

PRACTITIONER PAPER

The role of school counsellors in response to eco-anxiety

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Abstract

Today's children are born into a climate crisis and are increasingly exposed to its effects. Eco-anxiety is an emotional response to climate crises. Numerous recent studies have shown that the prevalence of eco-anxiety is increasing among children. School counsellors are uniquely positioned to lead educators, parents, and students on how eco-anxiety can be addressed within schools. However, this phenomenon has not yet received attention in the school counselling literature. This conceptual article aims to convey the importance of school counsellors' knowledge and consciousness of the relationship between ecological crises and mental health and to discuss their roles in schools in this context.

Keywords: School counsellor; school counselling; eco-anxiety; climate change; climate anxiety

Numerous recent studies show that children are concerned about the climate crisis and its effects (e.g., Burke et al., 2018; Hickman et al., 2021). The distress related to global environmental degradation is called 'eco-anxiety' and is widely experienced among school-age children. For example, Léger-Goodes et al. (2022) reviewed articles and grey papers published in the last 20 years to reveal evidence of eco-anxiety among children (aged <18 years).

Eco-anxiety is not a psychopathological condition, but an emotionally compatible and constructive response to climate and biodiversity crises. Moreover, ecological concern is necessary to take precautions, develop pro-environmental attitudes, find solutions, and create resources for negative situations that are predicted to occur in the future (Cunsolo et al., 2020). The literature highlights that eco-anxiety is unlikely to be categorised as a psychiatric disorder on its own but that it can trigger and exacerbate existing problems (Hickman, 2020; Panu, 2020).

Children need the support of adults and the school system to manage their eco-anxiety in a healthy way. Schools are ideal spaces where the issue of eco-anxiety can be discussed. As mental health professionals working within the education system, school counsellors are in an ideal position to facilitate the management of eco-anxiety among children and lead other educators. Despite its prevalence among young people, eco-anxiety has not been adequately discussed in school counselling literature. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, only one article (Nice et al., 2022) and one master's thesis (Koontz, 2021) have dealt with this issue. This article can contribute to the discussion of what school counsellors can do to protect the mental health of school-age children in the face of the adverse effects of an ecological crisis, encourage the inclusion of an ecologically based mental health understanding in counsellor education, and provide tangible and practical suggestions to school counsellors in this context.

The Roles of School Counsellors

School counselling is a profession that fills many complex, unique, and vital roles in the education system. For example, school counsellors are social justice advocates (Ratts et al., 2007), and an

ecological crisis is a social justice issue. Children who are criticised for their ecological concerns and made to feel as if their feelings are invalid need advocacy (Hickman, 2020). School counsellors advocate for students whose situations and feelings are not well understood. School counsellors develop preventive interventions for the wellbeing of all students throughout the school and cooperate with other experts and institutions (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). Eco-anxiety is not something that a person or unit within a school can handle on their own; it requires collaboration with other experts and the school community. School counsellors can play a proactive leadership role in social crises needing intervention and prevention (McMahon et al., 2014), and ecological crises are no exception.

Furthermore, there is evidence that those who experience the most acute forms of anxiety, grief and trauma about the climate crisis have less access to mental health services (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018; Sanson et al., 2019). School counsellors are the most competent professionals in the field of mental health in the education system. The following practical suggestions for school counsellors to apply when addressing eco-anxiety are provided, and useful resources that school counsellors can use in supporting students are listed in [Table 1](#).

See the Anxiety, Empathise With It, and Guide Other Adults to Understand It

As children's ecological concerns are glossed over or sometimes belittled by adults, they feel guilt, shame, and helplessness. However, when young people perceive their communication with parents as respectful, positive, and solution-oriented, they tended to cope better (Ojala & Bengtsson, 2019).

School counsellors can ensure that students' eco-anxiety is visible and understandable, either through individual and group counselling sessions or schoolwide awareness presentations and parent-teacher trainings. One of the primary duties of school counsellors is to provide training and consultation services to parents and other school staff members (ASCA, 2019). Such activities may help parents and other educators gain insight into the emotional reactions of children regarding climate crises. In addition, these practices help develop an empathetic approach towards children, normalising their eco-anxiety in the eyes of parents and educators, and creating a common hope for the future through intergenerational dialogue (Cunsolo et al., 2020). Thus, school counsellors can contribute to forming a school community with ecological value. Additionally, such activities prevent stigmatisation of children who worry about climate crises (Hickman, 2020). Online resources that school counselors can use while guiding students, parents, and other educators about eco-anxiety are listed in [Table 1](#).

