

School Counselors' Perspectives on Trauma-Informed Psychoeducational Assessment and Counseling Practices: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

School counselors undertake psychoeducational assessment and counseling to support the learning and well-being of students. Little is known about how school counselors use trauma-informed practices when undertaking psychoeducational assessment and counseling with students impacted by trauma. If school counselors do not use trauma-informed practices, they may cause further harm and provide ineffective interventions. Informed by the ecological model of professional school counseling, this qualitative study explored how eleven Australian school counselors used trauma-informed practices in psychoeducational assessment and counseling. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Two key findings emerged: cognitive tests may not be a fair and reliable measure of the cognition of students impacted by trauma; and school counselors must be culturally responsive in their approach to psychoeducational assessment and counseling. School counseling preparation programs must embed trauma-informed practices and supervisors of school counselors must support their staff in implementing trauma-informed practices in their work.

Keywords: counseling, cultural responsiveness, psychoeducational assessment, school counselor, trauma-informed practices

School counselors play a critical role in supporting the mental health and well-being, behavior, and learning of students, particularly those impacted by trauma. Supporting students impacted by trauma includes psychoeducational assessment and counseling. For the purpose of this paper, psychoeducational assessment and counseling are defined as the following: a) Psychoeducational assessment is “a type of assessment that is used to understand an individual’s cognitive, academic, social, emotional,



behavioral, communicative, and adaptive functioning within an educational setting” (Dombrowski, 2015, p. 3); b) Counseling is provided by school counselors for individuals and groups addressing personal, mental health and emotional and family issues to promote engagement in learning (Queensland Guidance and Counseling Association, n.d.).

There is limited research exploring how school counselors use trauma-informed practices when undertaking psychoeducational assessment and counseling. If school counselors do not understand how trauma affects students, they risk misinterpreting students’ presentation, which may lead to students being provided with ineffective support. It is for these reasons that this study’s research question is how do school counselors use trauma-informed practices in their work with students impacted by trauma? This study is part of a larger study exploring how school counselors implement trauma-informed practices in their work and what is needed for effective implementation (Brown, 2025a).

The Australian School Counselor

School counselor is a term used in this paper to cover the diverse roles within Australian school counseling. These roles include guidance officer, guidance counselor, and school psychologist. For example, guidance officers are registered teachers who have completed a Master of Education (School Guidance and Counseling) in which they receive training to support the social, behavioral and academic needs of all students (Brown, 2025b). School psychologists are registered as psychologists and are trained to provide individual therapy, assessment, diagnosis, and intervention to identified students (Sadusky et al., 2021).

School counselors serve a diverse range of students (for example, age, cultural background, family structures, abilities, impacted by trauma) by supporting their mental health and well-being and learning needs through preventative, proactive and reactive strategies (Kose et al., 2025). Brown et al. (2025) found that training in trauma-informed practices in school counseling preparation programs in Australia does not consistently embed trauma-informed practices within the curriculum.

Trauma and Trauma-Informed Practice

For the purpose of this study, trauma is defined as when,

...individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s function and mental, physical, social, or spiritual well-being (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014, p. 7).

School counselors may work with students who have experienced different types of trauma such as abuse (physical, emotional, sexual), neglect, single-incident trauma such as a natural disaster, family and domestic violence, racism, and intergenerational trauma (Higgins et al., 2023; Palma et al., 2024; Tujague & Ryan, 2021). The prevalence of trauma exposure among school students is alarmingly high. Current

Australian child protection data shows that 1 in 32 children (180,000) under 18 have had contact with child safety services, either through investigations or being in out-of-home care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025). This data excludes unreported child harm, cases not meeting investigation thresholds, and other trauma influences such as natural disasters, racism, and intergenerational trauma. This experience of trauma may have profound and debilitating consequences on students that can impact their behavior, mental health and well-being, and learning (du Mello Kenyon & Schirmer, 2020; Khawaja & Wotherspoon, 2022).

To mitigate the impact of trauma on students, trauma-informed practices can be implemented. Trauma-informed practices provide systemic support to address traumatic stress and promote mental health (Mullin et al., 2024). Research indicates that trauma-informed practices benefit students by fostering relationships between students and educators, enhancing self-regulation, and creating safe environments that reduce stress and improve learning engagement (Brunzell et al., 2016).

