groups of students.

One School Counsellor in a remote school had developed a student reflective journal to record the progress of counselling and support for individual students who had periods of non-attendance for family or community business or hospitalisation in Darwin. Others had adapted play therapy, sand-play and art to incorporate the story-telling and other interests of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. A School Counsellor travelling in remote areas kept crates of themed activities in the car, so that she was ready to respond with group and whole class activities in response to individual referrals, thereby skilling the teacher and educating the whole class.

# Issues for School Counselling Service Intervention

## Northern Territory Student Wellbeing & Learning

The *Review of the Global School Budgets Funding Model* (NT. DoE 2017b, p.12) describes the high level of socio-educational disadvantage faced by Northern Territory students. Many students begin when they are not “school ready”, and 41% have English language difficulties that impact on learning. Poor attendance creates learning and teaching difficulties. 43% of Aboriginal children and 44% of children in remote areas are developmentally vulnerable. Northern Territory students are greater than three times more likely than children elsewhere to be engaged with child protection services.

## Trauma

The most commonly cited reason for referral in formal interviews, conversations and questionnaires was “trauma”, with requests for counselling. Trauma, in itself, is not actually a reason for referral: some children have counterbalancing resilience, family and community connection and support. Similarly, Disruption to social and emotional wellbeing, dysregulation of behaviour and emotions, mental health problems and school disengagement that appear to emanate from known trauma, might equally be exacerbated by poverty, housing stress, social marginalisation, racism (Ferdinand 2012), and school practices that are non-inclusive, confrontational, or likely to escalate emotional outbursts and dangerous behaviour.

Over-emphasis on the “trauma” label can locate the problem solely within the student or family, rather than within the more complex eco-systemic environment described above. Some schools understood well and had the vision, policy and resources to put wellbeing processes in place, to work towards the cultural connection and identity, curriculum and classroom relationships that bring healing and learning.

Where schools were described as populations where all students and Aboriginal teachers had “trauma backgrounds”, there was little acknowledgement of individualised difference, and little room for appreciation of strength and the potential for healing and learning (Atkinson 2014). In one such school, a publicly available record (*uncited for privacy*) of cultural identity, pride and strength in a young man’s journey through traditional cultural practice and community connection presented an alternate story to the dominant trauma narrative.

School Counsellors are able to support principals and teachers to describe student problems in their complexity, rather than over-using the “trauma” label, so that school programs can properly target the particular wellbeing and learning needs of individual students, teachers and community. School

Counsellors themselves need to be culturally respectful and historically informed to model a strengths based, holistic, eco-systemic approach to trauma and healing.

*Individual kids referred for trauma – let's assume there are lots of kids who've experienced personal, vicarious or intergenerational trauma – What are we going to do as a whole school? (School Counsellor)*

## Teacher Support

Counselling teachers is clearly defined as outside the purpose of the *School Counselling Service*. However, several school and regional interviewees indicated that teacher coping and having strategies for positive learning relationships was so closely linked to teacher wellbeing that teacher mental health support should be acknowledged as a valid part of the School Counsellor role, even if it is limited to the school and classroom professional task of the teacher. A teacher suffering classroom-related anxiety is unlikely to get best help from an employee assistance service with no teaching experience. Some school and regional interviewees expressed concern that there were still some teachers and other staff apparently subject to bullying in the education system.

## Student Service Information Database

The Department of Education Student Service Information Database (SSID) can present in graphic form the number and type of issues responded to and the interventions employed by School Counsellors. Such a data base does not record the strengths and resilience of students, given its emphasis on problems. Referral forms should require school staff to include strengths in order to facilitate a strengths based approach from the pre-referral phase.

SSID does not record the issues that go unaddressed in schools representing around half of Northern Territory students. School principals frequently mentioned the need to support and train teachers to work with children, and framed this as support for the wellbeing of both teachers and children, especially in remote schools. They defined some of the issues for which they need the assistance of School Counsellors:

*Social and emotional learning, dealing with anxiety and/or depression, supporting students in positive behaviours, challenges of a very remote context with limited social networks, cyber bullying, bullying/ teasing, students with autism, students with ADHD.*

*Mental health- depression, self-harming, exposure to domestic violence, drug use, where a parent is very ill or has passed away, extreme behaviour*

*Trauma related behaviours – non-compliance, withdrawal*

*... substance abuse ... students living in violent households ... emotional needs*

*Suicide, supporting others through suicidal ideation, self-harm ...*

*Family issues ... alcohol, substance abuse, abuse and violence, neglect. Emotional and relationship support.*

*Mental health and wellbeing of children and families, emotional/social risk ... children in care of the Minister, criminological risk, gender identity...*

The breadth and seriousness of these issues, and the fact that they mostly come from remote schools with limited, if any community agencies, without School Counsellor service, can only serve to illustrate the dilemma for the Northern Territory Government, the Department of Education and the *School Counselling Service*. Teachers are not trained to deal with the distressing personal and social issues experienced by children. With training and support they could more confidently and comfortably build learning and community relationships, and handle the behavioural indicators.

Most of the issues above would fit into the categories of SSID, but the *School Counselling Service* would have no current capacity to address them in any case.

Figure 12: Issues recorded on the Student Service Information Database

RELATIONSHIP / PEER ISSUES	ACADEMIC / CLASSROOM ISSUES
Cyber-bullying offender Cyber-bullying victim Girlfriend/boyfriend issues Harassment/bullying offender Harassment/bullying victim Peer group issues Pregnancy Sexual activity	Accessing curriculum Career concerns Classroom behaviour Exam stress School refusal/attendance/truancy Social emotional learning Teacher/student conflict
MENTAL HEALTH / WELLBEING	FAMILY / COMMUNITY
Adjustment issues Anger Anxiety symptoms of Depression symptoms of Eating disorder Grief and loss (death) Health issue Problem sexualised behaviour Self esteem Self-harm Sexuality issues Stress Substance abuse/use Suicidal ideation	Acculturative stress Community issues Community relationships Emotional abuse Family conflict issues /family violence Financial Homelessness/accommodation/relocation Immigration issues Legal issues Mandatory reporting (school) Neglect Parental separation Physical abuse/ sexual abuse Physical assault / sexual assault Young carer

SSID figures indicated that the most common issues in 2017 across regions, including single and multiple reasons for intervention, have been in the category of mental health. Several School Counsellors indicated that the most common cause of distress, anxiety and depression lay in relationships: friends, boyfriend/girlfriend, family, peers.

Figure 13: Prevalence of Referral Issues

CATEGORY	Average %
MENTAL HEALTH / WELLBEING	41
RELATIONSHIP / PEER ISSUES	27
FAMILY / COMMUNITY	22
ACADEMIC / CLASSROOM ISSUES	20

Two regions, Barkly and Arnhem, recorded significantly higher academic and classroom issues as referral reasons. The other regions recorded lower, at between 11% and 15%. It would require more information to analyse this difference, but a similarity between Barkly and Arnhem Regions is the higher service coverage of remote schools and communities.

Figure 14: Academic / Classroom Issues

REGION	ACADEMIC / CLASSROOM ISSUES
Alice Springs	14%
Arnhem	32%
Barkly	30%
Darwin	15%
Katherine	11%
Palmerston & Rural	17%

## Interventions

Recorded interventions indicate that most School Counsellor work continues to be at the Complex Intervention level, despite a *School Counselling Service* commitment to concentrating efforts at the Prevention and early Intervention levels. With so few School Counsellors, and many schools still in the early stages of developing wellbeing teams and whole-school approaches, it is perhaps not surprising.

The most common interventions were a broad range of group work programs or group counselling; multiple methods for individual counselling and individual support; case management; liaison with family/guardian; teacher consult; provision of information; and liaison with external provider. There is an apparent discrepancy between the interview accounts of School Counsellors and the SSID data. School Counsellors spoke about a broader range of more preventative work such as professional development, general consultation and advice, social emotional course planning and collaborative work with school and community.

If SSID does not capture School Counsellor work that is not directly linked to individual referrals, it is important to inform policy-makers and planners of that omission, and consider ways to collate those School Counsellor efforts on behalf of the *School Counselling Service*.

## Valued Service

The study found School Counsellor satisfaction and the appreciation of schools, students and their families.

*This job gave me a wonderful opportunity to work more closely with kids, more closely with families, support the teachers the kids with their educational outcomes...*  
(School Counsellor)

*The School Counselling Service has worked with families to provide strategies and a way forward. Worked with children to develop strategies – very good results – attendance /engagement/self-esteem. (Principal email)*

*Student wellbeing is a priority, impacts significantly on learning, provides support for all involved (with) students. (Principal Questionnaire)*

*The School Counselling Service has been responsive, within parameters of staffing, to school needs. Counsellors can help to facilitate programs and interventions, for prevention, early intervention, complex intervention and crisis intervention. This can help develop teachers' knowledge and understanding, and offer support for students in groups or individually. (Principal Questionnaire)*

Schools appreciated the consistency of a Department of Education service, and the specialist practice that had the potential to offer services that were school-based, and proactive rather than solely reactive and often at the point of crisis.

