

The Epistemology and Ontology of School Counselling in a Colonial Ethnocentric Education System

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Affiliation	Abstract
¹ Acadia University	<i>This paper critiques the politics of Israeli school counselling and the values underlying this profession in a settler-colonial context. It addresses the research question: How do economic, sociocultural, and political forces shape Israeli school counselling? Deploying post-structural frameworks of power/knowledge, as well as postcolonial and decolonial thoughts, we conduct a discourse analysis of the Israeli school counselling profession, unpacking its ideologies and functions in a settler-colonial region. Using Foucauldian genealogy as a methodology, we analyse ninety-four interdisciplinary archival documents, historical incidents, and policies to uncover the political-economic values and morality embedded in school counselling. Our findings reveal that settler-colonial practices and Zionist political-economic interests have shaped the profession, turning school counsellors into subsidiary authorities that perpetuate Zionist ideology and justify colonisation through mental health interventions. In conclusion, this research illuminates that Israeli school counselling is not a culturally neutral or universally beneficent profession but, instead, a paradigmatic case of how mental health professions can be instrumentalised by the state to further colonial and ethnonationalist agendas. Additionally, this study highlights the importance of critiquing the political-economic agendas that influence professional institutions, educational and mental health leadership roles, and their broader societal implications.</i>
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Keywords: School counselling; Post-colonialism; Power/knowledge; Discourse analysis; Zionism.

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Introduction

This paper questions the sociopolitical construction of the Israeli school counselling profession as a settler-colonial and Zionist ideologically motivated discursive device. While school counselling globally is defined

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as a neutral and collaborative profession that deals with students' mental health and academic success (Remely & Herlihy, 2014), here we argue that in Israel it exists as a state-subsidised means to naturalise ethnonationalist discourses, masked by psychological welfare. Our research is guided by an inquiry question: How do economic, sociocultural, and political interests shape the identity, mission, and epistemology of the Israeli school guidance profession? Our methodological query goes beyond challenging the ordinary practices of counselling to the ideological values and institution logics that guide its construction within a settler-colonial education system. This study involves postcolonial and post structural thought in charting the development and reproduction of school counselling as a state apparatus of government. From the work of Frantz Fanon (1952/2006), Edward Said (1978; 1993), and Michel Foucault (1972; 1980), we used genealogical critique and discourse analysis to examine how professional knowledge is historically constructed in Israeli school counselling in the promotion of Zionist state-building. Foucault's concepts of power/knowledge and discourse are particularly crucial, allowing us to interpret how psychological knowledge is used as a regulatory device—constructing norms, subjectivities, and institutional positions in accordance with hegemonic nationalist ideologies. This scholarship is informed by critical research on educational leadership studies, which emphasises the need to decentre Eurocentric epistemologies and examine how leadership and mental health disciplines function as technologies of governance and cultural control (Arar et al., forthcoming; Clarke, 2022; Fernando, 2014; Said, 1993).

Genealogical analysis was conducted on ninety-four interdisciplinary texts from the 1930s to the present time, including policy documents, legislative documents, psychological texts, and state archives. Two thematic findings emerge from our analysis. First, Israeli school counselling is comprehensively infused with Zionist ideological values, including Jewish supremacy, militarism, and patriotic loyalty. From its inception as vocational guidance for *Mizrahi* immigrants to its current emphasis on resilience in times of Israeli national crisis, Holocaust remembrance, and military preparation (Erhard, 2014; Israelashvili, 2015; The Ministry of Education, 2017; The Knesset Archive, 1960), counselling is a politicised tool for socialising youth into a normative Israeli-Jewish identity. Such functions are what Arar et al. (2023) called instrumentalization of leadership discourses into national objectives rather than emancipatory or relational community engagement. Secondly, the Israeli school counselling knowledge base is constructed from Euro-American psychological paradigms—primarily those shaped by Judeo-Christian moralities like individualism, rational autonomy, self-disclosure, and confessional therapeutic practice (Foucault, 1980; Longman, 1997; Carter, 2004; Jennings, 2024). These epistemologies, which are often presented as universal, mask their cultural specificity and fail to represent or speak to the ontologies of marginalised peoples, especially Palestinians.

