Counselling Training in Social Work in Aotearoa New Zealand. Are we There yet?

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ABSTRACT

The role of counselling in social work has at times been contentious, but social workers often engage in counselling tasks. This article explores the results of two studies that have enquired into counselling in social work with a particular emphasis on the role of training for this practice. Results from these studies show that social workers at times do not feel adequately prepared by their qualifying social work training to conduct counselling within their work. Many have sought additional counselling training, and many indicated a desire for future or ongoing training. Potential models for training are proposed and possible impediments to further training are explored.

Keywords: *Social work; counselling; training.*

INTRODUCTION

The practice of social work can look very different, depending on where it is practised. From the registered clinical social worker to the community development worker, to the social administrator or agency manager, social work has many faces. While the more specific therapy-oriented role of counselling in social work varies from place to place, aspects of counselling such as the micro skills of listening, responding, problem solving and supporting people remain key components of social work practice in most settings (Seden, 2005, Staniforth, 2015a). In 2004, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) developed the joint "Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession". In this document it is stated that social workers should possess: "Sufficient practice skills in, and knowledge of, assessment, relationship building and helping processes to achieve the identified goals of the programme for the purposes of social support, and developmental, protective, preventive and/or therapeutic intervention" (IASSW, IFSW, 2004, p. 7). Many of these factors are obtained through micro communications skills or counselling training.

The role of counselling in social work in Aotearoa New Zealand has been contested at various points (see Staniforth, 2011a), but research (Munford, 2000; Staniforth, 2011b) has confirmed that many social workers do engage in counselling, or at least use counselling skills, in their practice. Many, however, have felt that their basic social work training may not have prepared them adequately for this practice (Staniforth, 2010).

This article reports on quantitative and qualitative data from two projects. Previously unpublished data from the first author's 2010 PhD dissertation provide a background on what a sample of social workers have indicated in relation to their training in counselling skills, experiences, and desires. Research from the second author's current PhD study, which aims to develop a practice framework for strength based counselling in social work in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, is also used to explore the idea that some social workers do not feel adequately prepared for their counselling roles.

Many respondents in both these studies also indicated that they have sought additional training to improve their counselling skills and some reported a benefit to their social work role from having both social work and counselling qualifications. This article explores these findings and provides some discussion on impediments to counselling training in social work and some possible training options in counselling for social workers for consideration in meeting this training need.

Literature Review

Point 3.1(7) of the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (revised in 2015) describes some expectations that social workers are proficient in communication and interpersonal skills and, within this, that social workers can demonstrate "practice skills in all methods of social work intervention, and oral communication skills for all intervention methods" (AASW, 2012, p. 12). In Aotearoa New Zealand, the "Process For Recognition/ Re-Recognition of Social Work Qualifications in Aotearoa New Zealand Policy" of the Social Work Registration Board (SWRB) is less explicit, stating that graduating students

must "[h]ave the ability to work with individuals, families or whānau, communities and groups from diverse ethnic, cultural and indigenous backgrounds" (SWRB, 2013, p. 6).

Clinical social work is its own field of practice, and widely written about in an American context (see, for example, the *Clinical Social Work Journal*). The use of micro/counselling type skills in social work has also been well documented in textbooks internationally. In an Australian context, authors such as Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2012), Harms (2007), and Healy (2012) have described the use of counselling skills or theories and the role of communication skills in social work. Spanning Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, Beddoe and Maidment (2009), Connolly and Harms (2013), and Maidment and Egan (2016) have all considered the use of counselling skills within social work practice.

There has been little written about counselling in social work in the specific Aotearoa New Zealand context, however. The history of education in social work has been better documented. Nash (1998) and Crocket (1977) have provided an extensive history of social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand, sometimes making reference to curriculum content. Various authors such as Manchester (2008), McCreary (1971a, 1971b), Cranna (1989) and Staniforth (2015b) have also documented aspects of specific education and training programmes. Aspects of these writings have included reference to counselling training within the programmes described (Manchester, 2008; Staniforth 2015b) or tensions between curriculum perspectives (McCreary, 1971a, 1971b) or specific moves away from a counselling perspective to a community orientation (Cranna, 1989).