Cultivate Critical Hope

Despite the negativities brought about by ecological crises, children need to have hope for the world's future. Individuals with high hope can take action to reach their goals, approach problems more constructively, and show resilience, even in uncertain situations.

Hopeless and even catastrophic messages about the course of an ecological crisis can create a sense of powerlessness, leading to emotional withdrawal or pathological anxiety (Pihkala, 2019). Hope emerges when one believes it is possible to cope with the situation and create change (Daly, 2013; Ojala, 2015).

The literature emphasises that a critical social lens needs to be applied to the concept of hope to help students transform their eco-anxiety to hope (Facer, 2019; Ojala, 2015). Duncan-Andrade's (2009) concept of critical hope can help school counsellors formulate a vision to build hope-promoting conversations and strategies for students. Resources that school counsellors can use to inspire realistic hope are listed in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Climate change and helpful resources for school counsellors

Recommendation 1: See the anxiety, name it, empathise it and guide other adults to understand it	
Online resources that school counsellors can use while guiding parents and other educators	
• A guide for parents about the climate crisis developed by Australian Psychological Society.	https://psychology.org.au/for-the-public/psychology-topics/climate-change-psychology/talking-with-children-about-the-environment/a-guide-for-parents-about-the-climate-crisis
• An information sheet on 'Raising children to thrive in a climate-changed world' developed by Australian Psychological Society.	chrome-extension://efaidnbnmnnbpcajpcglclefindmkaj/ https://psychology.org.au/getmedia/825eba10-9020-48d5-bf4c-44b0da388d52/raising-children-to-thrive-in-a-climate-changed-world-18092018.pdf
• NRDC Parent Guide	https://www.nrdc.org/stories/your-guide-talking-kids-all-ages-about-climate-change
Children-initiated websites that school counsellors can use to understand children's point of view, feelings, and struggles about eco-anxiety	
• Young Upstart Ecoanxiety	https://www.youngupstart.com/eco-anxiety/
• Eco-Anxious Stories	https://ecoanxious.ca/
Recommendation 2: Cultivate critical hope	
Resources that school counsellors can use to inspire realistic hope	
• 'Beyond doom and gloom: An exploration through letters' – Contains hope- and solution-oriented letters and studies, created by Elin Kelsey	https://www.environmentandsociety.org/perspectives/2014/6/beyond-doom-and-gloom-exploration-through-letters
• A website that offers information about oceans, showing glimmers of hope by pointing to the light in the darkness	http://www.oceanoptimism.org
• Children's literature that can be used by school counsellors as a tool for 'bibliocounselling'	Swain (2020) lists children's literature that offers hope and empowerment even in the face of many environmental challenges: https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(20)30253-4/fulltext
Recommendation 3: Support students' positive adaptation skills	
Resources that school counsellors can use to teach adaptive and flexible coping skills	
• Good Grief Network	This website curated a list of mental health organisations, offerings, poetry, films and podcasts related to climate crises and management of eco-anxiety and a 10-step program specifically for educators and mental health professionals. https://www.goodgriefnetwork.org/resources/
• The Climate Psychology Alliance	This website contains information about several therapeutic programs for resilience building and emotion-regulation skills for young people to manage eco-anxiety. https://www.climatepsychologyalliance.org/index.php/young-people
• Interventions for the treatment of eco-anxiety	Baudon and Jachens (2021) reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2020 that included therapeutic individual and group interventions for treatments of eco-anxiety. These intervention methods are not specifically aimed at school-age children, but they can give school counsellors ideas about eco-anxiety interventions in general.

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Table 1. (Continued)

Resources that school counsellors can use in supporting students' social and civic engagement	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Beyond projects: Involving children in community governance as a fundamental strategy for facing climate change' 	In this article Hart et al. (2014) discussed in detail how to address issues like being in solidarity with community groups outside the school, volunteering, and active citizenship in schools by going beyond the traditional understanding of participation. Models like the 'new schools' in Colombia and the 'wildlife club movement' in Kenya are discussed as some of the participatory and school-based examples in the article.
Resources that school counsellors can use in supporting students' climate change self-efficacy	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate literacy: The essential principles of climate sciences: A guide for individuals and communities 	This guide produced by the U.S. Global Change Research Program. DeWaters et al. (2012) evaluated an instructional module that was prepared based on this guide's objective. They found that climate change self-efficacy of middle school students significantly improved because of modules. This guide may be useful to school counsellors as a facilitator of collaborations with other school members. https://lincs.ed.gov/professional-development/resource-collections/profile-517
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using Imaginal Experiences 	This counselling technique was suggested by Nice et al. (2022) to school counsellors to increase students' climate-related self-efficacy.

