Counsellor Education Moving Towards Change
A Postgraduate, Distance-learning Experience in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Education changes people. People can also change education. In reviewing a postgraduate counsellor education programme in Aotearoa New Zealand, the relatively new teaching team of experienced counsellor educators identified several stages of research that required completion in order to address questions about changing curriculum content and teaching and learning styles in a distance-learning environment. We applied consultative methods associated with appreciative inquiry, including the supplementation of our conversations with various stakeholders in the provision of counselling and within the team, with an online survey questionnaire sent out to 75 recent graduates of the programme, 22 of whom responded. Graduates were asked to consider how different elements of the Professional Development (PD) workshops had prepared them for continuing development as reflective practitioners; professional employment; gaining professional membership; and appropriate progression in the guidance and counselling field. We report findings using both descriptive statistics and a narrative letter to imagined prospective students. Results of this research and its implications have changed the programme and will continue to inform the curricula and learning and teaching styles in counsellor education and development at Massey University.

Keywords: Counsellor education, Aotearoa New Zealand, biculturalism, reflective practice, professional employment

Counselling is at a crucial point in its history, both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally. Controversial proposals for professional regulation and registration have created heated debate. There are currently no professional scopes of practice or clear

standards of competence outlined for counselling practice or for counsellor education in Aotearoa New Zealand (Manthei, Stanley, & Gibson, 2004). Although the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy has relatively recently developed a core curriculum for the accreditation of courses (BACP, 2009), confusion about professional identity and core competencies in counselling exists in many parts of the world. In addition, concerns about employment opportunities and recognition for qualified counsellors cause anxious questions from prospective counselling students.

A full university external review of the Massey University counsellor education programme began in 2002 and the committee handed down its confidential report in 2003. Since that time there have been several changes in staffing, and our relatively new teaching team engaged in many discussions to consider how the findings of the review might best be applied. We needed to establish what the critical ingredients might be to inform change in a postgraduate, distance-learning environment. We continued to be mindful of our responsibilities and intention to honour te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi). As discussions progressed, we considered ways in which a culture-centred, and therefore pluralistic, model of postgraduate counsellor education might coexist with the bicultural imperative to honour te Tiriti o Waitangi. Our consultations and discussions within the team and with the community of counselling providers will continue, and although we have yet to engage with the clients as "users" of counselling and gain their insights and input, we are now in a position to report the interim findings, which are providing a springboard and encouragement for our revisions.

There is very little follow-up information about how students from postgraduate counsellor education programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand apply their experience in practice. A landmark study of counselling graduates (Cornforth & Sewell, 2004) recommended further research to monitor for whose benefit counsellors were being trained, and this was followed by Miller's (2007) work examining graduate counsellor views of critical incidents in training. Payne and Lang (2009) specifically focused on the support and self-care perceptions of school counsellors in Aotearoa New Zealand rather than on their experience of how their initial training had prepared them for work after graduation. This article, therefore, fills a gap in local knowledge by placing particular emphasis on recent graduates' experience, and develops implications and suggestions for two further articles that will explore, first, how pluralism might fit in a bicultural context, and second, how education at a distance can respond to technological change in the practice of counselling and counsellor education.

Massey University has provided counsellor education at a distance for over 30 years, mostly in the school guidance counselling context. This "market" is changing as a significant percentage of prospective and current students now come from health and community settings. We decided to further our efforts to understand this changing market by talking to graduates from the Massey University counselling programme. In order to be advised on what to retain and what to adapt, we wanted to listen to recent graduates' views on their experience of the programme in relation to their professional practice, in order to complement our other discussions and help inform our deliberations.

Methods and ethical issues

We decided on a bricolage of positivist and strengths-based methods, including appreciative inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2006), in order to answer a range of questions. Appreciative inquiry, often found in organisational research, seeks to build on the strengths of what already exists rather than focusing on deficits. Our inquiry used broad research strategies to provide a fuller and more complete appreciation of the ingredients informing organisational and educational change in the programme (Denscombe, 2007). We also used auto-ethnographic writing by the current staff team, which aimed to connect personal experience with the social and cultural (Chang, 2008). These deliberations within the team were assisted by cultural consultation (Puketapu-Andrews & Crocket, 2007) to ensure that our recognition of te Tiriti o Waitangi was maintained. The research also involved wide-ranging consultations with counselling supervisors, cultural advisers, employers, current students, and other stakeholders in the change process, and these discussions continue at the time of writing. Our inclusion of the opinions of past graduates of the programme was achieved through mixed method quantitative/qualitative research, and featured the use of a survey in the first instance.