Van Heugten (1994, 1999), Hancock (1969), and Baskerville and Durrant (1996) have explored private practice in social work. Within these articles, use of counselling, or counselling skills were considered as part of the private practice of social workers. The Education and Training Committee of NZASW also provided a statement on private practice in social work in 1971, which referred to counselling as one of the activities of social workers engaged in private practice.

In 1978, Simpson argued that there was a "crisis" in social work education and called for the improvement of counselling skills training, particularly for social workers entering statutory settings. More current research (Staniforth, 2010) and research within this article would support that there is still a need for counselling skills training.

Rochford and Robb (1981) conducted a workplace survey in Aotearoa New Zealand which indicated that many social workers believed counselling, or casework (which encompassed some counselling), was within their role. Further, a majority of social workers surveyed engaged in a range of "some–much" "continuing counselling" within their jobs and indicated that personal counselling was one of the specific tasks that they undertook. In a subsequent study conducted by Sheafor (1982), social workers were asked to rate their roles and activities by cluster. Social workers rated the "counselling and problem solving" cluster within the majority of their work activity.

Munford (2000) conducted a small-scale survey which sought to explore what social workers and counsellors believed was the relationship between social work and counselling

and how they perceived differences and similarities between these two professional groups. Munford concluded that, while there was some difference between how counsellors and social workers saw their roles, there appeared to be significant overlap between the theoretical orientations, values and skills used between the two groups.

As part of a larger study, Kazantzis et al. (2007) reported on the role of continuing professional development (CPD) for social workers who identified as practising psychotherapy. Samples of social workers from Canada, the USA and Aotearoa New Zealand were compared on a range of developmental activities. In general, social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand reported high rates of clinical supervision and having undertaken additional counselling training post-graduation. They reported lower rates of perceived professional development however, and were not as often engaged in their own personal therapy as a means of CPD.

Aotearoa New Zealand is a bicultural nation, and social work in particular has embraced its bicultural commitments (ANZASW, 2007). Several authors such as Durie (1985), Hibbs (2005), Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Māori Perspective for the Development of Social Welfare (1986), Ruwhiu (2001, 2009), and Walsh-Tapiata (2004), have questioned the role and function of counselling, at times aligning it with post-colonial oppressive social work approaches, and western hegemony. Staniforth (2011a) has posited that the development of counselling training within social work in Aotearoa New Zealand has likely been impacted by differing cultural expectations of what social work should look like.

Staniforth's (2010) doctoral thesis explored the history of the evolution of counselling in social work in Aotearoa New Zealand and also what social workers thought about, and did, in relation to counselling in social work. Results within this study included that: 33% of respondents had counselling within their job descriptions; 96% believed that counselling fell within the role of social work in many fields of practice; 62.6 % did "some to the majority of their work" as counselling; while 30.8% stated that they used counselling skills in their work, but did not do counselling. Only 6.6% indicated that they did not do any counselling in their jobs. Staniforth, Fouché, and O'Brien (2011) explored how social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand defined social work, with many indicating counselling or supportive-relationship-building skills being part of their practice and forming part of social work.

METHODS

This article reports on the findings of two research studies. In the first study, the role of counselling was the focus of study while within the second study a theme emerged in relation to social workers indicating a desire for counselling training. This section outlines the methods of each study and how the findings will be presented.

Study One: Doctoral Study on the history and role of counselling in social work in Aotearoa New Zealand

A mixed methodology format was used in Staniforth's (2010) research. Fourteen qualitative interviews with individuals who had helped create the professions of social work, counselling and psychology were conducted to help understand the historical development of

counselling within social work, and the factors that had impacted upon it. Participants were interviewed through use of a semi-structured questionnaire, with interviews lasting approximately one hour. Questions were asked in relation to participants' views on the history and development of the role of counselling in social work. Questionnaires were then sent out to 985 members of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers that asked about members' current views on, and practice of, counselling within social work. A total of 404 questionnaires were returned, giving a return rate of 42.5%. The margin of error or sampling error in this sample is +/- 5%. Interview data and open-ended responses from the questionnaires were analysed thematically using an inductive process where themes emerged from line-by-line coding with sub-themes then developed. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (Version 14) was used for the quantitative analysis.