In investigating the ontology and epistemology of Israeli school counselling, we are part of a greater volume of scholarly efforts to decolonise educational leadership, mental health knowledge production, and research practice (Arar et al., 2023; Arar et al., 2024; Fernando, 2014; Morrill & Comas-Diaz, 2024). The following article is provocation and critique—inviting us to rethink school counselling as other than an apolitical support mechanism, but as a politicised space where identity, culture, politics, and power converge. As we do this, we contribute to an incipient body of literature that works to reclaim discourses of education and mental health from the periphery and build more just, inclusive, and contextualised theories of care and leadership.

Theoretical Framework

School counselling is a profession that operates within the educational system (Brott & Myers, 1999; Foxx et al., 2016), aiming to promote students' social, emotional, and career development (American School Counselling Association (ASCA), 2012; 2016). Emerging in the United States during the significant economic changes of the early 20th century, vocational guidance—now known as School Counselling—was initially established to serve the United States' political-economic interests by investing in youth and human capital (Brown & Serbalus, 2005; Glosoff, 2005; Remley & Herlihy, 2014). This profession

proliferated after the Second World War (Remley & Herlihy, 2014) and was exported to international regions, where countries adopted the American school counselling model (Alvarez et al., 2013; Harris, 2013). Countries such as Turkey and Iran embraced American school counselling after the mid-20th century through their political alliances with the United States (Köse, 2017). Israel also adopted an American style of school counselling and Western mental health theories (Erhard, 2014). However, there is paucity of studies that investigate the political nature of Israeli school counselling.

Israeli politicians and American-Israeli intellectuals collaboratively constructed school counselling in 1960 and implemented it in schools for political purposes (Resnik, 2007; Swirski, 2002). Israeli school counsellors perform their jobs within the Ministry of Education (Erhard, 2014) and are prohibited from practicing independently from this ministry (Israelashvili & Wegman-Rozi, 2012). The Israeli educational system is inseparable from politics and the Zionist ideology (Al-Haj, 1995; Gideon, 2022).

Settler-colonial practices combined with Zionist values form Israeli social processes, including sources of knowledge and perspectives on realities, modes of thinking, and political-economic agendas (Al-Messiri, 2000; 2003; Jamal, 2016; Sabbagh-Khoury, 2022). The production of knowledge, including social sciences—to which school counselling belongs—is also enmeshed in a settler-colonial paradigm. Settler-colonialism is not only manifested in the dispossession and displacement of native inhabitants, but it also allows for the settler to impose their dominant sociocultural and political values, narratives, culture, and ideologies through systems of knowledge (Said, 1993; Sabbagh-Khoury, 2022).

The Zionist ideology and principles include Jewish supremacy, self-defence, emancipation, power, self-reliance (economic independence), patriotism (Al-Messiri, 2000; Eisenstadt, 1967; Shapira, 2004), nationalism (Al-Messiri, 2000; Jamal, 2016; Swirski, 2002), ethnocentricity (Jamal, 2016; Kasrils, 2015), Jewish salvation through establishing settlements in Palestine, and the need for power to colonise Palestine and suppress Palestinian resistance (Jamal, 2016; Sabbagh-Khoury, 2022). Symbols of the Israeli state such as its flag and hymn derive from Zionism (Eisenstadt, 1967; Rouhana, 1997). Official state holidays follow the Jewish calendar and historical experiences of Jewish Europeans (e.g., the Holocaust) (Rouhana, 1997). These symbols inform Israeli beliefs, thoughts, and public consciousness (Bar-On, 2004).

Zionism emphasises Israeli collective identity and Jewishness that connects diverse Jewish ethnicities, regardless of their religiosity degree (Sagy et al., 1999). Sagy et al. (1999) contend that one cannot understand Israeli society without understanding its religion. The researchers remind us that “every Jew is responsible for the fate of his fellow Jews” (Sagy et al., 1999, p. 330). The Israeli Jewish diverse ethnic groups adopt a core-Israeli identity that is hard to challenge (Bar-On, 2004). Along with the Jewish identity, those groups value patriotism, supporting people from the in-group, and the right to colonise Palestinian lands (Sagy et al., 1999).