*We did have a counsellor visit for about the past seven years. She led the whole school through a professional development for social and emotional learning program that the school now uses across the whole school. We now induct new staff members to the program but with a turnover of 50% of staff in only the first semester of this year it is difficult to continue to provide this PD without a person to lead it who is right across all the theory behind the program. Having support for individual staff and students in a very remote setting is very important. Mental wellbeing of our staff is paramount and is one of the reasons we have such a high turnover, keeping in mind that the loss of the counsellor coincided with the loss of many of our staff. (Principal Questionnaire)*

Principals and regional leadership expressed appreciation for immediate critical incident support:

*When there is a school critical incident, such as a suicide, it is good to know that there are counsellors to call on. It is good if they are able to run or organise staff PD in areas such as suicide awareness.*

*Responses from school counsellors ... have been very timely. School Counsellors go out of their way to ensure they meet the needs of the community they are going into and don't try to take over in any way at all. The School Counsellor supports the leadership team to do as much of the work as they can do, which then empowers them. No judgements are made. (They are) very professional.*

School Counsellors in middle, senior and high schools spoke of students' willingness to participate in individual counselling, group work and special programs. They would self-refer and attend at lunch times and after school if that was the counsellor's only free time, indicating it was not just a ploy to avoid class.

Students appreciated their relationships with School Counsellors, but also had some advice. Students and a parent commented on the need for consistency of School Counsellors, especially when they had experienced changeovers in community agencies. Confidentiality was highly valued.

*Over the last 5 years I have had over 13 different Counsellors. I don't like the structure and inconsistency – every few months it's a new person – each appointment is like a giant roulette table spinning – you don't know what you're going to get or if the Counsellor is going to be the same one as before. (Female student, senior school)*

*It is so difficult when you are seeking support for your child and your child already finds it difficult to talk about issues and has had bad experiences and breaches of confidentiality before.* (Parent comment)

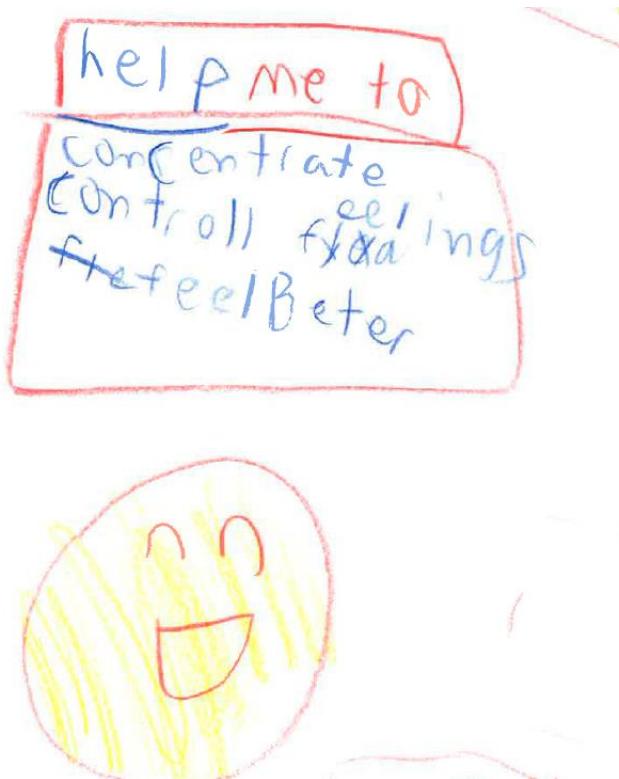
*It's fun, really good. Nothing negative about it. Nothing to improve. It helps. Helps you be yourself. Doesn't bother me at all if people know I see the school counsellor. My classmates generally don't ask, and if they do, I just tell them and they're like, OK, cool.*  
(Male student, middle school)

An Aboriginal mother explained how her relationship with the School Counsellor had helped her to be confident in bringing up her child, and help in the classroom with his disability. She was confident to support other mothers in the community and encouraged them to come to the school, and to talk to the counsellor.

Another explained that through her relationship with the School Counsellor she had become a school volunteer, and was now committed to the notion of life-long learning for her and her children. She was in the process of beginning another TAFE course. She took a leadership role in encouraging parents in community to pay more attention to and take better care of their children, especially at night.

Figure 15: Primary Student's Drawing & Comments

A primary school student had learned with the School Counsellor how to concentrate and control feelings. The drawing depicted the happy face that represented "feeling better".



One of the contributors to the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory explained the importance of their relationship with the School Counsellor who knew the background story and could provide a safe place to go. Children who are vulnerable or traumatised find it hard to trust and build relationships (Royal Commission).

The School Counsellor and the school are concerned for the wellbeing and learning of the child or young person. They are child centred; have no other agendas related to legal proceedings; and no need to influence the student's personal decisions. The School Counsellor can offer support that is relationship centred, strengths based and trauma informed. Counselling can be respectful, focussed on the student's interests and needs, and confidential. Whatever the outcomes of the Royal Commission, we might predict that the *School Counselling Service* will be nominated as part of the connected services that can support young people through difficulties and help direct them into satisfying life pathways.

## Challenges for the School Counselling Service

An exciting but difficult challenge for the *School Counselling Service* within a limited resource environment will be an expansion of the service, including: increased numbers of School Counsellors and effective, regular service to more schools. In the five years since the publication of *Gone Too Soon: A Report into Youth Suicide in the Northern Territory* (2012) and *A Share in the Future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory* (2014), there has been no increase in School Counsellor numbers despite very clear testimony and unequivocal recommendations to that effect within those documents.

The need for an expanded service is directly related to the high level of socio-educational disadvantage faced by Northern Territory students (NT. DoE 2017b). Despite their developmental vulnerability, the children in remote schools have little access to the *School Counselling Service*. Northern Territory students are greater than three times more likely than children elsewhere to be engaged with child protection services, and therefore more needy of the school counselling approach that can collaborate with schools, communities and agencies to focus on building identity and strength, school engagement and learning.

In 2010 there were 26 School Counsellors, despite an expectation that there would be 29 with the addition of 10 under *Closing the Gap* (NT. DEET 2008). At 30 June 2017, there were 19 School Counsellors and 5 vacancies. As school enrolments been relatively stable and social and mental health needs have grown more complex (NT. DoE 2017b) the *School Counselling Service* has not had the resources even to maintain its earlier staffing levels to deliver student support. There has been no movement towards the further 20-30 full-time positions suggested by the Chief Executive Officer

to facilitate the adoption of a more holistic approach to the education of young people, as reported in the *Gone too Soon* report (NT 2012).

At the time of the compilation of tables depicting regional allocation of School Counsellors, close to fifty percent of Northern Territory students and forty percent of schools had no regular access to the *School Counselling Service*, although all were eligible for prioritised critical incident response when required. The lack of School Counsellors is an issue across the Northern Territory: the figures do not support the notion that Darwin and urban schools are inevitably better resourced.

In the course of interviews some in management or school leadership made comments to the effect that School Counsellors in post-primary schools of less than 500 must be doing less work than those in larger schools. However, a School Counsellor who is fully integrated into the school program, to operate at all levels of intervention, could well be on call and over-worked in a smaller school. It would be ill-advised to make definitive decisions purely on the basis of student numbers, given the potential impact of other factors in the school population, such as social and economic conditions, community support agencies and other resources, proportion of Aboriginal students away from country, number of children in the care of Territory Families, schooling and academic issues (Northern Territory. DoE 2014, 2017b).

Participants in the study consistently advocated for the increase of School Counsellors, especially to primary and remote schools. Some commented that early intervention for primary aged children seemed essential. Only one School Counsellor thought that schools had the actual or potential capacity to meet student needs with community support, without the added expertise of a more regular *School Counselling Service*.

School Counsellors, regional and school staff gave accounts of fruitless attempts to refer students and families to community agencies. It was commonly noted that that community agencies, while generally offering quality services, were too often inconsistently staffed, with high turnover, staff vacancies; and subject to changing budgets and policies that placed limitations on eligibility for students and families.

*There are no counselling services provided to our school by the NT Education Department (sic) and so the school has to rely on NGOs such as (our town) Community Services. I understand from hearing feedback from the school they are happy with the service (our town CS) provide, however unfortunately due to staffing and financial constraints, (our town CS) are often unable to meet the needs of our children. (School Council letter)*

*We had one very good counsellor from a Non-Government Organisation visiting monthly for a while, and this worked well. However, there was high turnover of counsellors in that*

*organisation; even though the counsellors were generally very good, relating well to Aboriginal students, the high turnover meant relationships weren't sustained. (Principal Questionnaire)*

At every level of management, senior staff who were interviewed advocated for increased services in their regional schools. Some had experience in other Australian jurisdictions, where student support services were well-developed and organised and better resourced at both individual school and system levels. Interviewees with experience in three states gave examples of remote secondary schools that had school wellbeing teams that might include two counsellors and youth worker; or a regional team of six school counsellors and a senior.

