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MALE SECONDARY-SCHOOL STUDENT ENGAGEMENT RATES WITH SCHOOL COUNSELLORS, AS COMPARED WITH FEMALE ENGAGEMENT RATES

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Health and Wellbeing



Male Secondary-School Student Engagement Rates with School Counsellors, as Compared with Female Engagement Rates by Nigel Pizzini is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a statistical investigation into the engagement rates of male secondary-school students with school counsellors in co-educational state secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. The data analysis evidences a discrepancy between the engagement rates of male and female students, substantiating what has been known anecdotally: that male students are less likely than their female peers to meet with school counsellors. Data from 2615 counselling records across eight schools nationwide indicate that male students engage between 3% and 11% less than their female peers. Further research in 2022 is planned to investigate any barriers or constraints that could account for this discrepancy and expose possible facilitative factors that may increase male student engagement rates with school counsellors.

KEYWORDS

School counselling, male secondary-school students, youth mental health

BACKGROUND

Youth mental health has long been a concern in many countries (e.g., Arora et al., 2016; Gulliver et al., 2010; Quinn & Chan, 2009; Rickwood et al., 2005; Sagar-Ouriaghli, et al., 2019; Setiawan, 2006). Young people in Aotearoa New Zealand have poor mental health outcomes compared to youth in many other countries (Clark et al., 2013; Crowe, 2006; Gibson, 2022). The Youth 2019 report (Fleming et al., 2020) states: “youth emotional and mental health appears to have worsened compared to previous Youth 2000 surveys in 2001, 2007 and 2012, with most of this change occurring since 2012” (p. 1).

Male secondary-school students are over-represented in negative mental health/wellbeing statistics when compared to female peers (e.g., Hughes et al., 2019; Coronial Services of New Zealand, 2021). One example in the Aotearoa New Zealand context is that male youth suicide attempts increased from 2012 to 2019, while those of female youth declined (Fleming et al., 2020) and, while the Chief Coroner reports suspected suicides for females and males in the 15–24 age range held steady between 2018 and 2019, male deaths in that time period remain more than twice that of females (44 females and 94 males) (Ministry of Health, 2022).

From such mental health and wellbeing indicators it is clear male students grapple with mental and emotional difficulties and yet they make the least use of the support available to them (Gibson, 2022). It is well known anecdotally by school counsellors across Aotearoa New Zealand that, as a population group, male students are less inclined to seek counselling support to the same extent as female students do (e.g., Hughes et al., 2019; 2018). This article reports on a detailed analysis of counselling log statistics to evidence and quantify this gendered disparity in engagement rates.

A follow-up study is planned to determine whether there are barriers or constraints contributing to male secondary students' lower rates of engagement with school counsellors. Facilitative factors supporting males to seek counselling at schools will also be investigated. Thus, the current study provides a factual foundation for future research that will seek solutions.

With every young person legally required to attend school until the age of 16, the presence of counsellors at school is arguably the front line of mental health and wellbeing support for young people in Aotearoa New Zealand. The Education Review Office (2013) states that every student should be able to access counsellors at school because it's free, on-site, and within the context of a student's lived experience of their secondary-school community. The presence of barriers to males seeking this counselling support at school would indicate a need for change to enable greater access to one key mode of support.

METHODS

To build a quantitative picture of comparative engagement rates, an analysis of school counsellor logs (statistical records of appointments by age, year group, sex and ethnicity) as recorded in CounselPRO (a professional appointment-management software tool that many schools purchase to manage counselling records) was undertaken from participating schools for Term 2, 2019. This time frame was selected as 2019 was prior to the disruption of Covid-19 and, in most schools, the daily routine is well established by Term 2. The second term also tends to be a focused period in the rhythm of secondary schools, without exams or many of the other disruptions that often hinder student availability to attend counselling appointments.

The analysis undertaken examined each school's data in relation to that school's student-body demographics, as derived from the annual Roll Return required by the Ministry of Education. Thus, it was possible to construct comparative engagement data according to gender, year level and ethnicity.

A note about sex designations:

School enrolment data frequently offer only binary sex categories (Male/Female) (Hughes et al., 2018; A. Jang-Jones, Ministry of Education, personal communication, 22 October 2021). While an increasing array of sex-identity categories is being claimed by young people, this analysis focuses on male students (self-proclaimed or recorded as such in the data), as compared with female students. The author acknowledges that the experiences of non-binary, gender-fluid and transgender students are crucially important to explore, and deserve their own investigation.