To receive the graduates' views, a questionnaire was designed by the counselling programme teaching team, based on Miller (2007). It was emailed to 75 former students by an independent associate and used Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) to gather the anonymous responses. The initial survey aimed to yield significant information from former students across a wide geographical area. Our preferred approaches would have included graduate focus groups, and in-depth interviews using narrative case study inquiry. However, the geographical spread of the Massey University graduates and our own work pressures mean that if we are to use such approaches for future studies we will need significantly more time and funding.

Our aims in this part of the study were to consult students who had completed counsellor education to postgraduate diploma or master's level at Massey University within the past five years. We asked about their experience of the distance education offered, and how well the programme had prepared them for continuing development as reflective practitioners, for gaining professional membership, and for appropriate progression in their chosen work.

The survey of graduates section of the research differs from the routine programme review and evaluation in important and unique ways. First, this study gathered data from students who had already completed their qualifications and returned to the workforce. It investigated student perceptions of the programme once they had re-experienced the workplace and labour market, rather than during or immediately at the end of the programme. Second, the questionnaire was designed in a way that allowed the participants to express their perspectives on what learner outcomes were achieved; which of those were important in facilitating their re-entry into the workforce; and to what extent they contributed to their present positions and lives. Third, it aimed to identify which ingredients of the programme were considered most important to the students in achieving those outcomes. It was not designed to measure the outcomes directly against the pedagogical objectives of the programme and the institution. Rather, it expected to describe the outcomes against the extent to which the objectives of developing reflective practitioners, employability, and advancement in the field had been attained and utilised in participants' post-training careers.

The Massey University Human Ethics Committee was notified of the project, which was assessed as low risk by peer review. The survey process ensured the respondents' anonymity, and two of the researchers had arrived as new staff members of the counsellor education team at Massey University within the last three years, and had had very little input into the selected cohort's experiences of the programme. The first step, therefore, was to consult this cohort of graduates of the programme, now working in various settings throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. Their words are presented in italics.

Findings

The course is good. You can make it better. (Graduate)

Of the 75 graduates who were sent questionnaires, 22 responded. We have not detailed results about graduates' work here; however, it is interesting to note that 20 (91%) were employed in full-time paid counselling or counselling-related roles.

Counsellor role development

We asked what helped graduates decide on this university counsellor education programme. From the 19 graduates who responded to this question, the two most consistent reasons were accessibility because of the distance education delivery mode (or proximity to campus) (14 graduates, 63%) and the eclectic approach taught (four, 21%).

From the question that asked about future career plans, we received 21 responses, and more than half the respondents (52%) indicated they were working at least part-time in private practice or intended to do so in the short to intermediate term. This was not altogether surprising in light of existing international and Aotearoa New Zealand-based research, which reports a growing trend toward private practice in both the US and the UK as well as locally (Cornforth & Sewell, 2004). Seventeen respondents (77%) indicated membership of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors Te Roopu Kaiwhiriwhiri o Aotearoa (NZAC). In 1999, Paton found that the proportion of NZAC members in private practice had increased from 18% to 28% between 1993 and 1996. A subsequent survey by Manthei, Stanley, and Gibson (2004) found that more than 50% of NZAC members were involved to some degree in private practice, and in their study of counsellor graduates Cornforth and Sewell (2004) found that six of 14 respondents (43%) hoped to move into private practice. The results of our study are consistent with the cited literature.

Areas of development during and after training

Counsellors were invited to rate their development on seven dimensions using a 10-point scale where 1 was extremely uninformed/undeveloped and 10 was extremely knowledgeable/developed. They were asked to do so at three career points: before training, after training, and now. The mean values of those responses are shown in Figure 1. These data demonstrate increases in self-assessed knowledge and development across all seven facets, and those advances continue both during and after training. The largest gains during training appear in the areas of generic counselling skills, specialised intervention skills, and the sense of being a professional counsellor. (See Figure 1)

Integration of an eclectic approach in practice

Research participants were asked to what extent they were still using the core eclectic framework learned during their professional training. Nineteen participants answered this question. Twelve (63%) responses pointed to the eclectic approach as underpin-