Studies directly critiquing the politics behind the Israeli school counselling discourse are scarce. The available literature on Israeli school counselling history (e.g., Erhard, 2014; Heled & Davidovitch, 2021; Israeliashvili, 2015; Karyanni, 1985; 1996; Mar'i, 1982; 1988; Tatar, 1998; 2012) shows that this profession was officially mandated to promote vocational orientation and social assimilation for Jewish newcomers, primarily *Mizrahim* (immigrants from the Middle East). Reznik (2007) and Swirski (2002) have pointed to some political roots of Israeli school counselling such as the utilisation of this profession by politicians to promote their political-economic agendas. However, the studies that critique the values and political-economic interests embedded in this profession are limited, necessitating a reassessment of the principles and politics underlying Israeli school counselling.

We deployed postcolonial, decolonial, and post-structural theories to interrogate the discursive formation of this profession. This study is grounded in Said's (1994) writings on imperial impacts on non-Western cultures and knowledge construction, and on Fanon's (1952/2006) critical analysis of colonial psychology. We particularly utilised Foucauldian philosophy of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1972-1977/1980) and genealogy (Foucault, 1980) to unpack the values underlying Israeli school counselling. Foucault's (1972-

1977/1980) power framework emphasises the intertwined relations of power and knowledge; hence, the term power/knowledge refers to the duality between both notions. Power produces particular systems of knowledge, that is, *discourses* that determine and reinforce power (Foucault, 1977; 1972-1977/1980). This interdependent power/knowledge relationship is historically constructed and spread through the state's institutions, including schools, universities, and mental health disciplines, in Foucault's perspective (Chomsky & Foucault 1971/ 2022). Therefore, power pervades society and individuals' experiences, shaping systems of thoughts and professions corresponding to political-economic interests (Foucault, 1977; 1980; 1988).

Foucault did not discuss school counselling as it is a new profession. However, given that it is part of Israeli institutions, we suggest that this profession should be unmasked. Critiquing it is fundamental because mental health providers should understand the values underlying their professions and the political-economic agendas they reproduce (Clarke, 2022; Fernando, 2014).

Methodology and Methods

Given the focus of this article on school counselling, Foucauldian power/knowledge theory is relevant to this study, allowing for a critical investigation of power modalities informing this profession and its functions in society. Foucault suggested *genealogy* as a research methodology for critiquing discourses (Anaïs, 2013; Foucault, 1980; Garland, 2014). Genealogy uncovers the epistemology and ontology of a current discursive formation in relation power modalities that have shaped the discourse in historical contexts (Foucault, 1984), shedding light on the values underlying the studied discourse in its historical development and critically analysing its current nature (Anaïs, 2013; Foucault, 1980). This exploration is important to grasp how fields of knowledge such as education and mental health function in society in relation to political-economic benefits, shaping social processes and individuals' knowledge (Foucault, 1984).

To analyse the politics of Israeli school counselling, we investigated ninety-four interdisciplinary documents from school counselling, education, economics, sociology, and political fields. The documents encompassed academic journal articles, policies and regulations of the school counselling professions dating back to the 1930s—before the establishment of Israel in 1948 until today. The collected data included legislations and educational and school policies from official Israeli archives, and articles and books on school counselling education, sociology, and Israeli economics and politics.

Using *discourse analysis* (Foucault, 1972), we critically interpreted how the Israeli school counselling discourse signifies the intertwined relations of power and knowledge and politics and values behind this profession (Foucault, 1972; 1980). *Discourse analysis* refers to studying a field of knowledge and analysing power modalities that underlie this investigated knowledge in its historical-cultural context (Foucault, 1972). This analytical framework allows for unmasking power forms and politically-formed values that shape the investigated phenomenon (Foucault, 1972).

Findings

Discourse analysis revealed two major themes representing the values underlying Israeli school counselling: Zionist morals and sociocultural-political knowledge. These themes highlight the characteristics and politics of Israeli school counselling, suggesting it reproduces colonial, ethnocentric, and Zionist supremacy values. By practicing their roles, Israeli school counsellors help perpetuate Zionist Israeli principles and hegemonic Western mental health agendas.