If school counselors do not take a trauma-informed approach, they may misinterpret trauma-related responses such as hypervigilance, withdrawal or impulsivity as signs of defiance or lack of motivation (Gubi et al., 2019, 2023). This misinterpretation may result in ineffective recommendations for the classroom (Gubi et al., 2019, 2023). When a student impacted by trauma perceives a school counselor as dismissive and unsupportive, it can lead to disengagement, making it increasingly difficult for the student to seek support (Watson & Astor, 2025). A trauma-informed approach to counseling fosters safety, emotional regulation and empowerment, equipping students with coping skills (Martinez et al., 2020; Yohannan et al., 2022). Without this, students may be left grappling with unresolved trauma, affecting their ability to concentrate, build relationships and regulate their behavior (Alvarez et al., 2022; Dye, 2018; Yohannan et al., 2022). If trauma goes unrecognized, students may continue to face challenges in their learning due to anxiety, attention difficulties or feeling overwhelmed (Roseby & Gascoigne, 2021). To address this, students impacted by trauma may be referred to the school counselor for support. This support may include psychoeducational assessment to identify strengths and interventions that can be implemented within the classroom to support their learning (Campbell & Colmar, 2014).

Psychoeducational Assessment

Experiencing trauma can impact student learning (Phifer & Hull, 2016), with many students impacted by trauma referred to school counselors for psychoeducational assessment. Psychoeducational assessment is a fundamental component for school counselors to know the student's story, the social and cultural context of the student and how holistically this impacts their learning. Collaboration among teachers, families, and other professionals during psychoeducational assessments is also fundamental to identifying factors that impact student learning and inform decision-making regarding appropriate interventions and adjustments for the student (Khawaja & Wotherspoon, 2022; Lindelauf et al., 2018). It is then that the school counselor can ensure the psychoeducational assessment process they undertake does not further disadvantage students impacted by trauma.

Psychoeducational assessment incorporates the four pillars of assessment – interviews, observations, and norm-referenced measures and informal assessment procedures (Sattler, 2018). The process involves obtaining information from multiple sources, the teacher/s and parent/caregiver interviews, information from previous records (e.g., school and health professionals), observations of the student across different settings, administering standardized tests if appropriate, and gathering data using informal assessment procedures (Dombrowski, 2015; Sattler, 2018). The school counselor then interprets the data and identifies adjustments and interventions for teachers to implement in the classroom (Gilmore et al., 2015).

Psychoeducational assessments may become complex for students affected by trauma, due to their behavioral and emotional variability. Many students may feel unsafe or find it difficult to trust adults, feelings potentially compounded by cultural and individual differences (Blitz et al., 2016; Perryman et al., 2025; Walsh et al., 2024).

School counselors must take time to fully reflect on the social and cultural context of their students' learning environment and community. Canadian research assessing Indigenous students shows Western assessment practices often lack cultural sensitivity and may be discriminatory against Indigenous students (Preston & Claypool, 2021). Australian researchers caution there is a notable absence of validated tools and norms in standardized assessments such as cognitive tests that are suitable for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations (Hindman et al., 2024). Such standardized assessment approaches do not adequately account for the social, economic, and political factors that affect the learning difficulties encountered by numerous Indigenous students (Preston & Claypool, 2021). Instead, to be effective, the assessment of Indigenous students must encompass a holistic view of their "physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth and development" (Preston & Claypool, 2021, p. 6).

School counselors can implement this holistic, multimodal approach to psychoeducational assessment (Preston & Claypool, 2021) with dynamic assessment, BASIC assessment, and Tishelman's et al. (2010) framework for assessing students impacted by trauma. Such an approach is important because it moves towards a holistic approach and away from relying on a single source of information such as a cognitive test, since,

many children with complex trauma histories produce low average profiles on tools such as the WISC...that the child's results may have been affected by poor early language experiences (typical of children with trauma histories), the teacher sighting the scores will have lower expectations of the child's attainment (Mainwaring, 2015, p. 92).