Study Two: Doctoral Study on developing a strengths based framework for counselling in social work in Aotearoa New Zealand

Booysen's PhD project involved a series of interviews with social work practitioners throughout Aotearoa New Zealand who identified as using strength based counselling within their social work practice. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. A list of potential participants was developed in both practice and research supervision, where the researcher and her supervisors considered who fitted the research criteria and who could make an important contribution to the research area. These potential participants were invited to an interview. The sample was further expanded via the snowball technique.

Sixteen participants were interviewed about their beliefs and practice in relation to strength based counselling (only 15 returned transcripts with permission for data to be used). These interviews were analysed thematically, using Braun and Clarke's six-phase model of data analysis (2006). In this method, the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software NVivo™ was used to code themes and then sub-themes from the research transcripts. One of the sub-themes (which was outside the original scope of the research) identified by several participants was regarding the need for training in counselling skills in their social work practice.

Both studies received approval from the university ethics committees: Massey University (Staniforth) and the University of Auckland (Booysen). The findings are presented in the following section and are from particular questions asked in Study One regarding counselling training in social work. Quantitative data is presented along with comments provided in open-ended questions where participants were asked for further information. Comments from Study Two are also presented to show areas that emerged through the theme that developed in the thematic analysis in relation to training in counselling in social work.

Findings

Within Study One, participants were asked if they felt that their initial social work education had prepared them well for the role of counselling in their work. Results are shown in Figure 1.

The majority of respondents felt prepared to at least some degree, but only 34% felt that they had been either really well or adequately prepared. Fifteen percent of respondents felt that they had not been prepared.

I believe counselling is an integral part of social work, but it encompasses much more. But to do counselling, a social worker needs additional training to do safe practice. (Participant Study One)

I think that training for counselling in social work training is sadly lacking and needs to be improved. (Participant Study One)

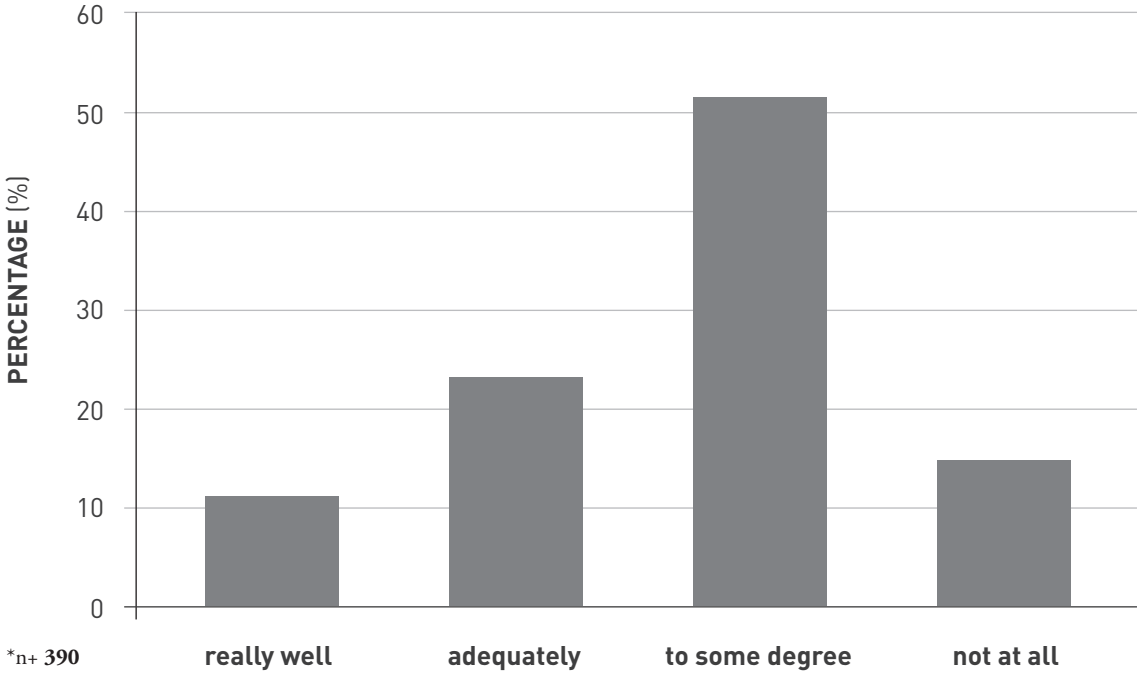

Figure 1. Did your basic qualification prepare you well for counselling in your job?

