



School Counselling 2.0: Reimagining School Wellbeing through the Lens of Positive Psychology 2.0

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Abstract. In the high-pressure climate of contemporary schools, counsellors face a tension between institutional demands for measurable success and a desire to address the systemic causes of illbeing to promote sustainable flourishing for the school community. This chapter proposes a pragmatic, reimagined approach to school counselling (School Counselling 2.0) grounded in Positive Psychology 2.0. Drawing on Heidi Rimke's critique of psychocentrism and Christoph Teschers' exploration of *Lebenskunst* (the Art of Living), School Counselling 2.0 challenges growthism paradigms that focus on the pursuit of achievement, and neoliberal narratives that prioritize individual productivity over systemic change, revealing how schools instrumentalize wellbeing and responsabilize students for their own mental health in harmful ways. Instead, it advocates degrowth, simplicity, and an emotional dialectic to foster sustainable flourishing, foregrounding contextual and systemic wellbeing. We interviewed school counsellors in international schools in Hong Kong to investigate their perspectives on counselling. We analysed data using a critical realist informed approach to thematic analysis. The findings revealed that counsellors align – often implicitly – with many of the principles of School Counselling 2.0, emphasizing emotional complexity, systemic advocacy, and intrinsic wellbeing over growth-oriented metrics in their work with students. We conclude that counsellors have agency within a contested wellbeing paradigm, and propose a set of underlying mechanisms and practices explaining how counsellors seek to enact the principles of School Counselling 2.0, negotiating the tensions inherent to their role, aligning transformative practices with institutional goals while maintaining a commitment to holistic, equitable, and sustainable student wellbeing.

Keywords. Positive Psychology 2.0, School Counselling 2.0, wellbeing, growthism, international schools, Hong Kong.

1 Introduction

This chapter proposes a reimagined approach to school counselling (School Counselling 2.0) grounded in Positive Psychology 2.0. School counselling is a professional service provided by trained school counsellors to support students' academic, social-emotional, and career development within educational settings (American School Counselor Association, 2019). School counsellors work within the tensions of meeting institutional and societal demands for time-limited, evidence-based practice, and seeking to take a humanistic, justice-oriented approach to student and

school wellbeing that aligns with their training and values. This tension may be particularly acute in international schools, where affluent parents send their children to acquire social and cultural capital and access prestigious higher education and global economic opportunities (Ingersoll, 2018).

School Counselling 2.0 acknowledges and addresses this tension, supporting young people's academic success while exploring, understanding, and addressing the causes of disengagement and psychological distress. Its goal is the sustainable and ethical flourishing of individuals and communities, recognizing that the wellbeing of individuals is inherently contextual. It is focused on the structural origins of illbeing and advocacy for systemic change, and draws on existential themes of responsibility, authenticity, and personal values.

2 Theoretical framework

School Counselling 2.0 draws on several strands of theory and empirical research from psychology, philosophy, and sociology. It is founded on the pillars of Positive Psychology 2.0: dialectical wellbeing, a systemic perspective, a rejection of instrumental wellbeing, and ethical flourishing (Ivtzan et al., 2015). Positive psychology focuses on positive emotional states, positive character traits, positive relationships, a sense of purpose, and the pursuit of mastery and success (Park et al., 2016; Seligman, 2019). While extremely influential across many domains of psychology, some aspects of positive psychology have been criticized. An overemphasis on positivity has tended to marginalize the importance of negative experiences and can fail to sufficiently recognise that growth and wellbeing are the results of a dialectic between positive and negative aspects of life experience. Negative emotions can foster creativity, problem-solving, and meaning making, but positive psychology can pathologize experiences such as grief, sadness, and anxiety as obstacles to growth, creating a narrow definition of wellbeing tied to happiness and success (Horwitz, 2012; Szasz, 1960). Consequently, positive education programs and counselling based on positive psychology can promote an unrealistic pursuit of happiness (Slemp et al., 2017; Goodman, 2022).

Positive psychology has also tended to place little emphasis contextual and systemic factors in wellbeing, responsabilizing individuals for their own wellbeing while ignoring the structural conditions that contribute to illbeing (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2019; Jackson, 2020). These shortcomings prompted scholars to develop an approach, now called second wave positive psychology, or positive psychology 2.0 (PP 2.0), that recognizes the importance of negative emotions, foregrounds the role of a dialectic between positive and negative emotions, incorporates existential themes such as meaning making, taking responsibility, and being authentic, and highlights the importance of context in wellbeing (Wong, 2010; Wong et al., 2022).