Figure 1: Development as a counsellor
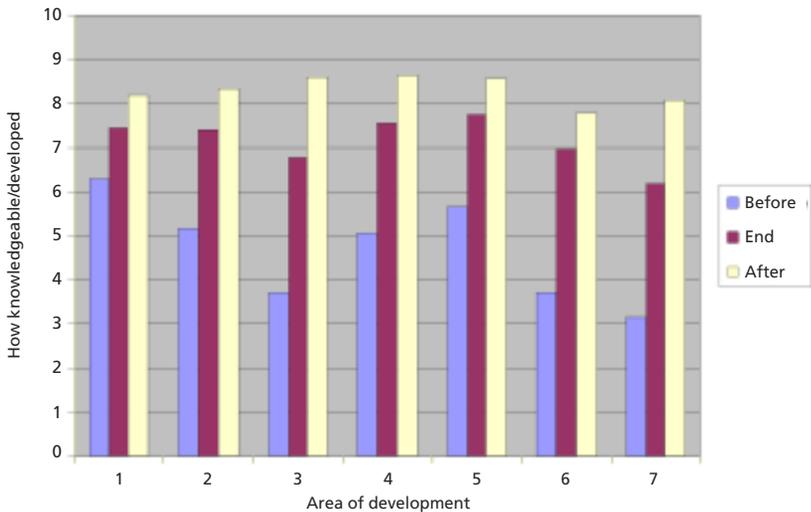
Key to areas of development

1 Personal values related to counselling
2 Professional values related to counselling
3 Sense of being a professional counsellor
4 Personal growth related to being a counsellor

5 Growth as a person
6 Generic counselling skills
7 Specialised intervention skills

ning much of their work. A further six (32%) indicated that they used it to some extent. One respondent said they no longer used it at all.

Key elements for counsellor development

When asked what specific aspects of the programme the counsellors found most helpful, nine (47%) of the 17 respondents mentioned the live and filmed counselling sessions with trainer feedback provided during the on-campus workshops. Six graduates (35%) mentioned the cultural and particularly the bicultural input. Three of these specifically mentioned the learning from the noho marae (overnight stay at a marae, a Māori meeting house). In addition, four answers (21%) mentioned Kiva (therapeutic non-structured group work) and three (16%) highlighted the trainer workplace visits. When also asked what was not helpful, six of 17 counsellors (35%) identified Kiva. There were some varied comments about some of the workshop lectures and content.

What we should include that was not there

The strongest theme here from 14 respondents was for more depth on specific approaches and perhaps fewer of them; more on couple, family, and organisational work, particularly the former; and some called for greater input from a human development perspective and also more from a medical-model mental health view.

What we should do more of that was perhaps there already

Five of 16 responses (31%) wanted more depth on specific intervention strategies and four (25%) of the replies recommended more Kiva therapeutic group work.

*What we should drop from the programme content*

Four of 15 responses (27%) suggested that Kiva should be dropped or changed. There were no other strong themes, though several comments about some of the lecture-style presentations were again present.

Helpful professional development events outside training

Asked to describe helpful events outside the programme, nine of 17 (53%) indicated clinical supervision as being important, seven (41%) indicated their placements and counselling practice were key elements of their learning, six (35%) included personal life experiences, six (35%) mentioned external training, and four (24%) found professional networking beneficial.

Rating the learning

In an attempt to rank what was seen as the likely significant learning both within and outside the programme, we asked the participants to rate 16 experiences encountered during their development as professional counsellors on a 10-point scale of importance/usefulness. The mean scores for these are displayed in graph form in Figure 2. These results tend to replicate the data from the more open questions portrayed above. Most significantly, 90% or more of the respondents rated the following at greater than 6 on the Mean Usefulness Rating: fieldwork counselling practice, fieldwork supervision, workshop video processing with trainers, self-reflection, and learning they did for themselves. Also gleaned from the qualitative responses was the strong theme of support for the importance of the cultural/bicultural learning experiences.

Figure 2: Course component usefulness/importance
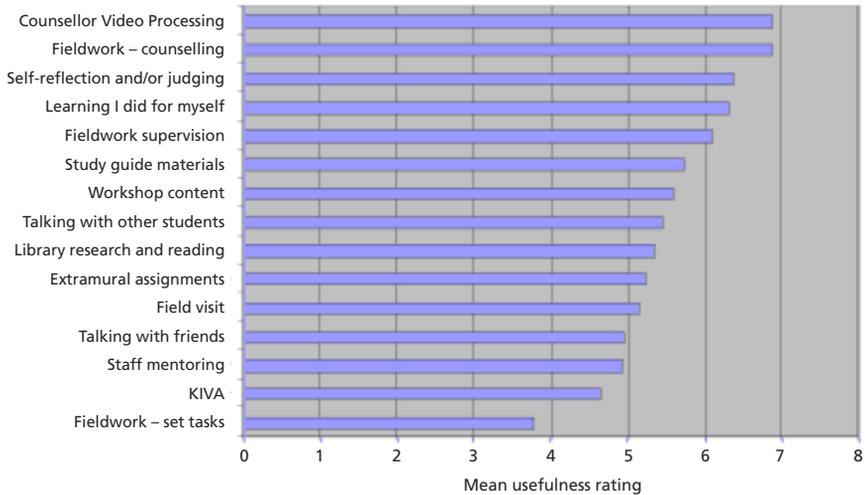
Formal professional development