Many respondents discussed the need for more counselling training within basic social work qualifications:

I believe there needs to be a bigger component in social work training around counselling. I feel uncomfortable calling myself a Counsellor, but do recognise the counselling skills I use every day in my job… I am definitely in support of more counselling skills. (Participant Study One)

A further respondent indicated that:

I don't think that coming out of an undergraduate degree in "social" work you are qualified and experienced enough to be offering counselling unless you have significant prior learning and life experience. You therefore need to do further study in post-training practice in a setting where you receive supervision of your counselling practice. (Participant Study One)

This was further supported by participants in Study Two.

I think we do need to be teaching people the micro skills of how they work with an individual, with a family, with couples… So it is about micro skills versus social policy/broad analysis and we need to work in a way that integrates that. And if we are sending practitioners out, without that set of skills, we are asking them to experiment with people, who are not necessarily set up well to do it, and that's probably unethical if you think about it. (Participant Study Two)

Respondents in Study One were asked if they had undertaken any additional training to improve their skills or knowledge in relation to counselling. Three-quarters (75%) of respondents indicated that they had undertaken additional training to improve their counselling skills. The total number of respondents to this question was 294 and there were 665 responses. Figure 2 shows the kinds of training that were undertaken.

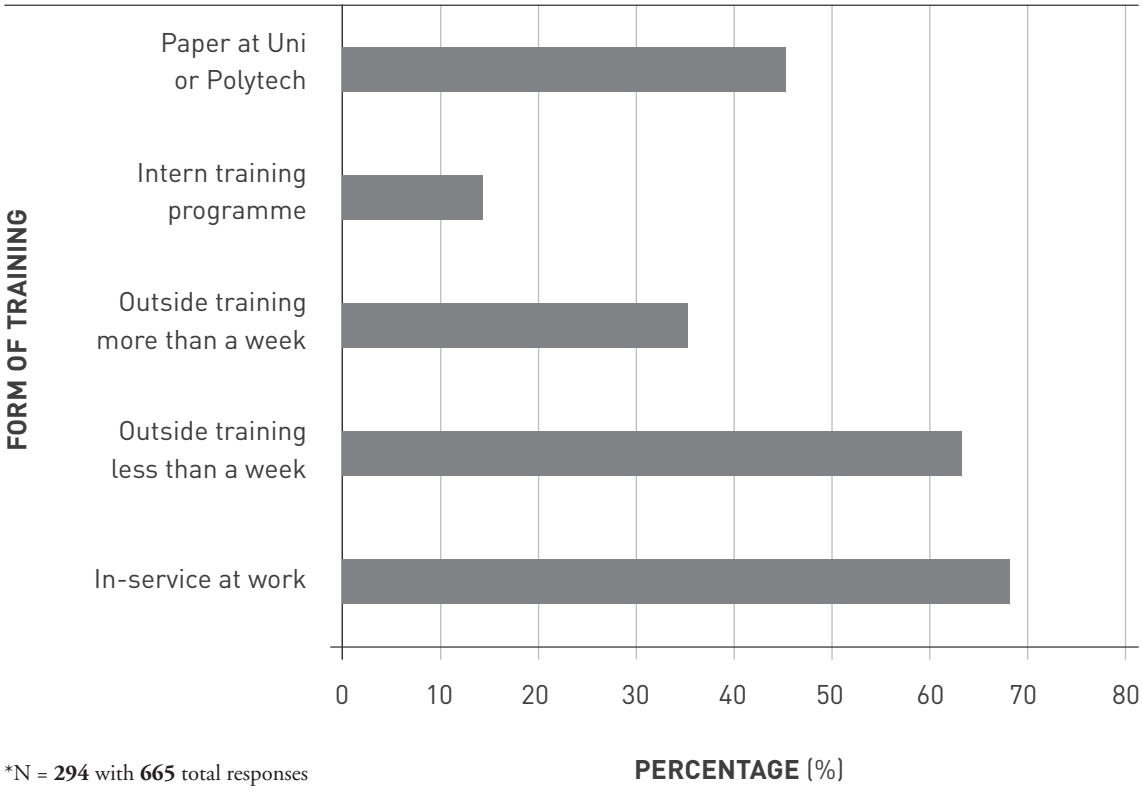

Figure 2. Percentage of Respondents Undertaking Particular Forms of Additional Counselling Training