School Counselling 2.0 also draws on Heidi Rimke's sociological critique of the individualizing and medicalizing tendencies of so called therapeutic culture that marginalizes structural factors such as inequality as an origin of illbeing. Rimke describes this phenomenon as "psychocentrism" (Rimke, 2020; Rimke & Brock, 2012). Counselling practices shaped by therapeutic culture prioritize individual psychological growth and personal achievement. This culture, rooted in scientific ways of thinking

about psychology and human experience, give rise to what Rimke describes as “psy knowledge” and “psy disciplines,” framing personal success and happiness as primary goals of education and, by extension, of counselling (Rimke & Brock, 2012). A consequence of this is the responsabilization of the individual for their own wellbeing through an the pursuit of endless self-improvement. Indeed, the individual responsibility to experience wellbeing can be seen as a kind of moral duty, and any failure to be well as a result of weakness or laziness (Zupančič, 2008). By framing problems as individual defects, and by focusing on individual solutions such as developing particular characteristics or engaging in certain practices such as “grit” (Duckworth, 2017) or mindfulness, therapeutic culture in schools deflects attention from structural and systemic causes of ill-being such as bullying, academic stress, or inadequate resources (Whippman, 2017) and limits the possibilities for collective action to address inequalities (McLeod & Wright, 2016; Rimke, 2020).

School Counselling 2.0 is also influenced by Christoph Teschers’ (2017) critique of the neoliberal instrumentalist focus of contemporary schooling, which prioritizes academic and economic outcomes and productivity over human flourishing. By integrating Wilhelm Schmid’s philosophical concept of *Lebenskunst* (the Art of Living) with several philosophical traditions (e.g., Aristotle, Foucault, Nietzsche), Teschers (2017) proposes a pedagogy focused on helping young people to address the challenges of postmodern societies, where rapid changes and abundant choices create uncertainty and disorientation. Teschers’ approach equips students with the skills to reflect on and develop values, norms, and beliefs that address their lived experiences and wellbeing through critical, creative, and caring thinking. Teschers’ critique views life as an artistic endeavour where individuals are responsible for crafting their own “beautiful life” through deliberate choices and self-reflection. There is, therefore, an emphasis on living well through self-reflection and making autonomous choices, developing practical wisdom, and taking responsibility for responding to and shaping one’s own experience.

Finally, School Counselling 2.0 draws on Chatelier and Harrison’s (2025) critique of growthism in educational counselling, an ideology prioritizing growth that links wellbeing explicitly to academic achievement and economic productivity but can exacerbate mental health problems among young people. The authors propose a degrowth approach to school counselling, which prioritizes deceleration, community cooperation, and understanding challenges, aiming to foster reciprocal and sustainable wellbeing. As such, a degrowth approach reorients counselling away from growth-driven logics toward practices that address systemic issues and promote meaningful engagement with the world.

3 Features of School Counselling 2.0

Together, the theoretical frameworks on which School Counselling 2.0 draws advocate for a values-based, contextual-systemic, and justice-oriented form of school counselling. School Counselling 2.0 shifts the focus from individualised growth to meaning making, the importance of context, and sustainable practices, advocating for institutional changes that address systemic causes of illbeing. It is therefore a systemic, schoolwide approach to student wellbeing and development.

Its primary aim is ethical flourishing. By drawing on the existential themes of meaning-making, authenticity, responsibility, and values-oriented living, counsellors help students to live well through self-reflection and the making of intentional, autonomous choices. It helps young people to develop critical, creative, and caring thinking, enabling them to navigate life's complexities, uncertainties and ambiguities. There is a focus on dialectical wellbeing, an explicit recognition of the value of both positive and negative emotions in sustainable flourishing. Emotions like sadness, grief, or anxiety are seen as an integral part of growth, creativity, and meaning making.