We asked participants to list significant activities (e.g., books read, articles read, conferences attended, courses attended, seminars and workshops attended, seminars or workshops offered/delivered, etc.) and to assess how these activities had improved their counselling. This resulted in 17 responses and a diverse and extensive range of books, workshops, conferences, and other professional development activities. The strongest evidence from this question was that all respondents were engaged in significant ongoing learning and professional development.

Cultural/bicultural aspects

After more than 30 years' development, the Massey University counsellor education programme has a valuable tradition on which to build, including a rich integration of Māori and Western knowledge. One graduate commented:

> *The visits to and contacts with certain indigenous people gave me a sense of connected spirituality. The experience helped me to acknowledge a greater depth in their culture than simple cognitive approaches or Treaty workshops.*

This type of comment, along with the percentage (35%) of participants who identified the cultural input and particularly the contact with Māori as helpful, suggests a need

for further research to establish what aspects of that particular experience were helpful and how that contributed to their sense of being competent practitioners. We are also committed to ensuring that Māori team members are a permanent part of the teaching across the programme.

Implications for personal development curriculum

Progressing personal development, when the programme is based on a model of counsellor education at a distance (Johns, 1996; Wheeler, 1996, 2002), is particularly challenging to facilitate and achieve for both staff and students. The Massey programme elicited varied responses from former students in this study:

> *Brilliant course, tough personally but the best thing I ever did in my life—both for me and my young clients.* (Graduate)

> *I think there was a conflict in the roles between educator and "therapist" as staff guided trainees through professional and personal development…I don't know what the answers are as the two are inseparable.* (Graduate)

Limitations

Interpretation of the findings of this study is limited by the sample size and response rate. Using Survey Monkey was, in retrospect, too dependent on having up-to-date email addresses for participants. Focus groups or interviews would be preferable if the ethical issues could be overcome and if funding were available to cover participants' and/or researchers' travel expenses. That said, several strong findings were supported by multiple sources.

Programme changes in direction and function as a result of consultation

The change process was often tiring, as these research journal extracts suggest:

> *Are these changes really necessary? It's like digging a garden, pulling weeds and planting seeds at the same time.* (Staff member 1)

> *So many meetings, discussions, heartache, supervision sessions and more cultural consultations. Change is not easy.* (Staff member 2)

Changes of direction and pedagogical practice have resulted from a range of discussions, readings, activities, and sources. For the most part, greater detail will be contained in the two articles that are in preparation to follow this one. We have made the following changes as a result of the 2003 confidential external review, the study funded by

Ako Aotearoa (Wright & Gardiner, 2009), the staff's (bi)cultural consultation, and the storehouse of different experiences, preferences, and knowledge we each bring to this programme.

Personal development curriculum

Personal counselling is a strongly recommended option. For example, student counselling services are available at three Massey University centres face-to-face, via telephone, and increasingly online. In addition, the belief that reflective journal writing is foundational for personal and professional learning from practice has always been part of the Massey programme, but not in a systematic way. We have now integrated personal development journal writing with block course teaching, field practice, and peer assessment via distance learning. Students' reflective writing is now peer- and self-assessed (Wright & Bolton, in press). This combination of personal counselling and reflective journal writing has become a cornerstone of the reflective practice elements of the programme.

Since Schön (1991) suggested that the capacity to reflect on action in order to engage in a process of continuous learning was one of the defining characteristics of professional practice, education across the human services—and particularly in teaching, nursing, and allied health occupations—has embraced reflective journal writing to a high degree.

Current staff experience and preferences have increased the focus on reflective journal writing for personal development in the Massey counsellor education programme (Wright & Bolton, in press). Although not without its critics (Bleakley, 2000; Ixer, 1999), reflective practice that draws on creative and expressive writing and on a narrative rather than a logico-scientific paradigm (Bruner, 1986) is firmly established in professional education across disciplines (Bolton, 2010).