The most common forms of training were in-service (70%) and outside training of less than one week (63%). Training also included papers from a tertiary institution (46%). Tertiary institutions could include universities or polytechnic institutes. A total of 35% had taken an external course lasting more than a week and only 15% indicated that they had been part of an intern training programme that was described as "usually involves

learning theory and then moving into practice in [an] intensely supervised, often observed way".

Participants from Study Two also identified having undertaken additional training:

So I had to up skill and learn about the different models around the strength-based approach, probably in the last maybe ten to fifteen years. It's a new concept in terms of my length of social work practice but certainly one that I would say underpins my practice at present. (Participant Study Two)

But I've had to go out and find the stuff and develop it myself and I've had to look more towards the counselling circles. (Participant Study Two)

Many participants reported that they had obtained both a social work and counselling qualification and found their dual qualification valuable in their social work practice.

At Whitireia, which is a really good degree and I learned heaps, but actually I already knew heaps, as I already had a counselling degree. (Participant Study Two)

You know I mean I've been a social worker and I'm a counsellor as well and I've been doing that for thirty years. (Participant Study Two)

But I find it really valuable having both my degrees. (Participant Study Two)

Survey respondents in Study One were asked to indicate if they would be interested in "pursuing further education or training in the area of counselling" and, if so, what models or theories would be of interest, and what form they would like that training to take. The majority of the 390 social workers who responded (68%) stated that they would be interested in further training in counselling, while 32% indicated that they would not be interested in undertaking further counselling training.

Respondents were invited to indicate as many responses as applied in terms of what theories or models they would be interested in learning more about. In this instance 287 respondents provided 813 responses. Figure 3 shows that the most frequently cited model of desired training is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) with 53% of respondents indicating an interest in this model. This is followed by narrative therapy with 47% of respondents indicating interest. Thirty-eight percent of respondents indicated that they would like to learn about strengths based perspectives and 36% indicated that they would be interested in Māori models. There was less interest in the older or more traditional models of practice such as psychodynamic (26%), client-centred, and systemic both with 23% of respondents indicating interest. Eclectic or integrative approaches were indicated in 24% of cases and "other" was indicated in 15% of cases.