Dynamic assessment enables the collection of quality data to effectively understand the needs of students impacted by trauma (Mainwaring, 2015). Dynamic assessment involves the student in a learning experience that enables the identification and interpretation of the processes associated with the student's learning and the factors that influence it (Berman & Graham, 2002). This information can then

be used to identify tasks, pedagogy, and assessments that can be adjusted to consider the students' strengths (Mainwaring, 2015).

BASIC assessment is another form of multimodal assessment used by school counselors to gain a holistic view of the student (Hatswell & Tiffen, 1992), and critical when undertaking psychoeducational assessment as it looks at all areas of a student's life: Behavior - classroom, playground, home and community; Academic - talents and strengths; Social - social relationships; Intrinsic – biological, sensory, physical, peri-natal, and genetic factors; and, Cognitive (Hatswell & Tiffen, 1992). Each area provides information about the student, and each area is essential to address when developing intervention strategies (Hatswell & Tiffen, 1992). The school counselor explores each area, looking at the predisposing and precipitating factors – the cause of the problem, the persisting factors – what is maintaining the behavior or situation, and protective factors - the preventative or therapeutic measures (Hatswell & Tiffen, 1992). Together this information enables school counselors, alongside the teacher, to plan interventions that best support the student (Hatswell & Tiffen, 1992).

Tishelman et al. (2010) recommends a framework for assessing students impacted by trauma where school counselors collect data across the four areas of student functioning, self-regulation, physical functioning, relationships, and academics. That is, the school counselor should assess the strengths and difficulties for each area, along with any central issues relevant to the reason for referral. Recommendations for student support can be made based on this information.

Counseling

School counselors also provide counseling to support their mental health, well-being, and behavior (Campbell & Colmar, 2014). Counseling in the school setting is a responsive service and typically short-term, with school counselors required to refer students to external support agencies for ongoing support (Dameron, 2016). Within the school setting, school counselors draw upon various counseling approaches (Samaila & Enem, 2022), depending on their own training, professional experience, and personal preference (Dameron, 2016). The most common of these approaches include Solution Focused Brief Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and Sandplay Therapy.

Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) is an effective short-term approach used by school counselors with different levels of experience (Brasher, 2009; Dameron, 2016). SFBT “shifts student’s thoughts away from their difficulties and toward the power that is within each of them to make and implement plans that can lead to brighter times” (Brasher, 2009, p. 27). SFBT focuses on the present and future, and is viewed as a strengths-based approach to support students impacted by trauma with its focus on post-traumatic success rather than addressing the symptoms of the trauma (Eads & Lee, 2019).

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) may help students change negative thought patterns, which can improve feelings and behaviors (Corey, 2017; Pugh, 2010). It is effective in school settings because it is time-limited, skill-focused, behaviorally oriented, and adaptable to group settings (Chafouleas et al., 2016). CBT programs have also shown to be effective for students impacted by trauma. For example,

Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) supports students affected by trauma by enhancing emotional regulation and helping them process trauma (McGuire et al., 2021), and Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) focuses on reducing trauma symptoms, teaching stress management skills, and fostering parent and peer support (Chafouleas et al., 2016). CBT may also be an effective approach with Indigenous people when used in “conjunction with other interventions and world views” (Darnett et al., 2024, p. 16).

Sandplay Therapy is also used in schools, particularly for students from diverse cultural backgrounds who have experienced trauma (Goss & Campbell, 2008; Pearson, 2003). School students often find it challenging to articulate their emotions verbally, particularly when grappling with traumatic experiences. Sandplay encourages students to convey their feelings and experiences by manipulating sand, water, and symbols, enabling them to externalize their internal struggles and a deeper emotional expression and healing (Goss & Campbell, 2004).

PURPOSE AND RATIONALE

With the increasing prevalence of students in schools impacted by trauma, school counselors must use trauma-informed practices to best support students within the school setting. Little is known about how school counselors use trauma-informed practices in psychoeducational assessment and counseling. This paper describes the trauma-informed approach school counselors in Australia take to psychoeducational assessment and counseling. The findings and implications contribute to the development of school counseling preparation programs, which equip school counselors to undertake a trauma-informed approach to psychoeducational assessment and counseling to support students impacted by trauma.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was informed by the ecological model of professional school counseling (McMahon et al., 2014; McMahon & Mason, 2018). This model provides a framework for exploring how school counselors work with and across systems to support student well-being. The model is based on ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and highlights the interconnectedness of students’ academic, emotional and social environments. It includes four primary functions of school counselors i) understand students within their multiple and unique context, ii) work directly with students from an ecological perspective, iii) participate in an ongoing cycle of multi-level assessment and interventions, and iv) use leadership, advocacy and collaboration to help create and maintain a healthy system that promotes success for all students (McMahon et al., 2014; McMahon & Mason, 2018). These functions are relevant to understanding how school counselors implement trauma-informed practices in their work.