Changes to the framework

The team agreed that no single therapeutic approach has all the answers. We also connected with a new text on pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy by Cooper and McLeod (2010), who describe two basic principles that underpin their pluralistic approach:

1. Lots of different things can be helpful to clients;
2. If we want to know what is most likely to help clients, we should talk to them about it. (p. 23)

We have also renewed our commitment to advantaging kaupapa Māori throughout the programme. This has resulted in our continued pursuance of regular (bi)cultural consultation, and in particular through the research of team member Steve Lang (2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2011). Conversations with Professor Mason Durie have also resulted in the adoption of a kaupapa Māori component within our ideological framework. For our programme, Durie (2009) provides the Whakapiri-Whakamārama-Whakamana sequence of Engagement-Understanding/Enlightenment-Empowerment, and we have woven this weft with the warp of Cooper and McLeod's (2010) Pluralistic Counselling framework.

The bicultural product that results from these entwined pedagogies we encapsulate as the ARC framework—that is, Attend – Reflect – Collaborate. The mechanics, philosophy, and practicalities of how these two pedagogies are entwined will be the subject of a future article, and the ideas behind our ARC framework have been shared with the counselling community at the 2010 combined NZAC/ACA conference (Wright, Gardiner, & Lang, 2010).

Changes to education at a distance

The advent of improved technologies has revolutionised our interactions with our students, their clinical supervisors, and the student work placements. Consequently, we have been able to move away from expensive and highly time-consuming field visits and replace these with "virtual visits." We use a range of technologies to make this happen, including Skype calls to students and supervisors; the advanced capability of Stream online learning protocols; electronic submission of assignments; networking at a distance with each other on a variety of portfolio tasks; three-way telephone conferencing; and video recording of counselling sessions that are both taken to supervision and digitally delivered to the counsellor educators. These adaptations to our distance education programme will be further examined as an androgogical paradigm in another forthcoming article on the revisions to the programme. All of these changes in the process of counsellor education continue to be reviewed and we are putting systems in place for improved liaison between the university educator team and the many supervisors who provide the essential third component (alongside the workplace personnel) of the counsellor educators.

By way of summarising the planned changes in the programme, and consistent with the values of reflective practice, we wrote a letter to an imagined prospective student:

Kia ora and haere mai to counsellor education!

Dear Intern: Some of the group experiences during the intensive block courses may challenge your "blind-spots." In addition, we strongly encourage all trainees to attend therapy here with student counselling, if you haven't already used counselling services nearer home. The cost of this service is covered by your student services fee paid at enrolment. Although the research to support this policy is inconclusive, we are of the opinion that becoming a client strengthens both the "personal awareness" strand of professional development and the learning about professional identity. (Please read the article by Norcross, 2005, as well as the other references we have included for you in this letter, preferably before you join us.) In addition, it is also worth noting that experience of both individual and group counselling as a client is required for full membership of Te Roopu Kaiwhiriwhiri o Aotearoa—The New Zealand Association of Counsellors. You might also like to reflect on the therapy sessions afterwards in your reflective journal, asking yourself: How does this counsellor open a session? How did he or she explain the approach used? How does it feel to be in the client's chair? What emerged that surprised me? How was my culture valued?

We emphasise a pluralistic approach (see the set text by Cooper & McLeod, 2010) based on a collaborative working alliance between you and your clients. Around this pluralistic approach we wrap the bicultural framework provided to us by Professor Mason Durie (2009). Our honouring of the intent of te Tiriti o Waitangi is further explored by Lang (2008). Feedback from a survey of graduates highlights the importance of the cultural, and particularly the bicultural, content of the programme. Cooper and McLeod (2010) noted that a pluralistic approach accommodates the cultural diversity of both client and therapist beliefs about the nature and means of therapeutic change. Furthermore, evidence shows that for the most part, no one theoretical orientation outscores any other in counselling outcome research (Wampold, 2001) but that certain factors are essential for effective practice (Cooper, 2008).

The clear message from former students is that filmed practice in groups of three, with a colleague's real issues and peer observation from a third colleague and with constructive critique from staff members, is the most useful part of the programme. Later in your practicum, you will be asked to record your counselling sessions, with client consent, to take to supervision on a regular basis and not just for assessment purposes. Again, there is evidence that this kind of reflective practice prepares professionals to be systematic and "self-monitoring" throughout

their training (Cox, 2005) and is a "good habit" for future practice and development. Along with actual supervised counselling practice in the field and the video reviews already mentioned, this type of reflective practice was rated by former students as one of the three most important contributors in their counsellor preparation to their counselling competence. This aligns with the emerging research suggesting that the difference between the most and least effective practitioners is that the most effective counsellor, both reflectively and at a skills level, is continuously evaluating, reviewing, discussing, and revising his or her work with clients (Miller, Hubble, & Duncan, 2008).