Every questionnaire completed by urban and remote principals expressed the need for increased access to the *School Counselling Service*, greater frequency and consistency. For some that meant one day, a second day, or 3-5 days per week. Principals who did not have a *School Counselling Service* practitioner because of regional decision-making or resource inadequacy were frustrated by the lost opportunity to further support their students. Some commented that they knew they could request urgent service from the region; two seemed less hesitant about availability and process; some appeared to be resigned to and/or frustrated by the fact that under current circumstances they would not get the service that students needed. Some schools had lost access to the *School Counselling Service*.

Another principal clearly expressed a desperate need for a School Counsellor, and listed as evidence some student stories (*slightly changed for privacy*):

- *A parent committed suicide and three siblings, still at the school, were separated to live with relatives. None has received counselling.*
- *A child watched her big sister being bashed by a relative. No counselling.*
- *One child's father is missing, feared dead. No counselling or specialist support.*
- *Several children in foster care, separated from families, have not had counselling.*

The *School Counselling Service* has the knowledge and skills not only to provide counselling, but to build the capacity of the adults to support and nurture the multiple children who are in distress.

A teacher with wellbeing responsibilities represented voices of most participants by expressing the high need for an increased *School Counselling Service*. From a list of 55 potential referrals, this school held signed consent for the 12 most urgent, where children had experienced family violence, accidental death, sexual assault, the jailing or death of parents. These signed referrals were directed to the Regional Office, despite knowing that there was no School Counsellor available to act on them. There was no available community service at the time. The school had strong pastoral care, social

skills and group work programs, alongside teacher professional development in the areas of social and emotional wellbeing, poverty, trauma, and building relationships. This teacher was acutely aware that they were inadequately protective of children, risking further harm and betraying their trust, especially when they were unable to enlist the counselling support that the children themselves had requested.

*If they don't get (counselling) they either stop coming to school or their behaviour escalates.*  
(Assistant Principal).

*... traumatic incidents ... If you don't get counselling, then the kids stop asking ... or they do something or they stop coming to school.* (Teacher)

The lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander *School Counselling Service* practitioners in schools, despite their representation among social workers and psychologists, warrants serious consideration, as it can appear to represent unintended systemic barriers to employment and subtle assumptions that can permeate institutions despite policy and practices to prevent racism. The appointment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander School Counsellors would increase the diversity that potentially enriches theoretical understanding and practice developments; and reinforce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' sense of inclusion and access to the traditional and contemporary practices that build cultural identity. Individual School Counsellors gave accounts of collaborating with parents, communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community groups and school services, to maximise their own cultural learning and responsiveness in the delivery of culturally informed services. However, the *School Counselling Service* itself appeared not yet to have a commitment to the significant inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school practitioners, nor to the development of theoretical approaches informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing knowledge. There is currently no specific, well-planned mentoring, on-going learning and support to ensure the success of new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in a *School Counselling Service* where they have been thus far only minimally represented.

Some Aboriginal parents and non-Aboriginal participants in the study suggested there could be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing assistants attached to the *School Counselling Service*, including men to work with young male students who have been through ceremony.

## Expanding the School Counselling Service

School Counsellors are still "few and far between", even a decade after the "*Little Children are Sacred*" report (2007). Five years after the "*Gone Too Soon*" report, there are still relatively few remote schools and students with access to services of School Counsellors; School Counsellors continue to bear the stress of high workloads; and there has been no sign of the 20-30 remote social

workers and counsellors suggested by the Chief Executive Officer (NT. DET 2012, 2014). Social workers and psychologists as School Counsellors are currently working in a professional team to deliver broad, school-based services. Increasing numbers of social workers and psychologists in the specialist *School Counselling Service* is essential.

An injection of resources to increase School Counsellor numbers over time will be required to cover the deficits in service. School Counsellors are relied upon to exercise demanding workloads in complex social settings. When human and financial resources are scarce, it is tempting for management to urge employees to increase their workloads, and for School Counsellors to feel responsible for gaps in service, with consequent reduction in effectiveness, quality and practitioner wellbeing. The study uncovered stories of service frequency ranging from full-time in some schools; phone consultations; and schedules whereby some schools received one or two visits per term. Consultations with School Counsellors themselves can uncover strengths and deficits in current service management; identify effective and ineffective modes of service delivery; and propose alternate models of service delivery where they are viable in terms of professional effectiveness and efficiency.

One of the Commissioners in the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory commented favourably about the effectiveness of school counsellors, although perhaps on the basis of a false assumption about their availability:

*I know most schools have counsellors, of course ... on their staff and that's a fairly private way for children who have got some concerns to be able to do it ... (Retrieved 1 Sept 2017 from <https://childdetentionnt.royalcommission.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>)*

At the time of this study, most, but not all post-primary schools had School Counsellors integrated in to the student wellbeing teams. The Commissioner's comment implied an expectation that children in the care of the Northern Territory have access to the services of a school counsellor, but for half of the school population, this is not the case. Children in care, whatever their age, in fact have best opportunity for child-centred counselling, independent of the agendas of their carers, caseworkers and government and community agencies, if they can self-refer to a School Counsellor who is regularly at the school and known as part of the support team.

Ensuring that every middle, secondary and high school has a full-time School Counsellor, irrespective of school enrolments, would allow for the equitable integration of School Counsellors into post-primary whole-school wellbeing programs to support young people to stay focussed on their pathways through learning and training, irrespective of their life circumstances and experience of trauma and other difficulties. On 2017 figures, this would require 3 additional School Counsellors.

The mental health, social, emotional, economic and learning pathway needs are great, and young people can be better protected from risk.

The Northern Territory Coroner recommended to the Legislative Assembly Select Committee on Youth Suicides that young people should have access to school counsellors (NT 2012). The New South Wales Coroner's report following the bullying and suicide of 14 year old student Alex Wildman directed several recommendations to the Department of Education and Training, including that schools of more than 500 students be assigned a full-time counsellor (cited in APS 2016).

For more than a decade, there has been a clear intention on the part of the Northern Territory Government to provide a *School Counselling Service*, and to provide access for all students. The publicly visible Department of Education "School counsellor services" web page (2017) implies that any student can access the services of a School Counsellor by talking to their teacher, or by referral by a member of staff, parent or guardian. Parents are encouraged to talk to their child's teacher, or directly contact school support services by phone or email (<https://nt.gov.au/learning/special-education/school-counsellor-services>). In fact, primary school and remote students in particular are unlikely to be able to access significant service. In regions where primary and remote schools have some service, depending on how the service has been structured, it is often less than adequate to be effective in bringing about lasting change, and some schools have no service at all. Middle and senior School Counsellors had limited capacity within their existing caseloads to service primary school students, and had been directed to make very brief interventions, preferably referral to other agencies.

Specialist student and school-focussed support delivered by School Counsellors, described on the same web-page, and typical of student support more widely in Australia, is simply not available to every student: student counselling, advocacy, assessment, referral and case management

- *liaising with the family and relevant internal and external support*
- *targeted group or whole of class mental health, social and emotional learning activities*
- *parent and community education*
- *attending critical incidents in schools.*

The notion that all students have access to the *School Counselling Service* is at best aspirational. Such universal access is yet to be achieved, despite being on the agenda since 2005 (NT 2005), with formal recommendations for increased allocation of School Counsellors (*Little Children are Sacred* 2007, *Gone Too Soon* 2012, *Review of Indigenous Education* 2014) yet to be realised. These previous reports and the stakeholder contributions to this study have confirmed the necessity for the growth of the *School Counselling Service*. To date, no reference has been found to the outcome of the 2005

request to employ Indigenous Counsellors in selected remote schools (NT. 2005). While the *Little Children are Sacred* recommendations (2007) were partially achieved, through the appointment of 10 rather than the recommended 20 additional School Counsellors, none of the subsequent recommendations (*Gone Too Soon* 2012, *A Share in the Future* 2014) to increase access to the *School Counselling Service* has been accepted, resourced and implemented.

The Northern Territory represents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and a multi-culturally diverse population including migrants and refugees; gay, lesbian and transgendered young people; those with physical and intellectual differences; male and female; young and old; rich and poor. Some of the Territory's children and young people still live with the trauma of past or current family and living arrangements. While collaborative efforts between community elders, guides and agencies continue, every student should be able easily to access the services of a specialist School Counsellor, who is a skilled child and youth counsellor, who can collaborate with educators to promote learning pathways in safe and inclusive schools, where social and emotional wellbeing is prioritised. Wellbeing and learning are matters of social justice, indigenous and human rights for children and young people. This encapsulates the purpose and uniqueness of the *School Counselling Service*. No other community agency takes such a holistic view. School Counsellors cannot be replaced by practitioners from agencies with their own focused specialties and limited knowledge of working within the complexity of school systems and educational achievement.

The *School Counselling Service* is relatively new compared to other interstate services. For example, the State of Victoria has been employing social workers and psychologists in schools since 1948 (Barrett 2014). This study has found there is a will in the Northern Territory Government and Department of Education to support the development of the *School Counselling Service*, but a lack of **determined strategic planning, including resourcing**, to bring it into effect.