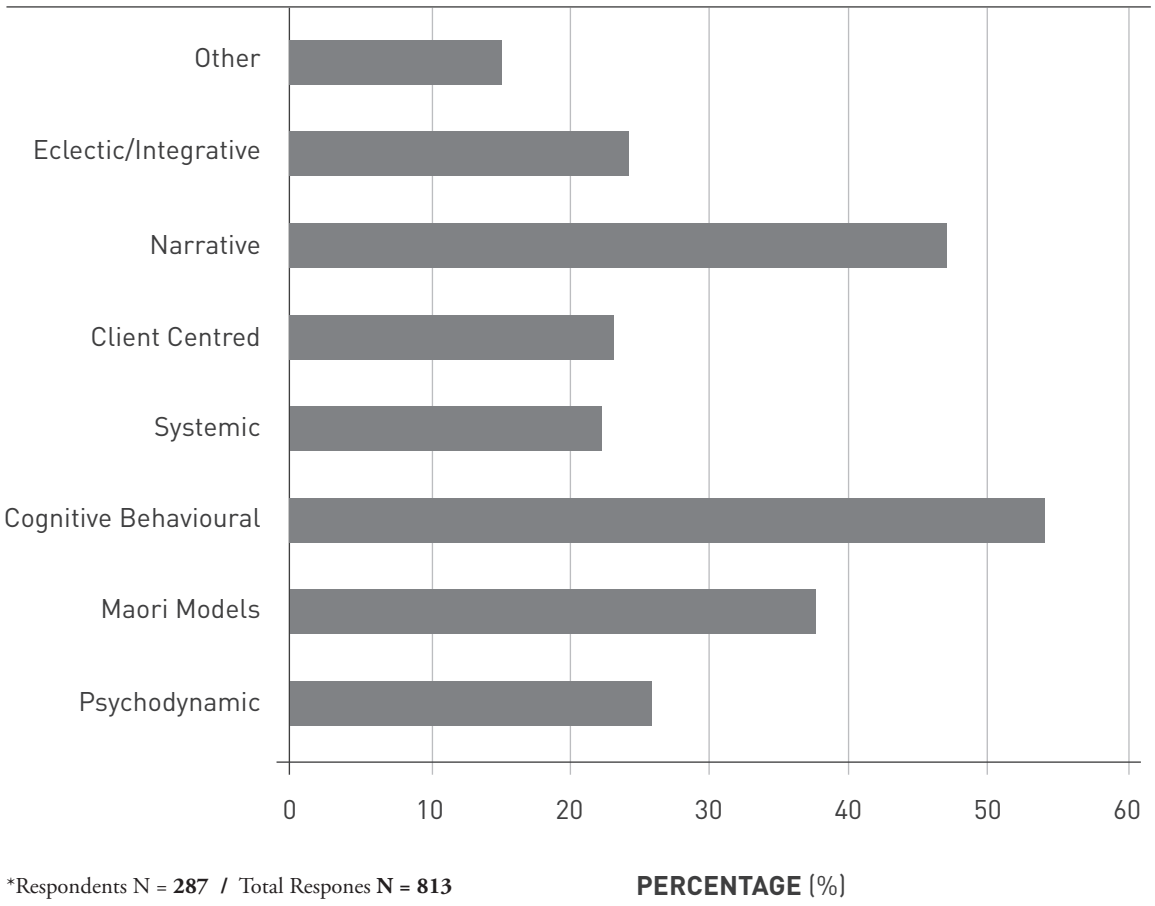

Figure 3. Preferred Models or Theories for Further Training

Almost half (45%) of Study One's respondents indicated that they would be interested in undertaking a postgraduate certificate or diploma in counselling, while 42% indicated that they would be interested in taking an external workshop of less than one week's duration. Thirty-six percent of respondents indicated that they would be interested in taking a single paper provided by a polytechnic, university, or wānanga, while 36% also indicated that they would like to attend an "in-service" session in their workplace. Of least interest to respondents were outside workshops lasting more than a week and intern training programmes, which both received similar response rates, with 21% of respondents indicating an interest in these training formats. For this question 266 social workers provided a total of 537 responses (see Figure 4).