METHODS

Recruitment

Ethics approval was secured from the University Ethics Committee before recruitment. Convenience sampling was employed, where participants were sourced through the researcher’s professional connections. It is worth noting that the participants recruited may reflect the researcher’s bias. The inclusion criteria required participants currently work as school counselors in Australia and self-identify as using trauma-informed practices in their work. The researcher contacted potential participants via email, inviting them to take part in an online recorded semi-structured interview lasting about 60 minutes. Participants received an email containing the information sheet and consent form and were made aware participation was voluntary, they could withdraw without penalty, and identifying details would be anonymized during transcription. Participants submitted the signed consent form before the interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom or Teams. The university’s transcription service, which is powered by Amazon Transcribe, completed interview transcriptions.

Participants

Eleven Australian school counselors participated in an individual semi-structured interview averaging 45 minutes. Participant demographics are (Table 1): Years of experience as a school counselor ranged from 0-5 years (n = 5), 6 - 10 years (n= 2), 11-15 years (n =1), 16 -20 years (n = 2), 20+ years (n = 1); Participants currently work across different geographical areas – metropolitan (n= 7), urban (n= 1), rural (n =1), and remote (n=2); the types of schools where school counselors worked include primary (n=6), secondary (n=4), and P-12 (n=1). Participants reported in engaging in trauma-informed practice professional development: books/academic papers (n=4); podcasts (n=1); professional development from a training organization (n=9); employer-provided training (n=2); Master of Education (School Guidance and Counseling) (n=4); other post-graduate courses (n=2); supervision (n=2); conferences (n=2); online training/webinars (n=2); speaking to experts in trauma-informed practice (n=2).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Years as a School Counselor	Geographical Area	School Type	Professional Development in Trauma-Informed Practice
Sophie	16	Metropolitan	Primary	Books, podcasts, professional learning provided by employer, Circle of Security

Jane	24	Rural	Primary	Supervision, conferences, online training, professional learning provided by employer
Pam	20	Metropolitan	Primary	Reading, Berry Street, student protection
Margie	15	Metropolitan	P-12	Reading, Berry Street, speaking to experts
Tara	5	Urban	Secondary	Conference, supervision, Graduate Certificate, online training, Berry Street, Beacon House
Chantel	6	Metropolitan	Primary	MEd School Guidance and Counseling, Berry Street, Short courses, Australian Childhood Foundation
Renee	6	Metropolitan	Primary	MEd School Guidance and Counseling, Berry Street, Resilience Project
Vicky	0.5	Metropolitan	Secondary	Therapeutic Crisis Intervention, Child Safety Officer training, Mental Health First Aid, Restorative Practices
Kim	2	Remote	Secondary	MEd School Guidance and Counseling, Graduate Certificate Trauma Aware Education, Graduate Diploma Psychology,

Sally	0.5	Metropolitan	Secondary	Graduate Certificate Mental Health, Berry Street, Reboot, Be you, discussion with people MEd School Guidance and Counseling, books, academic articles, webinars Poverty training, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Acceptance Commitment Therapy, Solutions Focused Therapy, safety planning, domestic violence, Restorative Practices, Love Bites, Respectful Relationships
Miranda	5	Remote	Primary	

Data Analysis

This qualitative research was informed by the ecological model of professional school counseling (McMahon et al., 2014; McMahon & Mason, 2018) to answer the question: How do you use trauma-informed practices in your work with students impacted by trauma? Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to analyze the interview data from eleven Australian school counselors. The researcher de-identified interview transcripts before analyzing the data, which followed the phases of: 1) becoming familiar with the data; 2) coding; 3) generating initial themes; 4) developing and refining themes; 5) refining, defining and naming themes; and, 6) write up (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