The 2012 *Gone Too Soon* report recommended an increase in School Counsellor numbers, not enacted, along with the determination of an optimum ratio of students per school counsellor for primary schools, middle schools and high schools, and that counsellors be allocated on that basis. The current estimated ratio is 1:1,762 (*Figures 2-8*), patently too high for effective service delivery to meet need.

The New South Wales Coroner recommended that schools of more than 500 students be assigned a full-time counsellor (cited in APS 2016). The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and the Australian Psychological Society (APS) recommend ratios for school social workers and educational psychologists of 1:500 (AASW 2015, APS 2016). This includes time allowance for direct and indirect work; in communities of multicultural and other diversity and socio-economic difference; administrative tasks, and normal travel between sites. It does not include the special circumstances

of the Northern Territory where the historical trauma associated with colonisation, dislocation from country and dispossession continue to impact on the mental health, wellbeing, education and detention of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Territorians.

The recommended AASW and APS ratio 1:500 does not take into account the huge additional challenges of distance and isolation of communities spread across the Northern Territory, and the consequent impacts on education, health and family support services. Neither does it take account of a one-day school visit requiring a day or more for a return journey over rough dirt roads, with unreliable phone reception and sleeping in a swag at a roadhouse on the way or at the school. School Counsellors drive with survival kits, and travel in daylight hours for safety, especially from the kangaroos, donkeys, horses and cattle that wander at night. Others have to contend with swollen rivers, crocodiles and dogs. Flights can be delayed for several hours; School Counsellors reported being the first off-loaded from full flights chartered by other government departments (School Counsellor interviews).

The School Counsellor to student ratio of 1:500 only seems idealistic in a resource poor environment. Those who work directly with Northern Territory children and young people, as educators, assistants and wellbeing staff in schools, would see the value of an even lower ratio. A strategic plan to expand the *School Counselling Service* will automatically involve targeting lower School Counsellor to student ratios. There is need for additional School Counsellors in primary and remote schools, especially those with enrolments over 200. Differentiated lower ratios might apply to remote schools more than, say, 150 kms from the School Counsellor's base office.

The challenges faced by the Northern Territory Government as it strives for wellbeing and social justice, through community collaboration and planning to build on child, family and community strength, cannot be minimised, even as we recommend commitment to greater funding and other resources for the *School Counselling Service*, the only wellbeing service that focuses on learning as the end-goal.

*I tailor-made my counselling to suit the educational outcomes of my students. Instead of providing counselling about general emotional adjustment, or social adjustment ... I make sure that even when I'm doing certain activities with them or during the session that they realise there are certain things about their education that are important. That's where I think (as a School Counsellor) I'm distinctively different from others.*

(School Counsellor)

## KEY AREA 2: PROFESSIONAL ISSUES

### RECOMMENDATION 2: Strengthen the *School Counselling Service* as the Professional Base.

- 2.1 The *School Counselling Service* operates as a specialist team across Northern Territory Government schools, with School Counsellors having strong connection to their purpose, *School Counselling Service Guidelines*, *Practice Standards* and professional base.
- 2.2 Allocate at least 2 senior positions to provide professional leadership, support and advocacy to protect the integrity of the *School Counselling Service Guidelines*.
- 2.3 Provide professional learning to principals and administrators, and advocate to ensure that School Counsellors are enabled to practice according to their specialist expertise alongside educators.
- 2.4 Engage School Counsellors in the development of *School Counselling Service* policies and practice.
- 2.5 Provide regular professional learning for practice at the theoretical level of advanced practitioners.
- 2.6 Provide two sets of funded professional learning days per year, at times when all School Counsellors are able to attend.
- 2.7 Provide annual professional learning on topics essential to Northern Territory School Counsellor practice: for example, Aboriginal Knowledge for social and emotional wellbeing; critical incident response and recovery; healing and recovery from trauma; professional supervisor training; suicide prevention.
- 2.8 Allocate defined professional development budgets to individual School Counsellors.
- 2.9 Provide comprehensive induction with intense focus on options for work in schools and communities, and the barriers that may arise
- 2.10 Professional supervision provided by *School Counselling Service* leadership or contracted specialists, according to professional ethics and standards of the AASW and

## FINDINGS: Professional Issues

### School Counsellors

The Department of Education employs School Counsellors who are professionally qualified as social workers and psychologists, and therefore eligible for membership of their respective professional bodies and committed to upholding the Codes of Ethics of the AASW and APS respectively. They are expected to meet all on-going requirements to maintain affiliation with their professional bodies and eligibility to practice. Within their professionally qualifying education, all social workers and many psychologists are likely to have completed study of systemic and ecological theories, and are able to take a bio-psycho-social approach to assessment, problem definition, and intervention. Some psychologists have done further studies specifically for practice in school settings. The AASW and the APS support practitioners through detailed documents explicitly covering professional practice in schools (AASW 2011, APS 2016). One of the noticeable gaps in the *School Counselling Service* is the lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners in schools, despite their representation among recent cohorts of social work and psychology graduates.

School Counsellors are employed at an advanced practitioner level, and are expected to bring professional eco-systemic experience and high level skills to the *School Counselling Service*. They draw on a flexible repertoire of multiple, eclectic approaches, and the application of creativity, practice wisdom and evidence informed approaches. School Counsellors should also demonstrate commitment to human rights, social justice, children's rights, indigenous rights, empowerment and reconciliation; and determination to work against the impacts of racism, dispossession, poverty, dislocation, social and educational exclusion, disempowerment and historical trauma. Despite working in with difficult personal and social issues, they appreciate and communicate belief in the strengths and resilience of students and communities (*School Counselling Service Guidelines*).

School Counsellor professional knowledge, skills and values are overlaid with a professional determination to deliver services that are: culturally responsive, relationship centred, community engaged, strengths based and trauma informed (5 Key Principles, *School Counselling Service Guidelines*). School Counsellor interviews demonstrated that they are working respectfully alongside students, conscious of engaging in empowering, ethical relationships, rather than imposing their

adult power and professional expertise. They work collaboratively alongside educators who do not necessarily share their values or appreciate the rationale behind their approaches.

Through the course of interviews it became evident that School Counsellors were indeed advanced practitioners, with clear theoretical and practical understanding and ability to articulate their role. They were professionally creative and talked about a wide range of options for intervention with students, and preventative programs. They also demonstrated personal characteristics including independence, resourcefulness, courage, adaptability, determination, a healthy mix of adventurous spirit and realism, lack of pretension and for some, the ability to live simply. They were intellectually and personally strong, resilient and flexible. They were committed to their work with children and young people, and overall, quite impressive.

Many had been called upon to deliver services to communities very different from their own backgrounds and experience, and needed to adapt to multiple unfamiliar environments; learn about language, culture and identity; and respect personal and community histories. They described school and work environments, and issues for students that were complex and difficult, and did not seem appropriate for the vast majority of new graduates or early career practitioners; certainly not without close mentoring and support to reduce the impact of “culture shock” and accelerate learning for professional practice in the Northern Territory.

## The School Counselling Service as a Professional Team

Until 2012, the *School Counselling Service* was centrally managed and professionally led by allied health professionals, with services delivered by School Counsellors in schools across six regions. The leadership team of a manager/Senior School Counsellor and a Professional Supervisor developed models for service delivery and managed an accountable service. There were leadership difficulties at times, and “*bitter-sweet*” encounters as the service was finding its feet. Nevertheless, School Counsellors recalled a strong organisational base, a strong sense of being a team of specialist practitioners. The Senior School Counsellor had oversight of practice standards, guidelines and resources, and coordinated working parties and group supervision. School Counsellors attended two whole team professional development activities each year, and received Professional Supervision.

School Counsellors were centrally managed but located in regional schools. There was a sense of real partnership with schools, and principals had common understanding of the role of School Counsellors. The Senior School Counsellor had frequent communication with principals. The *School Counselling Service* leadership and School Counsellors developed protocols and procedures for practice (School Counsellor recollections). Since regionalisation, the *School Counselling Service* appeared to have “*lost traction*”, and some felt a lessening in respect for their professional judgement and skill within the Department of Education (School Counsellor interviews/meetings).

The *School Counselling Service* remains a Territory-wide service, now administered and line managed by 3 Regional Managers across 6 regions. The change to regionalisation, while it brought management closer to the schools, has resulted in the disconnection of School Counsellors from their professional team, isolation from their professional base, and often alone in advocating for their professional practice imperatives. Most School Counsellors are not co-located, and miss opportunities for informal case discussion, support and debriefing back in the office at the end of the school day. The networking through the *School Counselling Service* is essential.

School Counsellors employed post-2012 generally said that they did not feel connected to a cohesive *School Counselling Service* organisation. Over recent years, School Counsellors had formed peer partnerships; used skype for peer supervision, debriefing and discussion; and met for peer supervision in bigger groups when possible. However, several School Counsellors had not had the benefit of such linkages, and their appreciation of new “in person” connections made during the Professional Learning Days in July 2017 were very apparent. Many had not been inducted into the *School Counselling Service* theories, practices opportunities and barriers, although the more general orientation to Department of Education had occurred.