THE DATA

Many schools purchase CounselPRO appointment-management software to record consultations, manage student information and produce reports. Soliciting data sets from schools using this tool was intended to provide consistent reporting of tabulated numerical data in a way that required minimum staff time (the data were already collated, and reports are easy to create). Student names were not part of the data.

From an initial list supplied by CounselPRO of over 100 schools in Australia and New Zealand, 47 co-educational state secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand that used CounselPRO in Term 2, 2019, were identified. An email was sent to the school counsellor at each school, outlining the research and asking the school counsellor to prepare electronic copies of five standard reports from CounselPRO.

The reports requested were of 'Student numbers by' the following criteria:

- Year level
- Classification (of student's primary concern)
- Ethnicity
- Referral source
- Number of consultations

Participant schools' 2019 Roll Returns (official roll data collected by the Ministry of Education) were accessed from the Ministry of Education website (Education Counts, 2022).

PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

The criteria for participant schools were that they were co-educational, with school counsellors on site, and used CounselPRO to record appointment statistics in Term 2, 2019. Of the 47 potential participant schools invited to contribute, eight provided their CounselPRO reports in time for the analysis, along with consent forms co-signed by the school counsellor and principal.

A thumbnail overview of each school, drawn from recent Education Review Office (ERO) Reports (Education Review Office, 2022), is provided below to demonstrate the diversity of school cultures represented in this study. The gender (denoted as sex) break-down of each school's total roll is also provided (Education Counts, 2022).

School A: Northland

2019 Roll: 1960

Male 51%, Female 49%

This school serves a seaside community north of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. As the only secondary school in the vicinity, it has a significant place in the local community. This school provides education for students from Years 7 to 13. The school engages students and promotes their progress and achievement. Students achieve very well in National Standards and NCEA qualifications. There is also a strong focus on manaaki, in which the school ensures that positive values are promoted and that students' wellbeing needs are well met.

School B: Auckland, inner city

2019 Roll: 1699

Male 54%, Female 46%

This school is located in an inner-city suburb and caters for students from Year 9 to 13. The school is well supported by its community and many families in the neighbourhood choose to enrol their children there. Since 2007 the school has had an enrolment zone for the mainstream school because of demand for places. The school provides high-quality education through a responsive and innovative curriculum that offers rich opportunities for students' learning and qualifications success.

School C: Auckland, south

2019 Roll: 587

Male 50%, Female 50%

Situated in one of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland's predominantly Pasifika southern suburbs, this school provides a caring and respectful learning environment. Classrooms are settled places for students' learning. The school caters for students from Years 9 to 13 and is experiencing a growing roll. For many students, generational connections promote a strong sense of family and belonging in the school. Most students have Māori or Pacific heritage.

School D: Auckland, west

2019 Roll: 1426

Male 49%, Female 51%

Located in a western suburb of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, this school caters for students in Years 9 to 13. The school has a positive profile in its community and a growing roll. Nearly 15% of students are Māori and 5% have Pacific heritage.

School E: Bay of Plenty

2019 Roll: 956

Male 50%, Female 50%

This school caters for students in Years 9 to 13 in a community with a choice of secondary-school options. The school's mission statement is underpinned by the values of achievement, respect and responsibility. Students are encouraged to give their best effort, to be considerate and appreciative of others, to look after the school environment, and to be accountable for their actions.

School F: Hawke's Bay

2019 Roll: 905

Male 42%, Female 58%

This school serves a wide geographical area. It has experienced considerable roll growth in recent years. The school's mission is to provide co-educational learning opportunities that inspire students to achieve a wide range of

successes, to grow self-esteem, and to develop high standards that enable them to become successful members of society.

School G: Wellington Region

2019 Roll: 712

Male 49%, Female 51%

This urban school is ethnically diverse, with 24% of students identifying as NZ European, 33% as Māori, 21% as Pacific, and 22% identifying from a wide range of other nationalities. About one third of the students speak English as a second language. The college has substantial links with its local community, including contributing schools.

School H: Otago

2019 Roll: 1,143

Male 47%, Female 53%

The only South Island school participating, this school provides education for students in Years 7 to 13 in a provincial town. Twelve percent of students identify as Māori. The school regularly hosts a small number of international students. In addition to the New Zealand Curriculum, the school offers industry training programmes in engineering and primary industries.