During phase 1, the researcher became acquainted with the data, thoroughly reading each interview transcript multiple times and noting insights related to the data. Phase 2, coding of each transcript occurred and entered into a spreadsheet. The researcher reflected on why they were drawn to certain codes by identifying assumptions and experiences that informed interpretations. In phases 3 and 4, coded data were grouped into potential themes and documented in the spreadsheet, reviewing the themes iteratively to determine if themes aligned with codes. In phase 5, themes were defined and named to ensure they were accurate, distinct and

meaningful, and recorded in the spreadsheet. Phase 6 is this article, incorporating participant quotations to explain each of the three themes.

Limitations

Participants in this research were identified by the researcher for their familiarity with school counselors practicing trauma-informed practices. This selection bias means the findings may not accurately represent the experiences or perspectives of a broader group of school counselors. The sample size of eleven does represent the voice of school counselors who have been educated to be culturally responsive to students impacted by trauma and who know that trauma-informed practices need to be holistic when undertaking psychoeducational assessment and counseling with students impacted by trauma.

Positionality

The researcher is an Australian school counselor educator with previous experience as a school counselor using trauma-informed practices in their approach to psychoeducational assessment and counseling, and a supervisor of school counselors. These professional experiences meant the researcher entered the study with assumptions and biases regarding school counselors' use of trauma-informed practices. For example, as a school counselor educator, the researcher teaches psychoeducational assessment and counseling units in a Master of Education (School Guidance and Counseling) course that embeds trauma-informed practices.

Trustworthiness of Findings

Trustworthiness strategies were used to increase the credibility of the findings (Guba, 1981). Throughout the interviews and data analysis, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to capture the progression of thoughts, assumptions, and research directions (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Guba, 1981). This journal served as a tool to document the researcher's positionality, illustrating how personal values and lived experiences as a school counselor and educator shaped interpretations, fostered self-awareness, and influenced the construction of shared meanings. It also provided a space for critical reflection on potential biases, such as preconceived expectations about participants' responses on how they approached psychoeducational assessment and counseling and how these assumptions might have impacted the research process and analysis.

Member checking was used during the interviews, where the researcher reflected and confirmed participants' meanings to the interview questions. The researcher engaged in peer debriefing with two colleagues knowledgeable in trauma-informed education, reviewing both the research methodology and findings to assist in uncovering any inconsistencies and biases (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS

The findings show three themes of considerations by school counselors when undertaking psychoeducational assessment and counseling with students impacted by

trauma (Table 2) 1) working with students impacted by trauma; 2) psychoeducational assessment; and 3) counseling. This presentation of findings includes quotes by participants whose names have been changed.

Table 2: Themes - School Counselors' use of Trauma-Informed Practices

Theme	Example of participant quotes	Functions of the school counselor (McMahon et al., 2014; McMahon & Mason, 2018)
Theme 1: Working with students impacted by trauma		
Individual approach	"Not a one size fits all" (Kim)	i) understand students within their multiple and unique context
Cultural responsiveness	"Cultural factors need to be considered as well. It's making sure you've got all that information in your mind to how to culturally support these students." (Chantel)	i) understand students within their multiple and unique context
Self-reflection	"You have to work hard to be non-judgmental. You have to challenge your own thoughts...you have to be aware of your own triggers and be thinking about that." (Sophie)	i) understand students within their multiple and unique
Theme 2: Psychoeducational assessment		
Relevance of cognitive tests	"...I'll try not to get too involved in the one-on-one assessment like a WISC [cognitive test] because I think that you're not going to get a fair measure, it's not going to be valid. You're going to only get the measure of the student at that point in time, which may not be a fair evaluation of what they [student] can actually do." (Pam)	ii) work directly with students from an ecological perspective
Relationships	"I spend a lot of time developing relationships with them. I make sure that I am present around the classroom so they're used to seeing me. Then I will talk with them about what I have been asked to do [psychoeducational assessment]." (Jane)	ii) work directly with students from an ecological perspective