The *School Counselling Service* is a specialist allied health wellbeing service embedded in a system where educators naturally hold power and influence. Many teachers appreciate collaborating with and receiving services from the *School Counselling Service*, but because of their different professional orientation, they very rarely understand the theories, values and ethics that underpin the professional practice of School Counsellors. An unintended effect of regionalisation has been the disintegration of the professional base, leaving the sole Senior School Counsellor with inadequate time to cover all portfolios, leaving individual School Counsellors at times isolated and unsupported.

## Professional Support

### Risk and safety

In the school setting, School Counsellors have the knowledge and responsibility to respond appropriately to difficult issues and distressing disclosures, and participate in critical incident responses. They need to care for their own personal and professional well-being in relation to the sudden or cumulative impacts of responding to traumatic experiences. School Counsellors deal with distressing personal, family and community circumstances on a daily basis. They are alone with their professional theoretical perspectives among educators, and while they can collaborate, only other School Counsellors really understand the issues faced, the processes undertaken and the stresses that can flow. The Department of Education and the *School Counselling Service* share a responsibility to support the School Counsellors who deliver the care-giving to students on their behalf. One

School Counsellor had become despondent and believed that there would be no Department of Education support in the event of a subpoena to the Coroner's Court, for example.

School Counsellors expressed concern about the risks and burdens inherent in making decisions about complex cases, for example involving suicidal ideation and family violence. One group of School Counsellors talked about the upsurge in individual precautionary referrals following recent suicides, and the apparent expectation that referral was an adequate response:

*... schools are making referrals as if we have the power to prevent something, instead of developing processes for looking for risk factors, or talking to someone who might be depressed. They just make more referrals which doesn't help. They think they're covering themselves but we're the ones holding it ...*

Among the many interviewee stories of satisfying collaborative practice were too many alternate stories of unrealistic expectations, attempts to instruct the School Counsellor to work in ways inconsistent with professional practice, disrespect for professional judgement and at worst, hostility, abuse and bullying. An element in all of these stories was the isolation of the School Counsellor trying to negotiate with the more powerful educators in the system, for the best practices to maximise student wellbeing and safety.

While principals consistently asked for increased access to the *School Counselling Service*, School Counsellor accounts included being directed by principals to work in ways that were ineffective, and counter to School Counsellor professional knowledge and expertise. For example, a School Counsellor might be expected to use counselling only, rather than a whole-school, collaborative, trauma-informed classroom and relationship approach to supporting students to modify their difficult behaviours. Some teachers expected School Counsellors to come into the classroom to "fix" the behaviour of their students; or to be involved in the actual discipline process for behaviour and bullying. Teacher complaints were made about the one hour per week the student spent with the School Counsellor.

Some principals had little understanding of the direct and indirect time and resources needed for effective practice. One School Counsellor was expected to manage 15 individual counselling sessions in a day. While some School Counsellors had formal or informal roles in leadership and wellbeing teams, and were able to collaborate to develop staff skills and knowledge, others had little influence on decision-making related to wellbeing processes. School Counsellors who worked in multiple schools noticed variations in the ways that principals and staff understood and accepted the *School Counselling Service* model. One counsellor told of persisting for almost a year with the limitations imposed by one school, hopefully working towards improved collaboration, but had begun to

wonder whether *School Counselling Service* time was well-spent when other schools in the same service cluster took full advantage of School Counsellor knowledge and skills.

One School Counsellor was working collaboratively and successfully in several schools, but found it difficult to get referrals properly completed and generally make progress in one school, and had the sense that in the past the School Counsellor had been blamed for things going wrong. Eventually the School Counsellor was confronted publicly in the staffroom:

*When you came we thought you were going to be proactive, you've done nothing. The School Counsellor program has never been successful here. You haven't met our expectations. (School Counsellor)*

An early interviewee suggested that if principals could not provide the wellbeing climate, support and willingness to collaborate within the professional frameworks, then perhaps the *School Counselling Service* should be withdrawn. By the conclusion of the information-gathering process, this had become a serious and reasonable consideration in the context of such limited resources, and the high needs of other schools.

## Professional Leadership

Line-management and administration at regional level often seemed incompatible with the professional leadership and consistency that School Counsellors required of the Senior School Counsellor and the *School Counselling Service* leadership team. The Senior School Counsellor was not necessarily involved in all recruitment, deployment, performance management and support. Organisational decisions could be made without consultation in relation to impacts on professional practice. Communication channels did not seem always clear, and as a result, negotiations involving management, School Counsellors and the *School Counselling Service* could be time-consuming.

The *School Counselling Service* needs at very least the second senior position apparently lost sometime after 2012. Given the range of urban and remote schools, vast distances, differentiated school needs and unique communities, the leadership team should include a minimum of 2 senior staff, and thereafter 1 for each group of 15 School Counsellors. There is scope for part-time leadership roles for advanced, experienced School Counsellors with *School Counselling Service* experience.

Figure 16: Potential Senior School Counselling Service Roles and Responsibilities

Positions	Portfolios (and potential positions)
Senior School Counsellor Professional Supervisor	Policy, <i>Guidelines</i> , <i>Practice Standards</i> , information for the Minister Professional support & Advocacy Professional Supervision Coordination of School Counsellor participation in decision-making, working parties etc Inclusive recruitment & mentoring Central data & records of <i>School Counselling Service</i> (1) Remote schools, (2) North & (3) South Building Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student cultural identity, wellbeing & learning Professional learning & training for School Counsellors, principals and other DoE stakeholders Theory and practice development: Aboriginal knowledge & cultural identity Allocation & Supervision of university students on placement in schools

## Professional Leadership

### Support

School Counsellors are protected from professional harm when the leadership team fosters team cohesiveness; and protects the integrity of the *School Counselling Service Guidelines*, a sound theoretical base, principles and frameworks for practice, *Practice Standards*, and explicit descriptions of the scope of professional activity.

The Senior School Counsellor was highly valued for her professional support and debriefing, and for the resourcing and knowledge that she shared. However, most acknowledged that the role was too great for one person, so that the support required was not always timely nor inclusive of all the topics that the School Counsellor needed to cover.

### Advocacy

School Counsellors have contributed to the principles and frameworks that have been integrated into the newly drafted *School Counselling Service Guidelines*. They were able to articulate confidently the frameworks, principles and scope of activity to school staff who found them different from expectation. But when they are deflected or ignored, the *School Counselling Service* leadership

needs to provide strong advocacy, including in the face of determined opposition, for its *Guidelines*, and in support of School Counsellors.

Similarly, the Senior School Counsellor needs to facilitate professional learning and updates for school principals in preparation for the introduction and maintenance of the *School Counselling Service* as part of the school wellbeing program of the school.

### Performance Complaints

During the course of interviews there were stories of School Counsellor failings, relatively minor criticism, unsatisfactory performance, and “*bad experiences with school counsellor(s) in the past*”. Interestingly, three stories were recounted from three different points of view; and both positive and negative accounts of the performance of one School Counsellor were given in the one interview by two different regional staff.

This points to the complexity of perception and relationship dynamics. Assumptions that the School Counsellor was in the wrong were not usually borne out in the complete account. In any profession there are different personal and communication styles: in school counselling they must be applied to or modified for successful professional practice, rather than left as some kind of character deficit. Other “behind the scenes” social or organisational factors seemed to be at play. Principals and regional management tended to believe their criticisms were correct, even when they had been given the School Counsellor’s professional reasoning which seemed consistent with the researcher’s understanding of professional practice in schools.

It is the role of the *School Counselling Service* leadership to advocate with principals and managers for fair focus on the performance of the School Counsellor in relationship to the *Guidelines*, where all requirements are outlined. Advocacy includes challenging unreasonable expectations or criticism; ensuring that the problem does not lie within school stance or processes; and checking that honest feedback has been regularly given. School Counsellors are experienced practitioners: when they make a mistake, organisational and practice factors need to be considered. Have they been properly inducted? Have they received Professional Supervision? Is the workload actually unreasonable? Have they experienced cumulative vicarious trauma? Have they been isolated and stressed? The Senior School Counsellor continues to advocate for the School Counsellor during any required planned process of learning and professional recovery.

### Induction

Some of the School Counsellors reported that they had not had induction beyond the necessities of payroll, travel, leave and other Department of Education administrative matters. They had support from the Senior School Counsellor. With regard to the actual school counselling position to which they had been appointed, its potential and risks, they had very minimal preparation. One joked that

if there were proper induction, no-one would have the courage to take up many of the positions. One School Counsellor was not told at interview a few years ago that the placement would be very remote, involving long periods of travel through dust and dirt. On arrival at the regional office it was up to the School Counsellor to work out how to get to the schools and what to do when there. Resourcefulness, courage and determination were brought into play.

School counselling is a specialist area of practice, and even very experienced practitioners from other spheres of practice can be quite shocked by entry into an environment where education, rather than health or welfare, is the dominant practice. Good induction processes are essential for all.

The most crucial aspect of induction, at least from the School Counsellor perspective, is learning about their potential role in the delivery of the *School Counselling Service*. To this end, the formal establishment of mentors in similar positions, and wider connection to a network of practitioners would be essential. Similarly, principals should be expected to introduce the School Counsellor into the wellbeing, learning and social environments of the school and its community; and support time for interaction with and visits to other *School Counselling Service* colleagues. In fact, it is worth considering that newly recruited School Counsellors do not attend their work-site(s) until after two weeks of orientation to work in similar schools and preparation for negotiations about service delivery.