School Counselling 2.0 takes a systemic perspective, emphasizing the contextual and structural origins of illbeing. It critiques the individualizing tendencies of therapeutic culture that responsabilize students for their own wellbeing, and advocates for systemic change, fostering collective action to tackle structural injustices and address the root causes of illbeing. It also rejects (and, indeed, opposes) the neoliberal instrumentalist focus that ties wellbeing to academic achievement and economic productivity. It intentionally challenges the (sometimes implicit) view that wellbeing is a means to an end (e.g., better grades), promoting it as an intrinsic aspect of human flourishing. School Counselling 2.0 is orientated to degrowth, rejecting the ideology of endless growth that links wellbeing to academic and economic success, and instead prioritizing deceleration, meaningful rather than transactional relationships, cooperation over competition, and understanding challenges rather than overcoming them. It promotes reciprocal and sustainable wellbeing, aligning counselling practices with simplicity and sustainability.

In summary, School Counselling 2.0 aims to support academic success while addressing the root causes of stress and disengagement by reorienting counselling toward holistic, ethical, and systemic approaches to wellbeing. It encourages students to live authentically and responsibly, engaging with the world in ways that promote both personal fulfilment and collective justice.

4 Empirical Study

We conducted a qualitative study with international school counsellors in Hong Kong, and used the data to explore how their practises are consistent with School Counselling 2.0. International schools generally employ qualified counsellors with a good understanding of the professional practices of counselling, unlike public schools in the Hong Kong, where counselling (often called “guidance”) is a para-professional activity generally practised by teachers and social workers without formal counselling qualifications and with little counselling experience (Harrison et al., 2022).

The international school context is a fertile one for exploring the implementation of School Counselling 2.0. International schools offer non-local curricula in English or bilingually (Poole, 2020) and have been described as “educational enclosures” (Ingersoll, 2018, p.259), where the children of privileged families acquire social and educational capital, and are prepared for entry to prestigious higher educational establishments. While these schools often claim to prioritize wellbeing, their academic focus can overshadow efforts to foreground sustainable and holistic wellbeing (Ref). Societal attitudes, such as cultural stigma related to wellbeing, can hinder open self-exploration and authentic engagement with counselling (Tan et al., 2024). Institutional

tendencies to promote happiness or goal-oriented outcomes, including the use of positive psychology concepts such as PERMA (Kern, 2022), can conflict with developing authenticity and a dialectic approach to wellbeing. The emphasis on quick fixes and short-term, solution-focused approaches to counselling over reflective dialogue exacerbates this challenge. Institutional demands for quantifiable outcomes and evidence-based practice can oversimplify student needs, clashing with counsellors' preference for subjective, relational approaches. The capacity to provide space for exploring emotional experiences requires time and availability, yet counsellors are often overburdened. Counsellors' own wellbeing is threatened by excessive workloads, undermining sustainable practice (Jones & Pijanowski, 2023). Advocacy for policy changes, such as community-focused initiatives or teacher training, can be difficult and ineffective due to time or budget constraints.

Within this challenging environment, we sought to investigate to what extent school counsellors implement practices consistent with School Counselling 2.0, the barriers they experience in doing so, and to identify underlying practices and causal mechanisms associated with their experiences. We adopted the paradigm of critical realism, an approach positing that observable social phenomena are caused by underlying mechanisms, the identification of which is a focus of research (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016; Gorski, 2013). Epistemologically, critical realism claims that observed events are always mediated through the lens of human interpretation, whereas the underlying structures and mechanisms are not mediated by such experience (Christodoulou, 2023; Fletcher, 2017). The mechanisms, practices, and observed outcomes that constitute reality are shaped by – and themselves shape – the particular contexts in which they exist, so there is a dialectical relationship between social-institutional structures and the mechanisms and practices in operation. Axiologically, critical realism seeks not simply to identify the structures and practices resulting in observable outcomes, but to critique and transform these mechanisms.

4.1 Methods

4.1.1 Participants and Data Collection

Ethics approval for the study was granted by Hong Kong Shue Yan University [Ref number HREC 23-05 (M09)]. The participants were practising counsellors working in international schools in Hong Kong. Sixteen participants across 13 schools were recruited from the researchers' professional networks, snowballing, and advertising on social media. The cohort of participating counsellors was made up of a highly educated group with varied professional experience in international school settings. All the participants held master's degrees and 14 (87.5%) were female. Their school counselling experience ranged from 1 to 33 years (mean = 10.75, SD = 9.58) and their total counselling experience ranged from 1 to 25 years (mean = 7.44, SD = 6.74). The counsellors' tenure at their current schools varied from 1 to 17 years (mean = 4.72, SD = 4.44), indicating a moderate level of mobility. Ages ranged from 27 to 56 years (mean = 38.56, SD = 8.34). Participants gave informed consent and individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted via zoom. Both the first and second author jointly interviewed all but one of the participants in English. One participant was interviewed in Cantonese by the second author.

