Book Reviews

Mental Health Handbook for Schools
Atkinson, M. & Hornby G., 2002
London: RoutledgeFalmer
ISBN 0-415-209829-7
£25 (pbk)

Reviewed by Ron Best, Faculty of Education, University of Surrey Roehampton

In their preface, the authors tell us that ‘a book that bridges the divide between mental health and education is long overdue’ (p. x). I am sure they are right. While much of the literature of pastoral care, guidance and counselling in educational settings has implications for and/or makes assumptions about mental health issues, the global concept of ‘mental health’ is not usually the focus. There are books which address one or more of such issues as behavioural disorders, emotional problems, child protection, the pastoral curriculum, substance abuse and special needs, but a book which sets out systematically to describe and inform about a comprehensive list of mental health disorders and what schools can do to help those who suffer from them has, until now, been lacking.

This book attempts to fill the gap. It is divided into four sections. The first provides a general introduction to children’s mental health problems, child development and the classification of disorders. The second (and longest) section contains 12 chapters, each dealing with a recognised mental health disorder namely, conduct disorder; ADHD; eating disorders; anxiety disorders; substance abuse; depression; suicidal behaviour and deliberate self-harm; soiling and wetting; obsessive–compulsive disorder; schizophrenia; autism and special educational needs. Two classifications of disorders are used throughout—DSM-IV of the American Psychiatric Association and ICD-10 from the World Health Organisation—and for each disorder there are sections on features, incidence, causes and treatment, followed by advice on what teachers can do to help. The third section focuses on situations and experiences which might give rise to, or exacerbate, disorders of one kind or another, such as bullying, divorce and bereavement.

The final section very properly concerns itself with preventive and proactive work in which schools and other agencies might engage, so that this is more than a resource to be turned to reactively when having to respond to specific instances of mental health disorders.

However, it is, as its title suggests, primarily a handbook—a manual that one should have to hand for reference when and as the need arises. It does not lend itself to a cover-to-cover read. The various treatments for different disorders are frequently similar, as is the sound advice to schools as to how they might respond to, or make provision for, such disorders. The busy teacher, confronted by a particular child’s condition (let’s say ADHD) cannot be expected to read the whole book—or even those chapters on conduct disorder, anxiety disorder and obsessive–compulsive disorder which would have relevance in such a context—in order to get the whole picture, so similar information needs to be included in each chapter. This makes for a book which, if read from beginning to end, can become tedious and repetitive. Since it is not designed to be read in such a way, this is of little consequence.

That said, a cover-to-cover read can pay dividends. After 25 years of research, writing and teaching about pastoral care in schools, I was surprised (and chastened) to find how little I knew about the specific conditions to which teachers might be called on to respond. I know a great deal more now! I am more aware of the relationships that exist amongst different disorders and have a greater insight into the combinations of conditions from which any one individual may suffer. I was struck by some repeating themes; for example: the existence of gender differences in the incidence of different conditions (for example, autism; p. 163) and in the responses of males and females to experiences of parental separation/divorce and sexual abuse (pp. 201, 226); the unhelpful effects of the government’s curriculum priorities on teachers’ attunement to mental health problems; and the contribution teachers can make to the early identification of children with specific conditions.

It is clear that a huge amount of effort has been put into systemically researching the literature concerning each of the disorders treated, and this is carefully and comprehensively referenced. The evidence base for the description and prognoses for each syndrome is impressive and teachers should feel able to consult the handbook and

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take its advice with confidence. The book is also clearly written and the style accessible.

There are three features of the book which I found less satisfactory.

I am not sure what the purpose is of the second chapter (on ‘normal and abnormal development’) in a handbook of this kind. It provides a context of sorts for what follows, including an ‘ecological model of child development’ with four hierarchical ‘systems’ within which behaviour may be interpreted. However, a consideration, in just a few pages, of such a vexed question as what is to count as ‘normal’, with all the issues of cultural, historical and gender relativism that it raises, is bound to be superficial, and the presentation of the competing theories of the stages of development of Freud, Piaget and Erikson is necessarily schematic. More to the point: what is one supposed to do with these models in using the book? They are rarely referred to in subsequent chapters and, since we are given no grounds for choosing among them, their inclusion seems rather pointless.

A second quibble has to do with the inclusion in Part 2 of a chapter on ‘special educational needs’ (SEN). It is not that SEN children don’t need attention, or that there are not connections between SEN and more specific problems, but to present SEN as though it is a disorder comparable to all the others is invalid. As either an ‘umbrella’ term or as a convenient category for policy (at least since Warnock), SEN seems to me to be part of the context in which mental health problems are confronted rather than a problem in its own right.