New School Counsellors had eventually found their way to the colleagues who could guide them; set up informal networks and peer supervision. Twice yearly in-person professional learning events will also contribute to induction and connection to the wider professional team.

## Professional Supervision

While a few School Counsellors were satisfied with the amount and content of Professional Supervision, most specified that they needed professional or clinical supervision separately from the support currently available from the Senior School Counsellor.

More than support and debriefing, Professional Supervision is an essential requirement in social work, psychology and counselling practice, and is unlike other support and mentoring within the education sector. Professional Supervision represents commitment to accountability and ongoing professional learning, and is a supportive, confidential process involving the individual School Counsellor and a Professional Supervisor, underpinned by *Practice Standards*, Codes of Ethics and *School Counselling Service Guidelines*. Professional Supervision assists in the continual improvement of professional and cultural competence; resolving ethical dilemmas; and actioning commitment to children's rights, social justice and empowerment.

Professional Supervision demonstrates the School Counsellor's commitment to reflection on practice, through a willingness to be challenged intellectually, theoretically, culturally and personally to consider the strengths, barriers and potential improvements to their practice. This includes consideration of the professional-client power imbalance; professional boundaries; professional and cultural assumptions; personal history, values and other factors; professional strengths and limitations; and theoretical biases that might block progress towards effective change, empowering therapeutic relationships, or collaborative partnerships.

Professional Supervision ultimately pursues best outcomes for the student, and the highest quality *School Counselling Service*, by encouraging School Counsellor self-monitoring, self-awareness, workload management, evaluation of interventions and resources, and identification of difficulties and further learning and skills development. The School Counsellor as supervisee is expected to supply cases or issues for discussion as the basis for reflection, and should include self-identified problems or performance concerns raised by line-managers. An effective supervisor is not a source of all knowledge, but stimulates self-reflection and asks the challenging, analytical questions that prompt the supervisee to explore their own alternative thinking and solutions. Professional supervisors attend their own supervision to ensure their best practice in the supervision of School Counsellors (*School Counselling Service Guidelines*).

In the Northern Territory environment, Professional Supervision becomes part of the Occupational Health & Safety provision for School Counsellors who are charged with protecting the safety and wellbeing of the youngest in the population; facing some of the most extreme difficulties in Australian communities; and isolated from colleagues. Currently some are paying for their own Professional Supervision, had negotiated for funding to cover it, or had made arrangements with other professional colleagues. Traditionally, Professional Supervision has been, and continues to be, a commitment that the *School Counselling Service* makes to School Counsellors. Under current senior staffing arrangements it is not being adequately met.

## Professional Development

School Counsellors commented that there was no career path for them, although high job satisfaction, making a difference and a busy workload even in the face of certain difficulties, was a bonus. The *School Counselling Service* can support the professional and career development of School Counsellors by giving them opportunity to achieve senior practitioner competence, through opportunities to assume organisational and professional leadership, and responsibilities individually or in teams to develop programs and protocols on behalf of the *School Counselling Service*. This is not a new idea, but was part of the organisational structure prior to 2012.

Allocated funding, consistently applied and transparent, should be available for individual professional development. Some School Counsellors did not know if they had an allocation, or how much, and were aware that others were able to access it. They also had the feeling that teachers were allowed easier access to professional development leave and funding. Regular annual allocation will allow School Counsellors to plan their own learning as it is relevant to the *School Counselling Service*. Given the high expense of some workshops and conferences, consideration should be given to being able to carry it over for up to three years.

Two sets of 2-3 day whole of *School Counselling Service* professional learning days should bring School Counsellors together for both collegiate connection, team-building and professional learning. These days should cover core theories and issues for practice. School Counsellors will identify from the suggestions below, and add others, along with preferred frequency of covering topics.

#### ***Critical Incident Response & Recovery***

Some School Counsellors had been sent to critical incidents without specific training in this specialist area. Professional learning content for annual review might include: emerging theories and practices; preparation, policy and procedure development; emergency individual response; team response.

#### ***Professional Supervision***

Professional Supervisor training will prepare advanced practitioners to supervise less experienced colleagues; all School Counsellors will be better prepared to engage in peer supervision and reflection; and all will have knowledge for their own best engagement in professional supervision.

#### ***Induction for Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities***

For all new staff, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural education delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders and teachers; and theoretical learning for working with power imbalance, oppression, disempowerment, trauma.

#### ***Working with Aboriginal Knowledge***

This is a most essential area of professional learning in the Northern Territory where 30% of the population is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. It is also an advancing theoretical area under the guidance of Aboriginal academics, writers and health professionals. Northern Territory SEL has placed cultural identity at the heart of wellbeing. School Counsellors need regular learning and opportunity to workshop how best to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students whether they are living urban or remote; and how to incorporate

Aboriginal knowledge for cultural identity and wellbeing into their practice, not just for Aboriginal students but for non-Aboriginal as well.

### ***Trauma and Healing***

While “trauma” is a key word in the definition of student problems, and some school populations are defined as if all had “trauma backgrounds”, School Counsellors need to have a clearly defined understanding of trauma and recovery, and the ability to articulate healing and learning in the context of positive relationships at school. “Trauma” has become so widely used that it risks becoming another way of “blaming” children and families, rather than taking a broad bio-psycho-social-educational approach to understanding their problems and building caring relationships at school. School Counsellors need to be well-prepared to take a strengths based, holistic, eco-systemic approach to trauma and healing.

### ***Suicide, Suicidal ideation, Self-Harm***

Given the comparative high prevalence of suicide of young people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal background, some School Counsellors raised this as a theme for continuing professional learning. Suicidal ideation and self-harm are common issues for intervention. School Counsellors need regular professional learning opportunities to reflect on their own practice; consider whole-school approaches to responding to incidents at school; develop risk assessment tools for the whole *School Counselling Service*; develop practical check-lists for disclosures; train teachers in basic skills for responding to mental health symptoms or crises.

## ***The School Counselling Service as the Professional Base.***

The best quality service will come from a professionally and theoretically consistent *School Counselling Service* team. This is a professional area different from pedagogy, school leadership and administration, and should be led by social work and psychology practitioners, ideally with experience in schools. The scope of the *School Counselling Service* is broader than counselling: an unhurried consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of a name change may be worthwhile.

The leadership team should have the power to share in decisions about the deployment of the service, and advocate for the maintenance the *School Counselling Service Guidelines*. Working independently in schools, School Counsellors need the collegiate support afforded by a strong professional team with shared understanding of the frameworks and models of practice; opportunities for shared and current professional learning; professional and peer supervision that will challenge and inspire them to best quality practice.

## KEY AREA 3: ABORIGINAL & TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER KNOWLEDGE FOR WELLBEING

### RECOMMENDATION 3: Integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge into *School Counselling Service* theoretical approaches

- 3.1 School Counsellors develop and deliver practice that is informed by traditional Aboriginal knowledge for wellbeing.
- 3.2 Ensure cultural identity is the foundation of wellbeing practice.
- 3.3 Programs and interventions at Prevention, Early Intervention and Complex Intervention levels promote connection to family, community and culture.
- 3.4 Provide regular full day induction and regular updates for School Counsellors on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, history, wellbeing knowledge and contemporary issues.
- 3.5 The *School Counselling Service* develops a professional learning and theory development over two years, to incorporate traditional Aboriginal knowledge into practice and service delivery.

## FINDINGS: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge for Wellbeing

The Northern Territory population includes 30% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, the highest proportion of any Australian state or territory (ABS 2011)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities represent diverse cultures, languages and traditional practices. They live in urban, remote and very remote locations, in both harsh and bountiful landscapes, many far from their traditional country. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples share understanding of colonial domination; dispossession, murder and rape; family and community breakdown caused by the “Stolen Generation”. They represent a breadth of community poverty and wealth; cultural identity, strength, resilience and determination; family and community struggle and difficulties; physical and mental health and ill-health, alcohol abuse; transience, homelessness, social disadvantage, government intervention and disempowerment.

Aboriginal young people are disproportionately represented in detention and mandatory sentencing Australia. Human Rights). Northern Territory Government, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and communities are attempting to overturn complex social, economic and educational inequities. The *School Counselling Service* has opportunity to incorporate contemporary Aboriginal theorists and traditional understandings of wellbeing as core theory and practice (Atkinson 2014; Grieves 2009; Kelly et al 2014; Lowitja Institute; Lohuar et al 2014.)