Support Students' Positive Adaptation Skills

Emotion regulation through meaning-focused coping skills, ecologic self-efficacy, and social and civic engagement are some of the basic skills necessary for children to manage the psychological effects of the ecological crisis (Sanson et al., 2019). Some resources that could be useful for school counsellors to facilitate such skills are listed in Table 1.

Meaning-focused coping skills

Meaning-focused coping has been empirically tested for its positive effect on managing eco-anxiety (Clayton, 2020; Pihkala, 2019). Ojala (2012, 2015) examined the coping skills used by children in the face of an ecological crisis and found that those who approached the crisis with a meaning-focused approach had higher ecological self-efficacy and positive mood, took more pro-environmental actions, and approached the problems with critical hope when compared to emotion-focused and problem-focused coping skills.

Meaning-focused coping is exhibited in behaviours such as evaluating environmental problems by putting them in a historical perspective to have a more holistic understanding of the climate crisis, finding meaning even in difficult situations, reorganising goals and behaviours in the face of changing situations, staying hopeful without losing rationality about climate change, and trusting societal actors, institutions, and scientists who work towards solutions (Burke & Blashki, 2020).

Social and civic engagement

Social and civic engagement includes volunteering, active citizenship, and participation in community groups. Children become more resilient and hopeful if they can play an active role in resolving the adverse situations they face regarding the ecological crisis. This protects them psychologically (Hart

et al., 2014). The way to evolve from the role of victim to that of change agent for the environment is to take action (Sanson et al., 2019). School counsellors should advocate for actions that can be taken in this context and support students in their efforts.

Social and civic engagement also teaches children that climate change is a collective problem that requires collective action. This is important because perceiving climate change as a personal matter makes individuals feel like they have less agency over environmental issues, making them fearful and avoidant (McDonald et al., 2015).

Climate change self-efficacy

Perceived self-efficacy is one of the key elements of positive adaptation competencies in managing the psychological impact of climate change (Heald, 2017). Children who cannot directly affect the creation of environmental policies but are worried about the ecological crisis often display emotional reactions such as helplessness, frustration, and anger, whereas taking action improves children's ecological self-efficacy (Sanson et al., 2019). Therefore, how school counsellors can contribute to building students' climate change self-efficacy is a question that needs to be considered. Talking to children about the areas where they can contribute within the framework of democratic principles allows them to see that they have spheres of influence and that they can play the role of change actors in the environment (Hart et al., 2014).

Discussion and Recommendations

School counsellors can provide a space for students to express and normalise their feelings and concerns about climate change. School counsellors can cultivate hope among students by adopting a social justice perspective. They can promote students' positive adaptation skills, namely, meaning-focused coping, social and civic engagement, and climate change self-efficacy.

Empirical studies on the effects of eco-anxiety on the mental health of children and youth, how this issue should be handled within the education system, and intervention methods that can be applied when it turns into a maladaptive state, are increasing rapidly (Hickman, 2020). Therefore, it is important that school counsellors closely follow ongoing research with curiosity to apply evidence-based methods and approaches in schools.

Finally, school counselling accrediting organisations should consider defining climate literacy competencies for school counsellors. International school counselling associations such as the International Society for Policy Research on School-Based Counseling can provide a list of available resources and materials for school counsellors to address eco-anxiety, so that they can access recommended best practices more easily and learn from each other.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

As this is a conceptual article on suggestions for how school counsellors can help address eco-anxiety, discussions about the role of school counsellors in handling eco-anxiety are based solely on the existing literature; this can be considered a limitation. Despite this limitation, the present article represents one of the first papers to discuss eco-anxiety and school counselling in an interconnected way, giving school counsellors practical suggestions based on the eco-psychology literature.

More quantitative and qualitative studies are needed to understand the eco-anxiety experienced by school-aged children. For example, how and to whom students express their eco-anxiety, and how students' eco-anxiety levels change according to certain factors should be investigated further. This would promote the best approaches, strategies, and materials for school counsellors to deal with eco-anxiety. Future studies should aim to identify the difficulties school counsellors face when dealing with eco-anxiety, and the knowledge and materials they need. Such empirical studies can help form a common idea on how to approach eco-anxiety in school counselling.

Finally, tools to aid school counsellors in cultivating meaning-focused coping and critical hope among students are helpful. Therefore, further research is needed to test and refine the theoretical concepts associated with the management of eco-anxiety and to better integrate them into school counselling programs and interventions.

Conclusion

Literature on students' mental health regarding climate change and school counselling is scarce. However, the effects of climate change on the mental health of school-aged children and eco-anxiety are very common phenomena. In this review, I discussed the role of school counsellors in addressing eco-anxiety.

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