RESULTS

The findings come from a total of 2615 counselling entries: 965 with male students (37%), 1483 with female students (57%) and 167 (6%) with non-binary students across the eight participating schools.

Surprisingly, the data sets were not consistent. As mentioned previously, the Ministry of Education Roll Returns do not offer a non-binary sex category, yet CounselPRO does. Counsellors in schools A, C, E and H included a non-binary category (Table 1, “% NB”) while the others did not (Table 1, “n/a”). This discrepancy has resulted in some inconsistencies in male/female statistics.

In addition, different counsellors record their statistics differently. Schools B, G and H recorded data by the number of individual clients, while the remaining five schools recorded their data by the number of consultations (potentially recording multiple entries for the same client, each time they attended a consultation). The number of unique clients in these schools was not provided (Table 1, “data not provided”). Thus, direct comparisons of engagement against the school roll were impossible for those five schools.

TABLE 1. SUMMARY OF DATA.

	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E	School F	School G	School H
Region	Nthland	Auck Central	Auck Sth	Auck West	BoP	Hawke's Bay	Wellington	Otago
Roll	1960	1699	587	1426	956	905	712	1143
# Sessions	889	213	295	211	423	294	96	194
% M	46% -8	48% -4	22% -6	37% -26	25% -45	31% -38	29% -42	40% -19
% F	54%	52%	28%	63%	70%	69%	71%	59%
%NB	<1%	n/a	50%	n/a	5%	n/a	n/a	1%
# Clients		214					96	194
% M roll	Data not provided	11% -3.4	Data not provided	Data not provided	Data not provided	Data not provided	7.8% -11.2	14% -5
% F roll		14.4%					19%	19%
% of roll		12.5%					13.5%	17%

Despite the variation in data, when translated into percentages for each school the results definitively show male students make up a smaller percentage of clients across all schools (Table 1, “% M”). The red numbers in Table 1 quantify this disparity. Schools A, C, D, E and F (reporting by the number of sessions) indicate male students represent a significantly smaller percentage of sessions (Table 1, “% M”). For schools B, G and H (reporting by unique clients), male student clients represent a smaller proportion of the total male student population than do female student clients at the same school (Table 1, “% M roll”). Explanations for these differences are not discernible from these figures alone, indicating that more detailed data collection is required.

Table 2 shows the comparative difference in the percentage of male students engaging with the school counsellor by year level (figures in red indicate a negative percentage difference for males compared to females, Table 2.).

TABLE 2. PERCENTAGE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE ENGAGEMENT, BY YEAR LEVEL.

School	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Yr	% Dif	% Dif	% Dif	% Dif	% Dif	% Dif	% Dif	% Dif
7	+3							-1
8	-7							+10
9	+10	+5	+17	-6	+6	+13	-9	+22
10	-3	+3	-12	+5	-13	-7	-12	-9
11	-6	-5	-7	+10	+17	+3	-4	-11
12	0	-1	+2	-5	-8	-5	-27	0
13	+3	-2	0	-4	-2	-4	+55	-1

These data show that in the two Year 7–13 schools (Table 2, “A” and “H”), the younger male students engaged more with the counsellor than their female peers (+3 for Year 7 males in School A, and +10 for Year 8 males in School H, Table 2). This scenario changes over in Year 10 for those schools and in Year 11 for the Year 9–13 schools; at those points, respectively, female students engage more (Table 2). Again, an explanation for this difference is not discernible from the data and warrants future investigation.

When the percentage of engagement is focused by ethnicity as reported in the CounselPRO reports (Asian, European, Māori, Other, Pacific, or not given), a further detail of difference appears (Table 3).

TABLE 3. PERCENTAGE OF STUDENT CLIENTS BY ETHNICITY.