Third, I was somewhat disappointed in the final chapter on ‘promoting mental health in schools’. Whereas throughout the rest of the book due attention is given to the needs of young people of all ages, here the emphasis given to the pastoral systems and curricula of the secondary school may disappoint the primary or early years’ teacher who turns to this chapter for help. I also found the use of Active Tutorial Works an example of tutorial materials rather dated. With a decade of initiatives in SMSC behind us and the inclusion of citizenship and PSHE in the National Curriculum review of 2000, to tie the discussion to a scheme of work which dates back to the 1970s looks out of touch.

But these are minor criticisms of what is generally an excellent book. In their preface, the authors envisage ‘that the handbook will be a useful guide for practising teachers to dip into when mental health difficulties are encountered and will also inform aspects of whole school development, both policy and practice. In addition, it will be of assistance to professionals involved in supporting teachers and pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, such as special educational needs co-ordinators, educational psychologists, educational welfare officers and behaviour support teachers. Finally, it will provide a useful text for students on post-graduate courses in education’ (p. x).

I believe it will serve all these groups admirably and trust that it will receive the widest possible dissemination.

Technology in Counselling and Psychotherapy: a Practitioner’s Guide
GOSS, S. & ANTHONY, K., 2003
London: Palgrave
ISBN 1403900604
£16.99 (pbk)

Reviewed by Jeannie Wright, Unit for Psychological Practice and Research, University of Derby

Have you had emails from clients asking if you could work with them online whilst they’re away in another country for 6 months? Are you starting to look at how the Internet might offer another possibility for self-help materials? I am not attracted to technology at all. It irritates me, especially when it goes wrong, but I have responded to client demand and offered email therapy in workplace settings both in the UK and elsewhere. Writing in therapy is not new and text-based therapy is of real interest to me. To be consistent, I have worked with an online therapist myself and even tried online supervision. The evaluation so far is: this is the way it’s going—keep up. Surprisingly, given how far I’ll go to avoid booking anything online, I have been very impressed by ‘Beating the Blues’ and other computerised self-help packages. So, if I am at all representative, a well-edited book, with contributors from North America, Australia and Europe, on the role of IT in the psychological therapies is timely and badly needed in practice. The dearth of
such texts, especially those with any UK research and experience base, is very evident and is one cause of the apparent excessive caution still to be found in some areas of psychological therapeutic practice. This book could fill part of the gap, offering a range of topics and depth of coverage currently unavailable in any UK-based publication. The vision is forward-looking without becoming merely speculative or hypothetical.

The stated intent is for the book to be accessible for both trainee and experienced practitioners of all orientations. Well-respected contributors from various modalities and approaches are represented, such as Maxine Rosenfield on telephone counselling, Gary Stofle on individual therapy via email and Internet Relay Chat and David Shapiro and team on stand-alone computerised therapy. The editors, Stephen Goss and Kate Anthony were part of the BACP group which produced the Guidelines for Online Counselling and Psychotherapy, a great relief to and much appreciated by anyone working online at the time.

This book is very comprehensive and is one of very few of its kind so far in the development of online counselling and psychotherapy. Illustrative case material is a great strength in such a relatively new field. I would expect experienced practitioners to get the most out of the full range of topics covered in the book. Some students with a particular interest might be attracted to some parts of it.

The title is unfortunate. Many practitioners are still edgy about technology and will not be attracted to the title nor the rather crowded, ‘techie’ cover. I tried it out at work and got some negative reactions. A pity as it is an excellent buy and meets the following needs:

- providing carefully researched theoretical aspects of the field for mental health professionals who are unfamiliar with any or some of the developments the book covers;
- providing a rigorous review of existing research and other material, which is either widely cited as ‘seminal’ or has been produced within the time-frame given and is of relevance;
- providing a ‘how to’ of online counselling and psychotherapy to reassure anxious practitioners that such work is ethical and, if not yet thoroughly researched in terms of efficacy, at least worthy of consideration as an alternative to the traditional modes of delivery;
- providing a combination of coverage of practice and supervision ‘at a distance’; and
- demonstrating how mental health professionals have met and are meeting client demands for alternatives to the traditional face-to-face psychological therapies.

This book has high potential for international sales. It is no coincidence that the use of IT in psychological therapies has developed so much more rapidly in areas where the technology is relatively widely available and where geographical distances create a real barrier to clients’ accessing help. A book like this should attract a wide readership in North America and Australasia.

What else is there that would offer as much useful information to practitioners? Another competing book that I was surprised not to see mentioned is the American Counselling Association publication Cybercounseling and Cyberlearning (Bloom & Walz, 2000). There are some overlaps. This book is more comprehensive and more tailored to the UK market. One problem in the field of any applied technology is the rate of technological change, so the book I’ve just mentioned published in 2000 is probably well past its shelf life. This one is worth buying—fast.

Reference
BLOOM, J.W. & WALZ, G.R. (2000). Cybercounseling & Cyberlearning: Strategies and Resources for the Millennium. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association/Greensboro, NC: CAPS, Inc.