4.1.2 Data Analysis

We used a critical realist informed approach to thematic analysis (Christodoulou, 2023; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Fletcher, 2017) to analyse the data. First, we coded the transcripts to identify patterns in the data. These codes therefore represented observable practices and experiences at the empirical level. Coding was carried out using the software applications NVivo 15 and Delve. Initial manual coding was supplemented with subsequent artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted coding. Codes generated and assigned by AI were reviewed by the researchers and modified where necessary. The codes were then clustered into themes, each with a central organising concept, and their coherence and relevance were assessed against the coded data and the entire dataset.

4.2 Results

Thematic analysis of the data resulted in four conceptually distinct themes. The findings suggest that counsellors are practising in ways consistent with School Counselling 2.0, although they are often doing so implicitly. The findings also reveal that counsellors face a range of barriers that impede their implementation of an approach to counselling that foregrounds dialectical wellbeing, a systemic perspective, a rejection of instrumental wellbeing, degrowth, and ethical flourishing.

4.2.1 Theme 1. Dialectical Wellbeing: Embracing Emotional Complexity

The counsellors spoke about the importance of exploring and accepting both positive and negative emotions and rejecting an excessive focus on positivity. This theme aligns with Positive Psychology 2.0's focus on balancing opposites, challenging positive psychology's optimism bias, and centering non-judgmental acceptance over forced growth.

The counsellors acknowledged negative emotions as adaptive, critiquing the pressure to "always be happy," and challenging the pathologizing of normal experiences. ISC09, for example, acknowledged that "dark times" were a normal part of experience and that it was a counsellors' role to "provide what that student needed in their very dark times." Similarly, ISC11 described normalising emotional complexity over forced optimism: "Life is hard, so we can't really say that all of our students are happy – that can't be the metrics for our job." ISC5 described how "kids can stop by" simply to "share something that's been stressing them out or bothering them." The importance of this was the normalisation of talking about and accepting negative experiences: "You know, kids are practicing sharing with somebody and practicing like getting things off their chest."

The counsellors validated students' struggles as normal, not framing them as failures. ISC10 said that "If you're having, you know, big feelings, you might want to talk to one of the counsellors." By framing "big feelings" as a valid reason for counselling, intense emotions could be normalised and not labelled as failures, supporting students' exploration and acceptance of emotional complexity.

The counsellors also emphasised the importance of non-judgmental acceptance and dialectical thinking in their work with young people. They embraced a dialectical perspective themselves, recognising the importance of both growth and acceptance, rejecting binary growth-versus-stagnation narratives. For example, ISC12 described the limits of their responsibility, showing a dialectical balance of effort (growth) and acceptance (limits), and rejecting the binary expectation of constant improvement: “If they’re not improving, I know it’s not fully my fault, because it’s not my responsibility.” Counsellors’ own experiences also revealed the importance of dialectic. For example, ISC11 observed “I’ve never been so stressed. I’ve never been so tired. I’ve also never been so satisfied with what I’m doing.” The holding of stress and satisfaction simultaneously shows how this counsellor was able to reject binary narratives and embrace emotional complexity.

4.2.2 Theme 2. Systemic Perspectives: Contextualizing Wellbeing

This theme describes how the counsellors shifted their focus from individual responsibility for wellbeing to structural factors, their critiques of neoliberal individualism, and their advocacy for collective approaches, emphasizing wellbeing for the whole community. The counsellors’ advocacy for change and community support aligns with Positive Psychology 2.0’s systemic focus and the application of degrowth counselling in education.