We look forward to working with you with aroha, manaakitanga, and respect. Kind regards: The Team.

Future directions

Changes in the Massey University counsellor education programme have been influenced by many factors: political forces, for example the policies of the Tertiary Education Commission; the university's strategic plans and missions; professional body requirements; and the interests, experience, and preferences of the current teaching team. Graduates' views continue to be integrated into our thinking and future planning as we incorporate this range of influences into our still emerging programme. For instance, as a result of this research, we have modified the Professional Development themes we are currently working with, and these are identified below in Figure 3.

The theoretical foundations of the programme are taught online, with a choice of papers and one compulsory counselling theory paper. Students compare their experiences of practice in an online discussion forum, which is lively and increasingly interactive. Online discussions also include the teaching of ethical practice, frequently through students' own discussions about their client work and organisational responsibilities.

Historically, counselling students at Massey University followed an eclectic model (Hermansson & Webb, 2009). Theory papers, fieldwork practice, and supervision took place in students' dispersed locations. Students came together for intensive block courses, focusing on professional development. This pattern of learning persists, although we have changed key elements of the distance and face-to-face learning experiences. Graduates reported that providing a model in which "no therapeutic approach has all the answers" was working for them in practice. We have therefore established an approach underpinned by pluralism, rather than eclecticism.

Figure 3: Professional development themes
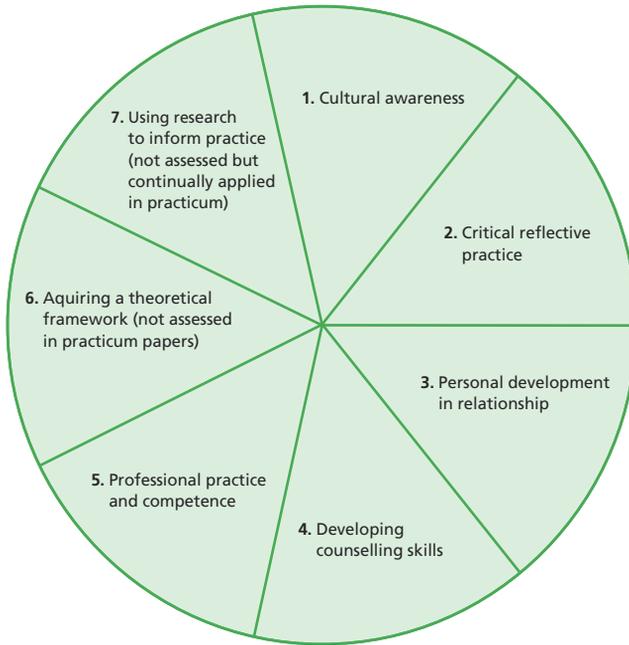
Counsellor education at a distance is not perhaps ideal. We acknowledge that there are some advantages in, for instance, face-to-face meetings with supervisors and workplace personnel. However, some potential student counsellors could be excluded if distance learning were not available in Aotearoa New Zealand. The growth of e-learning and the wider availability of fast broadband may or may not enrich the experience, and these matters will be the focus of future studies, as will the advent of increased applications of technology in the provision of counselling, through texting, online synchronous and asynchronous media, etc. (see Wright, 2011; Wright, Gooder, & Lang, 2008).

Stage one of this study used a design that was responsive to "real life" contexts and findings to extend the existing literature. Priorities for future research in our programme would include continuing to consult graduates about which core curriculum competencies work for them in counselling practice. In addition, we would welcome further investigation into several areas. The first is the exploration of Māori

experience of counsellor education, coupled with greater cultural responsiveness in counselling providers, educators, and funding bodies, so that counselling becomes what users want it to be. Second, we would value participation in a collaborative, national study to examine the critical ingredients of programmes for counsellor development in Aotearoa New Zealand, especially with respect to biculturalism and its influence on counsellor development. Third, extending case study research in counselling practice in Aotearoa New Zealand could elicit a critical mass of detailed, ethical, practice-based data. The fourth and final priority is extending the inclusion of supervisors as participants in learning relationships and processes involving students, educators, and workplaces.

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