Cultural responsiveness is a key principle of School Counselling Service programs (Perso 2012). The notion of inclusion was generally reported by School Counsellors as a principle of their practice. It might be argued, however, that inclusion requires a deeply understood appreciation of the unique experience and culture of students, so that they are not just included in the usual practice of the school, but in a deep and meaningful relationship with someone who really understands who they are, and can judge whether they are actually included and appreciated in the school. One School Counsellor said:

*We fail sometimes when kids come in from remote communities ... culture shock, language, lots of people, classrooms not necessarily relationship-based ... difficult for staff and kids, especially those in the middle ground, not low skill or high academic ability.*

In the first instance, School Counsellor work with Aboriginal students, whether urban or remote, needs to be mindful of the need to maintain cultural identity. One young man away from country to attend school in Darwin yearned to go fishing, as he would be doing if her were on country. Young men who had been through ceremony and could no longer comfortably talk to women were redirected to Clontarf, referred to a male School Counsellor or a counsellor in the community. A smoking ceremony at a school was proposed to clear the spirits causing distress to students. A School Counsellor had several Aboriginal boys with symptoms that might be diagnosed to be showing early psychosis: hearing voices, seeing things, but perhaps it was something more cultural/spiritual.

Two school counsellors talked about using yarning circles. One had developed the circles in her repertoire of interventions. The other had discovered that students were coming to her room, usually with extended family, to discuss with one another some cultural matter. She supported but did not interfere unless requested.

Where language and emotional literacy prevented therapeutic counselling, a School Counsellor took a community development approach to whole-school programs and behaviour plans, training balanda teachers and assistant teachers. The community was protective of interventions with their young people, who nevertheless came in to say hello and check her out. They didn't see counselling as useful. She had been "adopted", and given place in community.

School Counsellors who worked in remote communities had developed the practice of asking questions to be equipped with the knowledge that the community wanted them to have. People were intuitive about motivations, they would approach with ideas when you proved yourself to be "OK" (School Counsellor). One worked closely with Aboriginal staff to develop programs and ideas. She relied on them to teach her the things she couldn't otherwise know, and they were glad to work with her. She used narrative work, story-telling, and play therapy, with the goal of developing cultural resilience. Counselling always included:

*Where's your country? What do you and your family do to maintain cultural identity?*

*It's part of my therapy. (School Counsellor)*

School Counsellors were incorporating what they learned into work with students, to make it as relevant and useful as possible.

*I love my work. Love working with community. Despite all the challenges ... It's a privilege to work remote, with Aboriginal communities. You learn language, culture. Finding ways to be more useful, using language, calming animals, cultural symbols. Developing resources that the community can use, so I'm not needed. (School Counsellor)*

Cultural responsiveness requires more than understanding the implications of language difference and the cultural conventions of social interaction, family and community practice. It goes beyond collaborating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders and guides to implement non-Aboriginal, white dominant western notions of wellbeing practice, including those that claim to be evidence-based. Cultural responsiveness demands listening to the wisdom of elders about the links between traditional cultural practices and wellbeing; and collaborating with cultural guides and community leaders to develop theories and practice that blend traditional knowledge and the wellbeing practice that emanates from predominantly white, privileged traditions of social work and psychology. Cultural responsiveness means listening to the wisdom of elders, to build new ways of working, not only adapting Cognitive Behavioural Therapy or mindfulness practice to suit the interests of Aboriginal students.

This study was privileged to be informed by Aboriginal parents, an elder and school staff at Maningrida College. They had prepared a presentation on the traditional cultural way of promoting wellbeing by building cultural identity. From birth to adulthood, traditional cultural practices built connection to mother, father, and outwards to community, land and animals. They spoke of building love and respect, and focussing on strength rather than difficulties. At the school the children could learn song, dance, art, weaving, bush tucker and bush medicine as cultural practice. They participated in ceremonies and festivals all strengthening cultural identity and therefore wellbeing.

The *School Counselling Service* has the opportunity to theorise an innovative service that is based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional knowledge, in particular around the notion that cultural identity is the key to wellbeing, and connection to family, community and country or place is strengthening. School Counsellors, wherever they are located, could re-energise their practice with all students, no matter where they call home.

This requires more than cultural responsiveness from a position of assumed professional knowledge. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders, guides and parents explain their traditional ways to address health, wellbeing and cultural identity, and when allied health professionals listen respectfully to absorb the wisdom that is offered, then the actual practice of School Counsellors can change so that not only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, but all children will benefit.

## Learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge

The *School Counselling Service* is well-placed to develop unique theoretical approaches informed and influenced by traditional knowledge and the corresponding interpretations of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing theorists. Cultural practice and imagery can be integrated into goals and interventions, modified by the insights within stories of traditional practices that build connection to family and community, strength and cultural identity. Notions of cultural identity, strength and connection are applicable to the wellbeing of every student in Northern Territory schools, including non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

## KEY AREA 4: SCHOOL AND SYSTEM CAPACITY BUILDING

### RECOMMENDATION 4: Build school & system capacity for student wellbeing.

- 4.1 Plan strategically to demonstrate the possibilities for schools to increase their own wellbeing services to complement the *School Counselling Service*.
- 4.2 Continue to develop a repertoire of professional learning in the areas of student wellbeing, mental health, social issues, and whole school approaches to student support, for presentation by the *School Counselling Service* and School Counsellors to teachers and other school staff:
  - Foster School Counsellor collaboration in the identification, development and presentation of professional learning
  - Request principals to suggest topics of particular relevance to their schools
  - Provide examples of professional learning that can be offered
  - Actively promote *School Counselling Service* participation in school PD programs
  - Collaborate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teaching Assistants to develop and present workshops designed to provide knowledge and skills for initial response to student wellbeing issues
- 4.3 The leadership team, School Support Services and the *School Counselling Service* leadership collaborate with peak bodies and agency management to maintain an overview of school access to the services of community agencies:
  - Stay informed of actual availability and nature of services
  - Collaborate to develop services relevant to Northern Territory students
  - Promote an understanding the specialist purpose of the *School Counselling Service* and the practice of School Counsellors
  - Promote available agency services to School Counsellors and schools
  - Seek feedback on changed program and eligibility requirements, or the cessation of services
  - Negotiate to fill service gaps relevant to Northern Territory students

- 4.4 Liaise with universities in Northern Territory and further afield, to secure collaborative relationships to facilitate:
- Further learning in social work and psychology for teachers and other staff
  - Social work and psychology student field placements in schools
  - Recruitment and mentoring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander School Counsellors
- 4.5 Consider a plan for certificate training and employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members who have expressed interest in taking on the role of a student wellbeing assistant.

## FINDINGS: Building School & System Capacity for Student Wellbeing

There was a strong expectation that the Department of Education would provide School Counsellors, and that it was inequitable that only some schools had regular service. Even where there were indications of surplus or discretionary funds, stakeholders opted to use them for teaching or special programs, rather than for the employment of counsellors as members of school wellbeing staff. This attitude was also held by principals formerly from other jurisdictions, with experience of well-staffed student wellbeing teams. Two interviewees had been directly recruited by their school principals, not as part of the *School Counselling Service*, but with access to its professional support and learning. Generally, however, there was determined reliance on the notion that the School Counselling Service should provide School Counsellors to schools not currently services.

### Generating Changed School Culture

Facilitating a culture that builds school and system capacity to address student wellbeing matters would not be an alternative to the highly qualified, broad, school-specific practice of the *School Counselling Service*, but can filter and direct referrals, and support the work of the School Counsellors. In some schools, there is already a teacher or principal who assumes significant responsibility in this regard.

In itself, the implementation of the *School Counselling Service* was a first effort towards building school cultures that included the importance of student wellbeing, mental health and their connection to successful learning. The Department of Education is currently sponsoring a significant platform in the on-going development of student wellbeing cultures through the introduction of Social and Emotional Learning curricula, and Wellbeing and Positive Behaviour Frameworks. In the

schools they service, School Counsellors are contributing through support and advice for teachers who deliver those programs.

In order to drive change, the state of Victoria introduced a Pupil Welfare Coordinator (PWC), later Student Welfare Coordinator (SWC), initiative in 1976, funding secondary schools to release a teacher from classroom duties. A few had social work degrees or student welfare qualifications post-graduate diplomas, but most were teachers, and all were trained and supported by psychologists and social workers from the departmental *Counselling, Guidance and Clinical Services*. A similar initiative in 2003 introduced Primary Welfare Officers (PWO) with funding for two days per week for a teacher, social worker or other candidate. PWOs were individually supported by staff from the renamed *Student Support Services*, with collective professional development facilitated by regional office wellbeing staff (Barrett 2014).

SWC and PWO programs were stimulated by government, but over time their value was appreciated by schools, specific funding was decreased and principals began to use their global budgets, sometimes subsidised by community and church contributions, to employ qualified social workers in particular. Some schools have a community agency worker on-site to address student and family needs. Larger schools might now have a student wellbeing team with an allied health coordinator. Because it is at the principal's discretion, appointees might be from any discipline, and subject to the school's definition of the role. Some principals have employed only those chaplains who also have social work degrees. Over time there has been an evolution of a culture where schools take responsibility for some student wellbeing issues, supported by Department of Education & Training *Student Support Services*.

In the Northern Territory setting, immediate models available for sharing might come from those principals who have employed and gained from the services of their own school counsellors. The advantages to student engagement and learning, teacher satisfaction, and costs versus benefits might move some towards reshaping their global budgets.