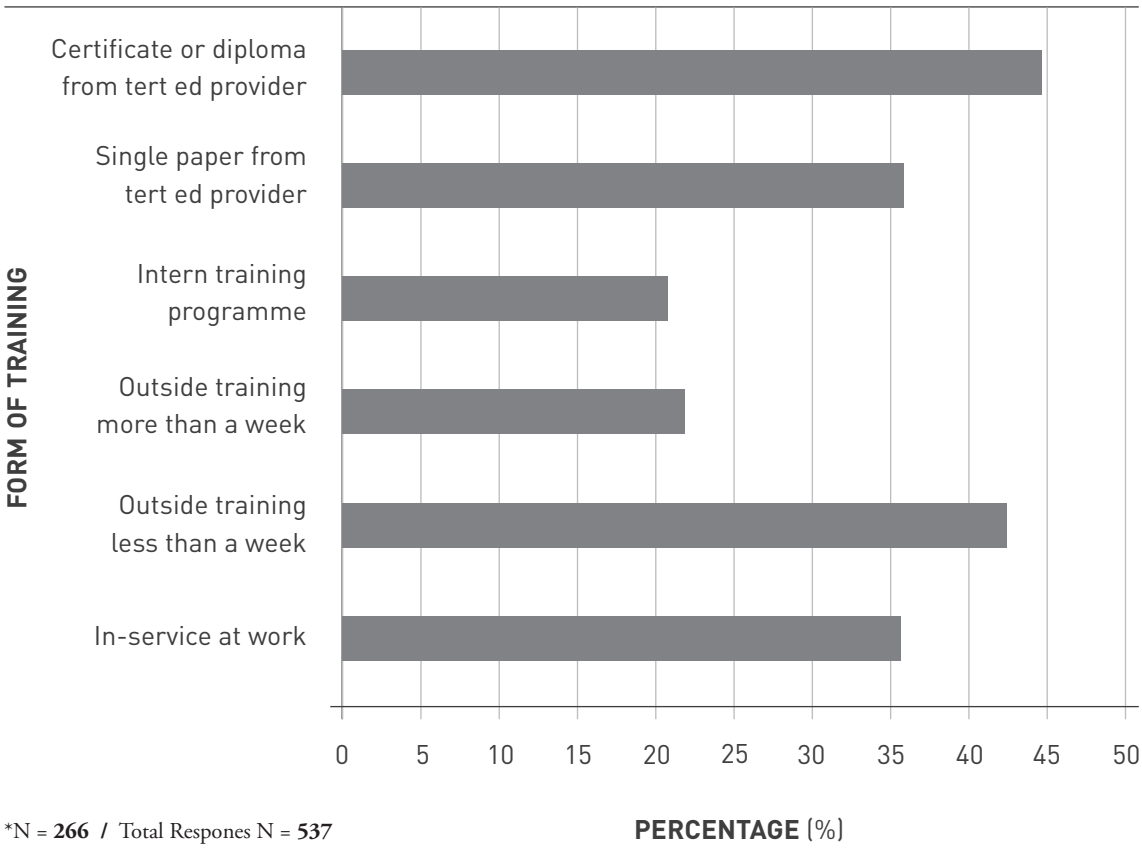

Figure 4. What form of further counselling training would you like to undertake?

DISCUSSION

Respondents in both studies indicated a desire for increased counselling skills training, and a belief that they may not have been adequately prepared by their undergraduate qualifications. Why is this the case? There are several possible issues that may have contributed to this feeling that counselling training has been inadequate or that there is a lack of training opportunities available to social workers post-basic qualification.

Impediments to training

There are several factors impeding training social workers in counselling or counselling skills. These occur at educational, professional and workforce levels.

At the time that this article was written, neither counselling nor social work have mandatory registration or protection of title in Aotearoa New Zealand, meaning that anyone can call themselves, and practise as, a counsellor or social worker. Scopes of practice for clinical social work, or counselling within social work have not been developed. The professional social work association, ANZASW, and the SWRB have focused on the development of basic social work qualifications and ensuring a consistent set of social work competencies are being demonstrated by graduates of social work programmes. While the SWRB has moved from having a three-year undergraduate degree requirement for recognition, to now requiring a four-year undergraduate degree, there is still limited room within programmes for expansion of skills training outside those of the core competencies described in the accreditation document (SWRB, 2013). While alluded to, counselling skills are not specifically named.

Both the workforce availability of skilled people to provide counselling skills' training, and the scope of available training appears to be problematic:

I think there is probably in New Zealand an absence of … local trainers, who are particularly affordable. I think of the Compass workshops, they can sometimes be expensive … they are often run by people from overseas who have really good ideas but … there is a way that that country uses those skills and you know, it will be good to have more local trainers.
(Participant Study Two)

Even when basic counselling skills training is available, it often needs to cater for a baseline skills level. One participant in Study Two noted:

First of all, it's limited, it's really limited. Secondly, if you've been around a while training tends to start repeating the basics … and you're not going anywhere with what you know. It's very nice and kind of validates what you already know but you are not growing as a practitioner or a counsellor using a strength-based approach. But the bottom line is we need more and we need incrementally more complex or more in depth training rather than what is strength-based practice, what are the basic principles, how do you do it, what is strength-based, it just gets repeated.
(Participant Study Two)

Cost of training is one of the largest impediments to continuing professional development and training, which includes training in counselling skills. There appears to be reduced funding for training at both statutory and non-government levels.

Many respondents in Study Two asserted that social workers wanted more financial resources to be allocated to professional development around strength based counselling.

They actually need to put the resources into that and they need to put it into training.
(Participant Study Two)

That would be in the ideal world but where would the funding come from?
(Participant Study Two)

So some of the training costs a lot of money for three days. I don't really think that's very affordable, it is not very good for the NGOs … because we've got limited funding around training. I can't just spend all the money on the budget for one training. That's why I couldn't really do any training after my study. (Participant Study Two)

Given the impediments, it is important to consider some ways forward. A starting point may be to develop a vision of what better training in counselling or counselling skills might look like. The following section details potential models for counselling training in basic social work qualifications or beyond.