Brief Counselling in Schools: Working with Young People from 11 to 18
LINES, D., 2002
London, Thousand Oaks, & New Delhi: Sage Publications
ISBN 0-7619-7355 9 (pbk) £50.0 (cloth), £15.99 (paper)

Reviewed by Tina Besley, Faculty of Education, University of Glasgow

As a former school counsellor from New Zealand trained in Rogerian, TA, brief solution-focused and most recently, narrative therapy, I was excited by of the title of this book. It promised a practical guide to methods of brief integrative counselling and the often complex and difficult range of problems that young people face. The book
comprises an introduction and 11 chapters: ‘School counselling’; ‘Professional and ethical boundaries in school counselling’; ‘The developmental process from 11 to 18 years’; ‘Brief counselling in schools’; ‘Low self-esteem, depression and suicidal thoughts’; ‘Bullying in school’; ‘Parental separation and step-parent conflict’; ‘Loss and bereavement’; ‘Sexual inclination and conduct’; ‘Smoking, drugs and alcohol misuse’; and ‘Life meaning and spiritual emptiness’. Each chapter is subdivided into several levels of subheadings, with helpful figures and tables. The text distinguishes client case studies (composites derived from practice), anonymised verbatim, and referenced quotations from authorial commentary, making it easy for the reader.

The author, Dennis Lines, writes as a practising school counsellor in England and BACP member. In the first three chapters he provides a limited contextualisation of school counselling in the UK. Lines’ assertion that Scotland’s guidance teachers are ‘counselling practitioners’ (p, 8) is misguided. They teach (sometimes, but not always PSE) provide educational, vocational and some personal guidance, but few are trained in the rudiments of basic counselling (Besley, 2002a; Howieson & Semple, 2000). Moreover, many are not even trained in guidance, despite its desirability being recommended in several official documents.

Many of the limitations of counselling in school which Lines addresses resonate with my own experiences and frustrations. Lines makes the suggestion that ‘perhaps we school counsellors tend to be too defensive and accept too readily political and school management constraints in which therapeutic support is regarded as an ancillary aspect of school life’ (p. 13). Yet he does not explore these issues and tends to ‘leave politics aside’. Recognising and addressing power relations in schools is vitally important in enabling/disabling ethical counselling practice and often determines how schools treat the young people and those designated to help them. Lines focuses on problems that pupils face, but arguably he needs to focus on school structures and systems. School counsellors should use all their personal communication skills to encourage a holistic approach to education that supports young people in more than just their academic endeavours. They must challenge barriers to their being able to conduct their job ethically and professionally.

Without clarifying or stating the aims of school counselling, Lines suggests that counselling ‘needs to be in keeping with the school setting, to some degree’ (p. 14). He notes that goals of individuation such as self-expression and self-assertion may not go down well with teachers or parents who are intent on social control. Thus, Lines suggests that the ‘social implications of counselling need weighing up’ (p. 15). While he raises this political and ethical issue concerning counselling he does nothing to resolve it or to explore its complex dimensions.

The book makes several forays into the ethical issue of confidentiality pointing out some of the classic difficulties for school counsellors working in UK Local Education Authority schools. School counsellors have to reconcile their role as professional counsellors maintaining an ethical counselling position while being legally in loco parentis and upholding government legislation. Counsellor confidentiality in relation to the law, to head teachers and to parents of pupils under 16 is briefly addressed with reference to pupil rights to counselling without parental knowledge and the legal right of parents to be informed of the content of counselling, Gillick competence and informed consent. Other components of the ethical minefield that are explored include: dealing with underage sex and the inconsistency of the legal age of consent for sexual relations for heterosexual and homosexual acts; mandatory reporting of sexual abuse to child protection authorities; suicidality; and the disclosure or otherwise of criminal activity. Lines points out that the BACP _Code of Ethics and Practice_ allows for breaching confidentiality in exceptional situations of serious harm to clients and/or others and that ‘ethically, the pupil–client must be informed of the boundaries of confidentiality that can be offered in educational settings’ (p. 36). He suggests publicising ‘all practice information in the school prospectus and in other induction documentation’ (p. 37). The book would have benefited from further exploration of ways of dealing with all parties—teacher, parent and of course pupil—perceptions about confidentiality and informed consent and how ongoing publicity about the counsellor’s role and the development of school policies could clarify this rather fraught area.

Lines adopts a psychodynamic theoretical framework because it ‘has had the most impact upon the therapeutic understanding of troubled young people’...and ‘provides a credible account
of the emotional moods and behaviours that we in
the west observe in adolescents’ (p. 9). While this
may be an acceptable starting-point he seems to
hold and promote this model as ‘truth’ without
questioning any aspect of this framework or the
assumptions about human beings and the self
upon which it is based. Nor does he examine the
extensive literature that now critiques this posi-
tion. This is not to say that theorists that are
referred to very briefly, such as Freud, Bowlby,
Erik Erikson and Piaget, have not been highly
influential, but only that their work (and stage
theories of development in general) is contestable,
and has been subject to criticism on the grounds of
gender, ethnicity, culture and context by many
theorists. We may have reasonably expected some
review of these criticisms.