Some counsellors highlighted how student wellbeing issues such as academic stress, perfectionism, and parental pressure are rooted in structural factors such as societal expectations and academic competition, and critiqued the reliance on counsellors to manage these individually rather than addressing the underlying systemic problems. For example, ISC02 noted the schools’ expectations of counsellors:

Anytime you have a student that’s dealing with something really challenging when it comes to academic stress or anxiety, or they’re not sleeping, or there’s perfectionism, or they’re in a not great parent situation, and there’s pressure, it is basically the school counsellor that is to drag that student through graduation so that they can make it.

Similarly, ISC09 described how “they see you as a sort of a magician that can fix everything,” and ISC11 describes how teachers would call the counsellor whenever a student was in distress: “The kid’s crying, call the counsellor. They’ll fix it. And I was like, this is weird, because obviously I think my job is a lot more than just that.” By challenging this stereotype of counsellors as problem-solvers, the counsellors’ recognised their schools’ oversimplification of wellbeing, advocating for a broader, systemic role.

They described the importance of community-focused engagement such as newsletters, wellbeing ambassador,s and working with parents: “Ambassadors have specifically implemented a lot of measures to just talk about what counselling is” (ISC09). They also rejected elite narratives of success, promoting inclusivity and wellbeing for all. ISC14, for example, prioritized foundational wellbeing for all students: “You have to Maslow before you bloom. If your well-being isn’t in place, then you’re not going to flourish.”

They described the importance of the school counselling community and the mutual support that could be derived from this. ISC13 said “I truly respect the group that I work with here. I keep staying because of the team and the structure.” Other counsellors spoke about the importance of the wider community of school counsellors of which they were a part: “There’s a big Whatsapp group where people ask for referrals, or support with specific topics or cases” (ISC10); “We have this organization called the Hong Kong School Counsellors Network; it’s great because we invite all of the other school counsellors to come” (ISC11).

4.2.3 Theme 3. Rejection of instrumental wellbeing: Decoupling from productivity

This theme describes how counsellors rejected wellbeing as a means to an end, primarily enabling students to become productive and successful. The counsellors critiqued the instrumentalization of counselling in schools, and advocated for a decoupling of wellbeing from economic outcomes, challenging human capital frameworks. This theme aligns with Positive Psychology 2.0’s rejection of instrumental frameworks, advocating for wellbeing as an intrinsic right.

The counsellors critiqued the structural prioritization of university counselling over social-emotional counselling, reflecting the school’s focus on career preparation, marginalizing wellbeing efforts and highlighting how schools instrumentalized counselling to serve productivity goals. ISC02 expressed this contrast as follows:

We’re taking time away from our wellbeing program...
University counselling says we need this. They get it.
Counsellors say that we need something to support our
students. They’re like, well, you figure it out with the heads
of year. You push it into their advisory program.

The counsellors also challenged their schools’ focus on performativity, where high scores overshadowed wellbeing in the schools’ public statements: “Our average IB score was the highest it’s ever been. But something that we certainly would never say is, look how many students we saved, or how many students we supported” (ISC 02).

ISC09 highlighted a disconnect between the school’s stated wellbeing priorities and its budget-driven focus on academic outcomes, critiquing how performativity overshadowed holistic student support:

I think on paper it is definitely something that is always
prioritized. But very often when it comes to budget, it would
require somebody who sits there on the board and nudges on
the shoulder, and says, by the way, I don’t think that
[academic focus] will actually be helpful for the students’
wellbeing.

The counsellors resisted tying wellbeing to performance and measurements of success and noted that metrics like surveys to measure wellbeing oversimplified the students’ needs. For example, ISC 12 challenged the idea that counselling is a means to achieve productive outcomes, saying that “doing sort of crude measurements of [whether] the kids less anxious or happier, or whatever, that’s not a very effective way.”

Reflection was valued by the counsellors over metrics: “I don’t know if it has to be measured. I think that what should be done is more conscious, time set aside to reflect and to process” (ISC 13). In prioritizing reflection over measurement, the counsellors critiqued the oversimplification of student needs through surveys, supporting qualitative, intrinsic support. For the counsellors, their work with students was more relational and subjective: “I consider myself a space for students to explore who they are. I don’t know how you measure that” (ISC 11).