## Professional Learning to Build Capacity.

School Counsellors can continue to provide professional learning opportunities for school staff, which is already an essential component of the School Counsellor role. The *School Counselling Service* can support the collaborative development of workshops and presentations that upskill staff in the area of wellbeing. School Counsellors working independently may be encountering the same learning needs and presenting the same topics in their own settings. Collaboratively sharing and further refining existing presentations, and working together to identify, develop and present new topics, will contribute to a wider *School Counselling Service* professional learning repertoire.

Professional learning might include, for example: building positive teacher-student relationships; trauma-informed schools; responding to disclosures of abuse; understanding suicidal thinking; anxiety in children and adolescents; supporting students through depression; social and emotional literacy; building student strengths; communicating with children; liaising with families. Schools will identify learning needs, and School Counsellors can be alert to responding to perceived need.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teaching Assistants, other aides and ancillary staff are often first to witness disclosures or emotional outbursts by students or families. Teaching Assistants who already have teaching and learning skills, cultural knowledge and community relationships, may be interested in upskilling to provide a first response to the wellbeing needs of students and families. The *School Counselling Service* can offer targeted learning, perhaps whole or half day workshops, to support the student wellbeing skills of this cohort.

## Community Partnerships

The School Counselling Service, individual School Counsellors and schools engaged in partnerships with community agencies and other groups where available. The study found that government and Department of Education expectations tended to overestimate the assistance to students and their families that could be reliably provided by community agencies. Problems with staffing turnover, vacancies, changing policies, eligibility criteria, waiting lists and irregular visits, especially in remote areas, reduced school confidence. The actual services offered by agencies, including those with a specific service focus, might be wrongly assumed, and in fact determined by specific government funding and contractual arrangements. Nevertheless, services, when provided, were highly regarded. This problem is not unique to the Northern Territory, nor restricted to non-urban areas (Barrett 2014).

Participation by school representatives in collaborative community based working parties contributed to the wellbeing of children and young people within and beyond the school, and cemented school-community liaisons that would ultimately support students. Community agencies could contribute to the school on-site and referral services, student learning in classroom programs and professional learning for staff.

Whereas School Counsellors take a whole school, multi-tiered approach to student wellbeing, community agencies might offer short term assistance or group work, then withdraw with little, if any, follow-up with participants or contribution to the whole school program. Again, this is a phenomenon experienced in other jurisdictions (Barrett 2014). While schools will continue working productively with their available community partners, the *School Counselling Service* should be able to offer all schools their specialist, whole school and individual services with the specific purpose of school engagement and personal achievement.

## Teacher Studentships for Student Wellbeing Upskilling

The Northern Territory Government offers opportunity for upgrading qualifications. Teachers might opt to pursue social work or psychology degrees, using study leave or on-line learning. The Department of Education would need to consider the implications of such a program. For example, what would be on-going expectations in terms of duration of employment on completion of studies funded and otherwise supported by the department? Would new graduates now dually qualified be expected to continue in the school under principal direction, or join the *School Counselling Service*?

In Victoria in the late 1960s and most of the 1970s, while there was a shortage of social workers, the Department of Education granted 2 years fulltime, paid study leave to teachers who successfully applied. On graduation they were required to work in *Counselling, Guidance & Clinical Services* to deliver services to schools and students (Barrett 2014). Some stayed in CGCS, others made their way back to schools as SWCs, or in senior class teaching positions.

## Student Field Placements in Schools

The advanced practitioners represented by current School Counsellors are well placed to fulfil the roles of field teachers and professional supervisors for social work and psychology students on placement in schools. A balance can be found between the extra demands on the School Counsellor, and the positive contribution that the student will make to the school. Schools are rich sites for professional learning for beginning practitioners, and they have enough knowledge, skill and common sense to make themselves a valuable part of the school wellbeing program. University students are ready for the learning that comes from direct practice, and are usually better placed in schools rather than the Mitchell Centre. When school holidays interrupt the period of placement, the School Counsellors can collaboratively arrange for special learning or research opportunities; placement in child and youth holiday programs; or short placement in another agency.

Because schools are complex organisational environments, and school counselling is a specialist area of practice, it is essential that supervisors are readily available especially in the first few weeks, and that they are experienced school practitioners. School Counsellors can be supported by *School Counselling Service* colleagues and universities to become ready to provide supervision. Potential candidates for placement should be interviewed and assessed for the likelihood that they will be able to operate independently. Principals or their delegates need to understand that while they have task management, guidance and support responsibilities, it is the School Counsellor who is the professional supervisor. There needs to be clarity around the role of the student, and agreement that they will ultimately work independently without direct supervision. Ironically, it is the professional supervisor who may be guiding the development of practice when the school greatly appreciates the student's contribution to the school.

The advantages of placing social work and psychology students in schools include:

- Students develop a commitment to practice in schools
- School students benefit from the additional services of the university student on field placement
- Schools see how a school-employed professional practitioner might contribute to their own wellbeing program
- The *School Counselling Service* can identify students who are about to graduate with the wisdom or potential to be recruited and mentored

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Welfare Assistants

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants suggested the development of ATSI Wellbeing Assistants in school communities, similar to Teaching Assistants. It was apparent that some ATSI adults were keen to learn and gain qualifications, and it may be possible for the Department of Education to liaise with a TAFE provider to develop or adapt a certificate in the area of student and community wellbeing. It might be anticipated that the *School Counselling Service* could support these new workers in their roles in education, even while they are linked in to collaborate with indigenous services.

## KEY AREA 5: DOCUMENTS, RECORDS & REPORTS

### RECOMMENDATION 5: Establish secure archiving procedures

- 5.1 Establish a secure archive of documents to maintain a record of the development of educational and wellbeing practice, change and development.
- 5.2 Keep a record of key documents that demonstrate *School Counselling Service* evaluation, policy and program development.
- 5.3 Record the writing of *School Counselling Service* leadership and School Counsellors
- 5.4 Acknowledge those School Counsellors who have contributed to the development of the *School Counselling Service*
- 5.5 Acknowledge those School Counsellors who have contributed to the wellbeing and learning of students
- 5.6 Maintain a historical trace for future reflection, research and service development.

## FINDINGS: Documents, Records & Reports

Records of current service delivery were difficult to find, and were certainly not in a coordinated format across regions. Forward planning requires such documentation.

Within a service that has operated as long as the *School Counselling Service*, there will be practitioner, organisational and professional writing about the operation of the service. Education reports that reference the *School Counselling Service* also have historical value. Many of these documents were extremely difficult, some impossible to find. When there is change within the organisational structure, these can be lost at a service level. Such documents might highlight the developmental history of the *School Counselling Service*, or other functions in the education system, show practice continuity and development, and past response to difficulties.

Even if new governments ring in new policy imperatives, important records that show the historical development of an institutional system such as education, and the thinking and work that has shaped it, should not be destroyed, lost or vandalised in the headlong rush to change. The historical trace is important for understanding the trajectories of the past, how ideas and practices have been shaped, and the possible pathways towards the future, resonating with knowledge developed in the past.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: School Counsellor Interview Questions

Years in School Counselling Service	Time fraction
Location / Schools serviced	
Number of students in population serviced	
How do you see the purpose of the School Counselling Service? <i>What does it provide? How could it be improved?</i>	
How do you negotiate the relationships with the principal, regional manager/director, School Counselling Service?	
What are the issues of concern in relation to students?	
How do you determine how to structure the components of your work in the school?	
What values, beliefs, theoretical approaches, departmental policies guide your practice?	
How does your practice respond to student diversity?	
How does your practice address the particular historical and current political and social issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families.	
How could more School Counsellors be deployed? <i>Sites? Roles?</i>	

## Appendix 2: Principal/Manager Interview Questions

Role in relation to School Counsellors?

How many School Counsellors?

How do you see the role/purpose of the *School Counselling Service*?

*What does it provide? What more could it offer?*

What are the issues of concern in relation to students?

How could the *School Counselling Service* be improved?

What are the cultural implications for the *School Counselling Service*?

How could more School Counsellors be deployed? *Sites? Roles?*

## Appendix 3: Principal Questionnaire

### Questions for School Principals

1. School (middle, primary, etc.):
2. Number of students:
3. What is the current frequency per term of *School Counselling Service* activity in your school?  
Is it adequate for your student/school needs?

*Please answer all or some of the following questions, and/or write your own.*

4. Do you have a clear picture of the operation of the *School Counselling Service* and the roles and tasks of School Counsellors?
5. How would you define the purpose of a *School Counselling Service*? What are the ultimate goals of school counsellors?
6. If you don't already have them, and it were possible, would you like a school counsellor assigned to your school/network of schools? What frequency would meet your needs?
7. What student issues would a counsellor address in your school?
8. What tasks would a counsellor undertake in your school? (eg individual counselling, group work, staff support, family support, professional development....)
9. From your knowledge, what are the strengths/advantages of the *School Counselling Service*?
10. In what ways might the *School Counselling Service* be improved?

*Please feel free to add comments not covered by the questions.*

Dr Chris Barrett will be available for phone consults on the 23 and 27 June. Please notify Kath Midgley if you would like to be scheduled.