Counselling Skills Training Models

Skills Within Basic Social Work Qualification

In terms of possibilities regarding how counselling training could be provided, schools of social work are in a strong position to play a part in influencing the amount and depth of counselling skills being offered at an undergraduate, or first social work qualification level. Social work education programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand require accreditation by the SWRB. Accreditation involves the Board reviewing social work programmes via a set standard of criteria. Although there is no specific mention made of counselling skills in the Standards, point 2.11 states that, "the programme has social work skills teaching across the curriculum that addresses interpersonal skills, reflective practice, supervision and risk assessment in preparation for placement" (SWRB, 2013). It would seem therefore, that the amount of counselling instruction offered in individual social work programmes is likely to be more related to local contexts, historical associations, individual preferences within programmes, strengths and preferences of staff and available time within curricula. Creation of a particular competency around micro skills could enhance greater consistency between qualifying social work programmes.

Concurrent Undergraduate Models

One potential way of ensuring adequate counselling skills is through the provision of a conjoint social work/counselling degree. One provider in Aotearoa New Zealand previously enabled students to graduate with a social work degree in three years, and then students could complete one more year to obtain a counselling qualification. This option is no longer available and may be less appealing now that a four-year undergraduate degree is required for SWRB programme recognition.

Postgraduate Models

With nearly half of the questionnaire respondents from Study One indicating that their preferred means of obtaining more training in counselling would be through a postgraduate certificate or diploma, or a single paper at post-secondary level, this seems an area that would be good for schools of social work to explore. Currently, various institutions offer such programmes, but they are usually offered through counselling or education programmes.

Some education providers also offer postgraduate diplomas in areas such as CBT. Many social workers have chosen to pursue postgraduate study in a particular modality of therapy. This often involves both theoretical training and practical experience through conducting supervised, and perhaps assessed, therapy sessions.

An MSW degree in Aotearoa New Zealand is usually undertaken as an advanced research degree. While these programmes sometimes have one or two clinical social work papers as electives, many countries such as the USA and Canada have a clinical focus within their Masters' programmes. A clinical stream within an MSW programme may also be an option to consider. Finally, a clinical doctoral programme with an internship component would also be a way of building the clinical skills of the social work profession in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Continuing Professional Development Activities

There may also be scope for social work's professional body, the ANZASW or other private training providers to develop one-to-five-day training packages in counselling skills at either refresher or advanced levels. In Study One, 43% of questionnaire respondents indicated interest in further training and a desire to take a "workshop offered by an outside individual or group of less than a week". The ANZASW has recently begun offering continuing professional development activities around such issues as ethics and cultural or bicultural competence. Counselling skills could easily be included. Private providers have also begun to advertise counselling skills workshops in modalities such as CBT via the ANZASW newsletter.

Regardless of the models available, it is unlikely that one model is likely to serve the needs of all social workers, and it is more likely that some combination of the previously suggested models, involving both public and private providers will be required. Developing both a coordinated response and competencies for counselling in social work will be two of the challenges faced.

CONCLUSION

There has been a consistent call for more counselling skills training to be made available to social work students and practitioners. This has been demonstrated through information from both studies reported on in this paper where social workers have engaged in their own postgraduate counselling skills training, and social workers indicating that they are interested in pursuing ongoing training in counselling skills.

There are a number of factors that create barriers to increased counselling skills' training at basic qualification and ongoing training levels. Cost constraints and decreased funding available for training likely impact on the scope and availability of training. Difficulties in defining the scope of practice without mandatory registration for social work act as a barrier to defining counselling as a core competency.

There are various possibilities available for consideration, from increased training within basic qualifications, clinical training at postgraduate levels or various continuing professional development opportunities that might be offered through private trainers or professional bodies.

This situation is evolving. Many within social work and counselling in Aotearoa New Zealand are eager for mandatory registration and the ability to develop more advanced competencies. It will likely become clearer "who can do what" but social workers will continue to have counselling as part of their roles. Adequate training will remain an important factor in this evolution.

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