The psychodynamic approach locates the
problem within the student, in effect promoting
highly questionable deficit models of functioning
and associated remedial-adjustment measures
without adequately considering other factors
such as structural elements of the education
system, the nature of the relationship between
teacher and student and the power relations
involved, or, more generally, societal and cultural
processes. The danger is that such simplifying
assumptions about human nature become reduc-
tionistic and do not acknowledge the multiple
social, economic, political processes that shape
human behaviour. By ignoring the cultural or
societal perspective, psychodynamic theories
maintain the status quo without challenging it in
any constructive manner.

I concur with Lines’ comments that ‘brief
therapy refers to counselling contracts of fewer
than 20 sessions, which in school would not be
considered as brief’ (p. 2). In Chapter 4, Lines
points out that ‘brief therapy is not a specific
approach or model of a distinctive therapy and
practice, but a description of time-limited coun-
selling...foreshortened practice of ‘mother mod-
els’ (p. 66). The models he discusses are Egan’s
three-stage model, motivational interviewing, so-
lution-focused therapy, White and Epston’s narra-
tive therapy, and Nelson-Jones’ cognitive-
humanistic counselling. He advocates an integra-
tive or eclectic approach, which emerges as the
counselling dialogue proceeds and the counsellor
matches techniques to client and their problem.
Perhaps, more could be done to untangle the
working assumptions behind these different ap-
proaches. It is not always the case that ‘what
works’ is a pragmatic matter based on experience;
sometimes we can gain insights from theoretical
work and from understanding the deep underlying
differences, even, contradictions among those
techniques available to us as counsellors or else
counselling risks becoming simply a pragmatic
grab-bag of tricks applied without much real
thought as to why we are using these techniques,
where they come from, what their underlying
assumptions are and what their consequences
might be. We owe it to clients to be as reflective
about our own practice as we expect them to
reflect on their lives in counselling sessions.

The remaining seven chapters that focus on
common problems that youth bring to counselling
make use of research, case studies and the different
counselling methods. However, each of the areas
explored has an extensive literature, only some of
which Lines has engaged with. Lines attempts to
present a large picture of brief counselling in
secondary schools with the result that he risks
reducing his material to a set of truisms. He makes
a series of easy assertions of crisis in youth culture
without examining the nature of the crisis or its
various interpretations. I am concerned at the
number of sweeping assertions and generalisations
he makes about youth and their behaviour, e.g.
‘Why do most young people become intolerable
through their teens’ (p. 38); ‘Adolescents are
essentially changeable and temperamental...’ (p.
62); ‘adolescents are in a developmental phase of
emotional vulnerability...’ (p. 63); ‘So common is
the single-mother family in some areas of the UK
that I wonder what concept of ‘normal’ lies on the
minds of many youngsters as a template for future
familial relationships’ (p. 111); ‘Feminism, result-
ing in the changing role identity of women, has
been one reason for partnership breakdown’ (p.
113).

Lines is, perhaps, at his best in the chapter
dealing with bullying. I am surprised that there is
little discussion, except in Chapter 9 (with its
quaint title of ‘sexual inclination/rather than the
more standard ‘sexual orientation’ about the
ethical requirement of referring clients to other
counsellors or agencies if an issue (often sexual
abuse or suicidality) is beyond the training and
competence of the counsellor.

The book ends quite abruptly without any
form of conclusion—an unsatisfactory ending for
an ambitious project with a broad sweep. The final
chapter is entitled ‘Life meaning and spiritual
emptiness’, as though the crisis of youth culture

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is a form of Western cultural and individual nihilism. Lines advocates a ‘new spiritual para-
digm’: ‘The old order has to give way to a new 
spiritual paradigm that is far less certain, more 
pluralistic, and much more honest’ (p. 184). This 
is an interesting and important direction yet he 
does not investigate ‘postmodernism’ or its impact 
on counselling (see Besley, 2002b) except to 
recommend a form of spiritual counselling. In 
one sense this chapter comes too late as it appears 
to carry the underlying argument of the book, 
which remains hidden or implied and oversha-
dowed by the ‘how’ of counselling. The argument 
needed greater and earlier exposition and develop-
ment. Why ‘brief’ counselling? To what extent 
has the role of counselling changed as the society 
has changed? What, indeed, is postmodernity and 
what value shifts does it imply? I expected a lot 
from this book, but was left feeling somewhat 
disappointed and uneasy in that it did not live up 
to its promise.

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