School		A %	B %	C %	D %	E %	F %	G %	H %
Asian	M	11.4	5.4	-	6.5	-	15	2.1	-
	F	8.2	9	-	21	47	-	2.3	10
	NB	-	-	-	-	21	-	-	-
Euro	M	47	10.8	-	31	34	15.3	8	24
	F	58	13.5	-	16	66	18	40	27
	NB	-	-	80	-	-	-	-	-
Māori	M	48	12	27	14.5	35	28	6	14
	F	58	18	36	17	60	57	19	60
	NB	-	-	44	3.2	3.2	-	-	-

Other	M	56	28	-	25	25	-	38	-
	F	-	38.5	-	22	-	-	-	-
	NB	-	-	40	-	-	-	-	-
Pacific	M	28	19.5	28.7	72	-	-	-	16
	F	11	14.4	38.1	27	67	12.5	16.4	27
	NB	-	-	15.5	-	-	-	-	V -
Not Given	M	1.4	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
	F	3	0.1	-	-	1.3	-	-	4.8
	NB	-	-	-	-	0.1	-	-	0.5

For the schools reporting numbers by individual students (Schools B, G and H, Table 1) the percentage of the total school roll seen by counsellors was 12.5%, 13.5% and 17% respectively. This contrasts significantly with the scores reported in Table 3, which shows a higher percentage of the student body of particular ethnicities engaged with the school counsellor in every school (e.g., School A, Euro M 47% and F 58%, Māori M 48% and F 58%, Table 3). The orange areas pinpoint where female rates exceed male rates (Table 3).

Of significant difference is the incidence of higher percentages for male students (highlighted in red) than their female peers.

The current analysis was not able to theorise a rationale for these higher engagement rates.

DISCUSSION

Existing literature clearly recognises that a significant number of young people in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools experience mental health and wellbeing issues that may be ameliorated through work with school counsellors (Crowe, 2006; Clark et al., 2013; Dewhurst et al., 2017; Knight et al., 2018). And yet the Youth 2000 national youth health and wellbeing survey (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2003) reports that half of the students surveyed had not sought assistance from health services during a time of need due to a wide range of barriers (no gender breakdown was provided). This article shows that something is up for male students in particular that has them less engaged than their female peers in utilising the resource of school counsellors.

While this article reports on an analysis of counsellor statistics from a small number of schools ($n = 8$) with different recording processes, the case is evident that male students appear less often as counselling clients across all the schools, according to the percentage of the total school roll these male clients represent (Table 1, "% M"). While the data sets analysed cannot shed light on the factors contributing to this discrepancy, the statistical difference in engagement rates is clearly evidenced.

While the data for schools A, C, D, E and F were based on consultation numbers (rather than individual students/unique clients) they could still indicate that for a variety of ethnicities in many schools, higher percentages of both male and female students are accessing the counsellor (Table 3). Contrast this finding with schools B, G and H, for whom the statistics gathered were for unique students (rather than "by consultation"). In those schools, 12–16% of the total school roll was shown to engage with school counsellors (Table 1, "% of roll"), which could suggest a more typical percentage rate of engagement. Again, the higher engagement rate for these ethnicities lies outside of the scope of this analysis and cannot be explained by the current data; further investigation is warranted.

The data also show that while male students from a wide array of ethnicities identified in the demographic data engage with school counsellors at a higher rate than an overall male rate of engagement (Table 3), there are still only a few instances in which male engagement rates are higher than those of female peers of the same ethnicity

(e.g., Table 3, School A, “Pacific”, and School D, “Euro” and “Pacific”). Similarly, there is an indication in the data that younger male students might be more amenable to engaging with school counsellors than older male students. Explanations for both of these findings lie outside of the scope of the current analysis and cannot be explained by the data presented here. These topics are worthy of further investigation.

This analysis raises many questions: Why are male students engaging with school counsellors less frequently than female students when there is clear evidence of the extent of mental and emotional distress among young males in Aotearoa New Zealand? Why do males from some ethnicities in some schools have higher engagement rates than in other schools (e.g., Table 3, “Pacific” in School A and D but not in school C)? Does the age of male students affect their willingness to engage with school counsellors? How can the varying rates of male engagement across these schools be accounted for? More generally: are there constraints and barriers (real or perceived) that disincline male students from seeking the support of school counsellors, and are these unique to males (i.e. not experienced by female students); or, do female students enjoy more facilitative factors than male students? What could schools or school counsellors do that might encourage male students to seek support from the counselling offered in their co-educational secondary schools?

Further research, currently underway, explores such questions. The aim is to identify any barriers male students may experience when seeking or considering accessing the school counsellor, and to identify facilitative factors to support male students’ engagement with counselling at school. The longer-term goal is to help create conditions whereby these students are more likely to obtain services that could contribute to their wellbeing.

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