The counsellors defined effectiveness through subjective student experiences rather than academic outcomes, emphasising intrinsic wellbeing over productivity: “I don’t know how you would [measure] effectiveness. It’s so subjective” (ISC14); “Ultimately, I think effectiveness is also just subjective, if you can feel like you’ve helped them, you’ve been effective already” (ISC07). Counsellors also noted that effectiveness is not the same for every student. For example, ISC14 noted the importance of individual differences in growth and development: “The growth for one student is completely different for the growth of another student.”

4.2.4 Theme 4. Ethical and sustainable flourishing: Justice and degrowth

This theme describes how counsellors approach power structures, critique growthism and the coercive potential of wellbeing, and promote sustainable, ethical flourishing through simplicity and systemic change. The counsellors identified systemic barriers and critiqued coercive practices, advocating for structural change, and promoting sustainable, ethical approaches. This aligns with Positive Psychology 2.0’s critique of perpetual growth, valuing sustainability and justice, equity and sustainability, and ethical flourishing, over competitive achievement.

The counsellors noted structural and societal barriers like stigma. Cultural attitudes in Hong Kong are associated with the dismissal mental health support as a sign of weakness, reinforcing systemic stigma as a barrier to wellbeing: “There is still stigma in Chinese culture, like the shame of losing face” (ISC 07).

By seeing counselling as a space for self-exploration rather than about goal attainment or outcomes, the counsellors challenged performative wellness, prioritizing authentic student growth over expectations of happiness or success. They mentioned practices such as suicide prevention that prioritized structures over individual adaptation. Highlighting counsellors’ systemic role in issues such as suicide prevention and child protection shows how the counsellors foregrounded structural interventions. ISC02 described being “connected with child protection issues, suicide, self-harm, crisis management,” and how “it would be great to have even time in a staff meeting to explain what confidentiality is.” Persistent advocacy for teacher training on self-harm reflects justice-oriented agency, pushing for systemic improvements despite institutional resistance. ISC14 described how the counsellors “made a very articulated move to shift from being more reactive to being proactive.”

The counsellors saw themselves as having a role in justice-oriented advocacy, asserting their agency: “I am agent of systemic change” (ISC 09). They also stressed ecological ethics, such as activities using minimal resources that could easily be adopted in the school setting. ISC08 described how “one of our strategies was to let people listen to music or use their headphones during the break in a in a corner where

it's not very obvious to other students." Proposing low-resource coping strategies like music during breaks embodies ecological ethics, supporting degrowth's emphasis on simplicity and minimal environmental impact for student wellbeing.

They also spoke about a focus on their own wellbeing. For example, one counsellor mentioned that boundaries prevent burnout and allow for more sustainable counselling: "If I continue on this path of doing all the things I will not last very long, and that surely isn't good for my students" (ISC 11).

5 Discussion

Drawing on a critical realist approach to data analysis (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016; Christodoulou, 2023; Fletcher, 2017), we propose an overarching causal framework that integrates several mechanisms and practices: counsellor agency within a contested wellbeing paradigm. Counsellors' capacity to enact dialectical, systemic, intrinsic, and justice-oriented practices is driven by their professional agency, allowing them to navigate the tensions between neoliberal educational structures, such as academic performativity, and alternative wellbeing paradigms, such as Positive Psychology 2.0 and degrowth (Wong, 2010; Chatelier & Harrison, 2025). Underlying practices are the ways in which counsellors strategically negotiate institutional and societal constraints through advocacy, collaboration, and ethical reflection, enabled by counsellors' training, professional networks, and cultural awareness, as well as philosophical approaches like *Lebenskunst* that emphasize self-reflection and autonomous choices (Teschers, 2017). This framework counters the individualizing tendencies of therapeutic culture (Rimke, 2020; Rimke & Brock, 2012) and explains why the themes manifest as observed, as counsellors actively reshape wellbeing practices to align with intrinsic, equitable, and sustainable goals.

We propose four mechanisms underlying the themes derived from the empirical data and constituting the overarching framework. These mechanisms and the practices associated with them are located in and influenced by the contextual structures such as school climate and the wider sociocultural setting in which they are located, and lead to observable outcomes which then reinforce or undermine the effectiveness of counselling. A summary of the mechanisms and examples of associated practices are given in Table 1.