Theme 3: Counseling

Trauma-informed counseling environment	"Provide a safe, quiet and private environment and assure kids of their confidentiality. But also making them aware that if you're at all concerned that you're going to need to report it [to child safety services]." (Jane)	ii) work directly with students from an ecological perspective
Trauma-informed counseling approaches	"I saw some amazing transformation in some kids through this [sandplay therapy]. Because a lot of the time you don't have words. There are no words to sort of process the things that are going on or have been going on. So, where you can take the verbal out of it can provide a really nice safe process in place for you and the student to work out what's going on. What's magical is that you don't need to know all of the ins and outs [of the student's trauma]." (Pam)	ii) work directly with students from an ecological perspective

Working with Students Impacted by Trauma

The first theme, working with students impacted by trauma, explains what school counselors do when undertaking psychoeducational assessment and counseling to ensure they are working in a holistic trauma-informed way. School counselors identified three areas of their practice that are critical when working with students impacted by trauma: taking an individual approach; cultural responsiveness; and self-reflection.

Individual Approach

What was important to school counselors was that their approach to working with a student impacted by trauma was “not a one size fits all” (Kim) and was “dependent on the needs of the student” (Margie, Miranda, Vicky) regardless of whether they were undertaking psychoeducational assessment or counseling.

Cultural Responsiveness

Another important consideration is for the school counselor to be culturally responsive. Chantel explained, “cultural factors need to be considered as well. It’s making sure you’ve got all that information in your mind and how to culturally support these students.” Chantel went further stating, “you’ve got Indigenous perspectives to think about as well.” Jane agreed, “You’ve got to have that cultural understanding and whether you need somebody from that culture there with you

initially.” Sally highlighted how critical it is to “be aware of the stuff that we carry as well. You’ve got to be aware of your own history, our own biases, our own culture, our privilege, and the way that intersects with the young people that we work with.”

Self-Reflection

Self-reflection was identified as being important for school counselors to effectively implement trauma-informed practices (Margie, Sophie, Vicky, Jane, Sally). Margie reflected, “I really have to check myself, particularly with some students who I find a little more challenging. I guess a lot of reflecting, on what this person has gone through or what I know.” Sophie noted, “you have to work hard to be non-judgmental. You have to challenge your own thoughts...you have to be aware of your own triggers and be thinking about that.” Vicky shared the importance of being regulated, and to “find ways to regulate myself, because I am not going to be of use to anybody if I am dysregulated.”

Psychoeducational Assessment

The second theme presents how school counselors use trauma-informed practice when undertaking psychoeducational assessment, with two sub themes being: relevance of cognitive tests; and relationships.

Psychoeducational Assessment is a key component of the school counselor’s role, particularly in primary schools, as education support needs are usually identified before a student enters secondary school (Rice & Bramston, 1999). School counselors reported two considerations to approach psychoeducational assessment in a trauma-informed way: relevance of cognitive tests and relationships.

Relevance of Cognitive Tests

School counselors reported feeling pressure from schools to administer a cognitive test on students impacted by trauma due to the difficulties they face with learning. In the words of Jane,

You get a lot of pressure from schools to assess students even when they [leadership] identify that they’re [student] suffering. But they [leadership] don’t seem to have that understanding that children [impacted by trauma] need time in a stable and safe environment before you can do an assessment.... So that’s one of the things that’s educating the schools around what is needed, what sort of things needs to be in place before you consider an assessment. For example, attendance has improved, and they’re [student] in a safe environment. We’re going to be monitoring them for a period of 6 months, seeing how these students gain academically, socially, and emotionally, and then review at the end of six months and then determine whether an assessment may be required or not.

Pam explained,

I’ll try not to get too involved in the one-on-one assessment like a WISC [cognitive test] because I think that you’re not going to get a fair measure, it’s

not going to be valid. You're going to only get the measure of the student at that point in time, which might not be a fair evaluation of what they [student] can actually do. But there are some other things that you might want to understand, you know, social-emotional profile and how they're functioning at home and school.

Pam shared instead "look at oral language or communication can help us sort of structure a bit of support around that to improve what the outcomes are." Miranda remarked on the importance of using a non-standardized approach and a strengths-based approach when assessing students impacted by trauma.

Relationships

School counselors shared that the heart of their trauma-informed approach to psychoeducational assessment was building relationships with the students.