First, we propose that a mechanism of encouraging dialectical emotional processing is enabled by counsellors' professional stance of non-judgmental acceptance, informed by Positive Psychology 2.0's recognition of the dialogue between positive and negative emotions in fostering meaning-making and growth (Wong, 2010). Counsellors enact this mechanism by practices such as the intentional creation of safe spaces for emotional exploration, countering a tendency to pathologize negative emotions like sadness or anxiety (Horwitz, 2012; Szasz, 1960). In the school context, societal and school-level pressures for constant positivity and high performance are challenged by counsellors' agency to redefine wellbeing as embracing emotional duality.

Second, counsellors engage in systemic advocacy for collective wellbeing and structural reform, a mechanism rooted in Positive Psychology 2.0's systemic perspective that foregrounds contextual influences on wellbeing (Wong, 2010). Counsellors' practices of engaging communities through initiatives such as newsletters and wellbeing ambassadors are enabled by their professional identity as systemic change agents, challenging neoliberal structures like academic competition and parental pressure, often intensified in Hong Kong's international schools, and the perception that counsellors' role is narrowly to support academic success. This aligns with critiques of psychocentrism which argue that therapeutic culture individualizes wellbeing and marginalizes structural causes of illbeing (Rimke, 2020; Rimke & Brock, 2012). The strategic use of collaborative networks such as the Hong Kong School Counsellors Network can enable counsellors to amplify systemic interventions, focusing on collective action to address inequalities (McLeod & Wright, 2016).

The third proposed generative mechanism is an orientation towards intrinsic wellbeing, grounded in Positive Psychology 2.0's rejection of wellbeing tied instrumentally to productivity (Wong, 2010). Counsellors' practices of prioritizing relationships over metrics and relational support over economic outcomes are enabled by their ethical commitment to student autonomy and intrinsic growth, echoing Teschers' (2017) emphasis on self-reflection and making autonomous choices in *Lebenskunst*. An underlying practice is the deliberate rejection of performative metrics in favour of qualitative, student-centred approaches, supported by counsellors' professional autonomy within international schools. This mechanism counters institutional pressures for academic performance that often responsibilize students for their own wellbeing (Rimke, 2020; Zupančič, 2008), by advocating for holistic wellbeing decoupled from productivity.

Finally, counsellors engage in justice-oriented degrowth agency, a mechanism drawing on Chatelier and Harrison's (2025) critique of growthism linking wellbeing to academic and economic productivity. This mechanism suggests that counsellors' practices of advocating for systemic change and sustainable wellbeing practices are enabled by their role as ethical agents challenging growthism and aligning with Positive Psychology 2.0's emphasis on ethical flourishing (Wong, 2010). An underlying practice is the integration of ecological and justice-oriented principles into counselling, supported by professional networks and personal commitments to sustainability, countering the individualizing tendencies of therapeutic culture (Rimke, 2020). In Hong Kong's international school context, negative cultural attitudes and resource constraints intersect, prompting counsellors to push for equitable and sustainable wellbeing practices through collective action (McLeod & Wright, 2016).



Figure 1: Counsellor agency within a contested wellbeing paradigm: Mechanisms and practices

6 Implications

Through the four proposed mechanisms, School Counselling 2.0 enables counsellors to strategically negotiate the tensions inherent to their role by aligning transformative practices with institutional goals while maintaining a commitment to holistic, equitable, and sustainable student wellbeing. The implementation of School Counselling 2.0 within the challenging environment of international schools requires counsellors to address the tensions between its transformative, systemic, and degrowth-oriented principles and schools' performativity-driven demands.

As a foundation, counsellors should strategically align School Counselling 2.0 with institutional priorities and broader educational and societal trends. Wellbeing, sustainability, community, and environmental awareness are all important strategic priorities for international schools (Poole & Bunnell, 2022). By referencing the growing emphasis on mental health and sustainability in education (e.g., UNESCO's focus on wellbeing in education; see UNESCO, 2025), grounding advocacy for change in credible sources, and aligning counselling with accreditation standards (e.g., Council of International Schools, n.d.), counsellors can show how School Counselling 2.0 positions to school as an educational innovator.