Jane noted the importance of building relationships with the students prior to psychoeducational assessment,

I spend a lot of time developing relationships with them. I make sure that I am present around the classroom so that they are used to seeing me. Then, I will talk with them about what I have been asked to do. So, I'll sit down and chat with them and say, "Look, I've been asked to do some work with you to find out more about how you learn, and which ways you learn best, and which ways you might find a little bit harder to learn". Then what I do is observe them in class. I'm with them out in the playground, developing lots of rapport, collecting lots of information about how they're learning in different subject areas and how they're interacting.

Counseling

The second theme that emerged was counseling. Counseling is another component of the school counselors' role. Within this theme there are two sub-themes: trauma-informed counseling environment; and trauma-informed counseling approaches.

Trauma-Informed Counseling Environment

Establishing safety and relationships was identified as key to taking a trauma-informed approach to counseling. Jane stated the need to, "provide a safe, quiet and private environment and assure kids of their confidentiality. But also making them aware that if you're at all concerned that you're going to need to report it [child safety services]. So being right up front and clear with them". Kim also noted the importance of "providing a safe environment."

Margie expressed the importance of relationships and consistency, "I'll just develop the relationship initially. I'll try to find out a bit about them. I allow them to ask me questions. I just try to keep sessions routine and consistent."

Sophie highlighted the importance of, “having a non-judgmental approach”. Tara concurred by identifying the importance of “that unconditional positive regard.”

Trauma-Informed Counseling Approaches

Trauma-informed counseling approaches reported to be used by school counselors included Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Solutions Focused Therapy, and Sandplay Therapy.

Pam described her experiences of using sandplay with students impacted by trauma,

I saw some amazing transformation in some kids through this. Because a lot of the time you don't have words. There are no words to sort of process the things that are going on or have been going on. So, where you can take the verbal out of it can provide a really nice safe process in place for you and the student to work out what's going on. What's magical is that you don't need to know all of the ins and outs [of the student's trauma].

Other school counselors shared how they often used Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) as well as incorporating other approaches to counsel students impacted by trauma. Jane reflected on her counseling approach saying, " Sometimes, depending on what you're doing, you might be doing some CBT when you're looking at feelings and emotions, especially when you're looking at behavior." Miranda expressed, "I really focus on a CBT model. Sort of identifying thoughts, feelings, actions. I quite like solution-focused therapy." Margie identified she used, "life story and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. I guess just draw on different approaches." Renee claimed, "I use solutions-focused therapy just because they [student] don't have to relive the trauma. That can be a trigger for them as well, if they got to go back over it [trauma] again."

There is no single approach school counselors take when counseling students impacted by trauma with Kim identifying, "It's really very different [counseling approach] depending on the need [of the student]." Chantel agreed, "it [counseling approach] has to work for you as the counselor as well as the students you are working with."

DISCUSSION

The two key findings from the eleven Australian school counselors interviewed about how they use trauma-informed practices established that cognitive tests are not a fair and reliable measure of cognition for students impacted by trauma, and that cultural responsiveness is fundamental when working with students impacted by trauma.

Cognitive Tests Disadvantage Students Impacted by Trauma

The first finding corresponds to the second function of the ecological model of professional school counseling – work directly with students from an ecological perspective, which means advocating for student needs (McMahon & Mason, 2018).

In this study, school counselors used a trauma-informed approach when considering whether to administer a cognitive test to students impacted by trauma. What is significant for school counselors overall, based on these insights, is to firstly question whether cognitive tests are necessary, then question whether a cognitive test is worthwhile when it may give an unreliable and invalid result, as well as a deficit view of the abilities of the student (Rhee et al., 2001). There are four key reasons why cognitive tests are not a fair and reliable measure of cognition of a student impacted by trauma: a) a student's behavioral response such as impulsivity and dysregulation and inability to tolerate anxiety (Haywood & Tzuriel, 2002; Smith-Schafer, 2024) may interfere with their ability to engage with the cognitive test (Sattler, 2018) leading to results being an unreliable and invalid measure of their cognition; b) The formal structure of a cognitive test may not create a safe environment for the student so creating a safe testing environment can reduce anxiety by creating a climate of trust and encourage risk-taking (Pham et al., 2022); c) Trauma occurs within complex contexts such as neglect or abuse and intergenerational school trauma (Ward, 2024). Cognitive tests may not capture these nuances, leading to an incomplete understanding of the child's cognitive strengths and needs; and, d) The use of cognitive tests is a social justice issue as it does not consider the cultural, political and socioeconomic background of students impacted by trauma. That is, these cognitive tests can result in biased results that do not accurately reflect the student's potential (Haywood & Tzuriel, 2002; Sevon & Dowtin, 2020).