Counsellors should see themselves as bridge-builders, highlighting how systemic mental health enhances long-term academic outcomes. By doing so, counsellors can position School Counselling 2.0 as a way of meeting institutional demands more sustainably. For example, by highlighting how an overemphasis on performativity can lead to burnout and anxiety, undermining long-term student success,

and how the non-judgmental acceptance of negative emotions can help students recover from setbacks faster, counsellors can draw on evidence from Positive Psychology 2.0 and Rimke's critique of psychocentrism to show that dialectical wellbeing (balancing positive and negative experiences) leads to greater resilience and sustained academic engagement. Interventions like dialectical wellbeing workshops, community forums, and mentoring programs can develop emotional agility, school cohesion, and leadership while embedding degrowth principles.

Given the importance of evidence-based practice, data can be collected and presented strategically to show the impact of School Counselling 2.0 interventions. Mixed metrics to evaluate success, including quantitative data (e.g., reduced counselling referrals, improved attendance) and qualitative feedback (e.g., student/parent satisfaction surveys), as well as metrics that appeal to performativity (e.g., improved grades) and systemic indicators (e.g., stronger peer relationships) can be leveraged to build an evidence base for School Counselling 2.0. Progress can be reported in a strategic way that aligns with institutional goals while emphasizing systemic benefits.

Collaboration and the formation of alliances with different stakeholders is an important part of building buy-in from different parts of the school community. Counsellors can work with school leaders to align counselling goals explicitly with their school's strategic plan, such as improving student satisfaction or reducing teacher stress. They can also provide professional development and consultancy on Positive Psychology 2.0 and ecological ethics for teachers, framing this as a way to enhance classroom management and student engagement. This distributes the model's principles across the school, reducing reliance solely on counsellors. Parent workshops that introduce the principles on which School Counselling 2.0 is based can be offered, framed as providing tools for raising well-rounded, ethical, and successful children. Student-led initiatives such as wellbeing councils that give students agency to address systemic issues like peer pressure or academic stress can also be very effective in empowering students and shifting the focus towards structural issues. Such initiatives align with School Counselling 2.0's emphasis on responsibility and self-reflection while fostering the leadership skills valued by schools.

Counsellors should see themselves as systemic change agents, leveraging collaborative networks and relationships with stakeholders in schools to advocate for structural reforms that address academic competition and parental pressure, aligning counselling with broader institutional goals for community wellbeing. Counselling practices should emphasize relational support and student autonomy over performative metrics, challenging neoliberal educational structures by prioritizing qualitative, student-centred approaches that foster intrinsic growth. Counsellors can integrate ecological and justice-oriented principles into their work, advocating for equitable and sustainable wellbeing practices to counter growthism and resource constraints.

The study reported in this chapter also has several theoretical implications. Our critical realist approach challenges traditional individualistic counselling models by emphasizing the dialectic between agency and structure, offering a theoretical lens for understanding how counsellors navigate institutional and societal constraints to enact transformative wellbeing practices. School Counselling 2.0 invites a theoretical shift towards more holistic and systemic conceptualizations of mental health in education. The overarching framework of counsellor agency within a contested wellbeing

paradigm theorizes how counsellors negotiate tensions between institutional-societal structures and alternative counselling paradigms based on Positive Psychology 2.0 and degrowth. This illustrates how professional training, networks, and cultural awareness enable counsellors to reshape wellbeing practices, offering a model for agency-driven systemic change in education.

Further studies should test the proposed mechanisms (dialectical emotional processing, systemic advocacy, intrinsic wellbeing, and justice-oriented degrowth) in different educational contexts to extend their application. Research could also explore the long-term effects of School Counselling 2.0 on student resilience, academic outcomes, and school climate. Comparative studies across different sociocultural and educational settings (e.g., international vs. local schools, different national contexts) can investigate how contextual structures influence the effectiveness of counsellor agency and systemic interventions.

7 Conclusion

School Counselling 2.0 offers an approach to counselling drawing on the principals of Positive Psychology 2.0, a sociological critique of coercive narratives of wellbeing and counselling, philosophical perspectives on living well, and degrowth principles. The approach rejects individualized performative ways of counselling that are detached from context and reorients counselling towards practices that foster ethical and sustainable flourishing. School Counselling 2.0 decouples wellness from economic productivity, and prioritizes authenticity, dialectical exploration of experience, and reciprocal relationships. By offering pragmatic alternatives to counselling driven by neoliberal priorities, School Counselling 2.0 offers counsellors new ways of becoming agents of transformative change in the lives of students, in schools, and in society.

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