The school counselors who have spoken here represent a paradigm shift in psychoeducational assessment. They believe the focus should be on a student's social emotional factors, and language and communication skills, the areas impacted by trauma (Smith-Schafer, 2024). School counselors also advocated for a multimodal strengths-based approach to psychoeducational assessment (Pham et al., 2022; Rodaughan et al., 2024) since focusing on strengths facilitates both a holistic view of the student and comprehensive intervention development, rather than focusing solely on what the student cannot do (Rhee et al., 2001). What this finding highlights is that a one-size fits all approach to assessing students impacted by trauma is not effective. That is, it does not identify what the student can do, and what needs to be done, to support the student to be successful (Hewitt et al., 2024; Parker & Hodgson, 2020).

Cultural Responsiveness

The second finding corresponds to the first function of the ecological model of professional school counseling – understanding students within their multiple and unique contexts (McMahon & Mason, 2018).

School counselors must be culturally responsive when undertaking psychoeducational assessment and counseling, which is, in fact, recognized as a core competency within psychology (Anderson et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2024). School counselors in this study identified the criticality of cultural responsiveness by being aware of Indigenous perspectives and being culturally responsive when working with Indigenous students. Being culturally responsive includes working collaboratively with adults from the same culture as the student impacted by trauma, so as to follow and respect cultural protocols and build relationships.

School counselors identified the need to be aware of their own history, biases, culture and privilege and how this intersects with the students they are working with. Doing so enables school counselors to understand students from a different background (Smith et al., 2024). This focus on self-reflection is consistent with other school counseling research as being essential for school counselors to do their work (Better-Bubon et al., 2022; Vannest et al., 2023).

Cultural responsiveness enables school counselors to create a safe environment, build trusting relationships, provide equitable support, and work towards not re-traumatizing students due to cultural misunderstandings or insensitivity. School counselors can provide the right interventions for students impacted by trauma when they address their own biases.

Implications for School Counseling

The findings from this study clearly have significant implications for both school counseling educators, and supervisors of school counselors. School counseling educators have the responsibility to ensure school counselors are well trained in taking a holistic trauma-informed and culturally responsive approach to psychoeducational assessment and counseling. School counselor supervisors must continue to develop school counselors' knowledge and how to apply this knowledge so they can effectively implement trauma-informed practices in their approach to psychoeducational assessment and counseling.

If students impacted by trauma are to be supported effectively and without being further disadvantaged by school counselors during psychoeducational assessment and counseling, it is important that school counselors are well trained. It is important that school counseling educators explicitly embed and teach cultural perspectives and responsiveness into school counseling preparation programs. Such a practice means school counselors can implement trauma-informed practices effectively, and be culturally responsive, and then be able to provide appropriate support to students impacted by trauma.

For the supervisors of school counselors, the findings from this study identify the importance of providing trauma-informed supervision, and to supervise school counselors to be strategic in determining whether a cognitive test is appropriate for a student impacted by trauma. Supervisors need to support school counselors in knowing how to undertake a trauma-informed approach to psychoeducational assessment.

Psychoeducational assessment and counseling are necessary components of a trauma-informed approach to school counseling. School counselors need to be self-reflective, have knowledge about trauma and have the skills to apply trauma-informed practices. These school counselors, as well as being culturally responsive, need to know the context in which they are working so that they can work collaboratively with students, staff, families, and communities.

CONCLUSION

To support students impacted by trauma effectively, school counselors must take a trauma-informed approach to psychoeducational assessment and counseling. If they

do not, further harm to students may occur due to a lack of understanding of how trauma impacts students' behavior and learning. This means school counseling preparation programs must embed trauma-informed practices, including cultural responsiveness, into their programs to ensure school counselors are well trained to support students impacted by trauma.

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