Theme One: Zionist morals and systems of thoughts in Israeli school counselling

Exploring archival materials from the early 1930s to recent years shows that this profession adopts Zionist values of colonialism, ethnocentricity, political-economic, and cultural supremacy, shaping the discourse

of Israeli school counselling. Initially named vocational guidance, school counselling aimed to enhance the vocational and agricultural education of immigrant Jews, expand their colonisation, and thrive politically and economically in Palestine. For instance, Zionist American institutions like Hadassah invested in Jewish immigrant youth to learn agricultural and industrial specialties and adjust to Palestine (Nardi, 1945). The formation of school counselling emphasised economic development and absorption of immigrants from the Middle East, as shown in Israeli parliamentary (Knesset) archives (The Knesset Archive, 1960, meeting 107).

Today, the profession has expanded to include various socioemotional topics but still reflects Zionist values of Jewish ethnocentricity, patriotism, and the need for power. School counselling topics, such as preparing students for military service, learning armament technology, enhancing coping skills during national crises, and remembering the Holocaust, reinforce these Zionist values (Israelashvili, 2015; Shefi, 2024; The Ministry of Education, 1970-1972/2017). Although Israeli school counselling regulations included inclusivity and multiculturalism in the 1990s (Karyani, 1996; Shefi, 2019/2022), these policies refer only to Jewish ethnic groups from the diaspora and the former Soviet Union, excluding the cultural needs of Palestinian students in Israel. Topics of mental health needs, national traumas, and crises do not inclusively represent Palestinians in Israel, reflecting Zionist values.

Theme Two: Judeo-Christianity and School Counselling Knowledge

Israeli school counselling relies heavily on the American school counselling model and Eurocentric theories of mental health, as shown in Israeli school counselling documents (Erhard, 2014; Mar'i, 1988; Shefi, 2024; Smilanski, 1957; Smilanski & Parnes, 1960). Similar to Western school counselling disciplines, Israeli professional knowledge emphasises individuality, independence, privacy, rationality, self-disclosure to the therapist, and career development, reflecting the common traditions and values of Judaism and the Western-Protestant world.

Modern psychology frameworks that have impacted school counselling (Erhard, 2014) are not ethically neutral (Carter, 2004; Katz, 1985; Knijff, 2003; Longman, 1997) but are embedded in White and Jewish European cultures (Carter, 2004; Sue et al., 2022). Researchers (e.g., Jennings, 2024; Heinz, 2001; Issacs, 1997) argue that theorists of modern psychology frameworks, such as Abraham Maslow's humanistic approach, Victor Frankl's existentialist theory, and Freudian and Neo-Freudian psychodynamic frameworks, are influenced by their Jewish heritage and cultural values. Thus, principles, practices, and knowledge in dominant psychological frameworks are influenced by both cultures. Practices such as help-seeking, sharing personal thoughts with others, and receiving a stranger's advice are commonly accepted in Christian and Jewish cultures (Longman, 1997). These practices are rooted in traditions of pastoral confession in Christianity and principles of *Kabalah* in Judaism (Foucault, 1980; Longman, 1997).

Discussion, Conclusions and Implications

This study sought to challenge the epistemology and ontology of school counselling in Israel and asked how and economic, sociocultural, and political forces constitute the occupation as a profession within a settler-colonial regime of education. Through the deployment of Foucauldian genealogy (Foucault, 1980) and postcolonial critique (Said, 1994), the study revealed the deep affinities between school counselling, Zionist state formation, and broader projects of ideological regulation. The findings are against hegemonic constructions of school counselling as a ubiquitous wholesome, apolitical, or technocratic activity. Instead, the Israeli profession is revealed to be a state institution designed to advance ethno-nationalist interests and legitimate Zionist dominance in the form of psychological support and educational services.

Rather than being designed as a response to diverse psychosocial needs, Israeli school counselling was historically constructed to absorb and mold Jewish immigrant children into the ideological frameworks of nationalism, militarism, and Jewish ethnocentricity (Erhard, 2014; Karayanni, 1996; Swirski, 2002). Early iterations of the profession—particularly vocational guidance—were not pedagogic or therapeutic but were

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aimed at creating an industrious Jewish working class to support Zionist colonisation and territorial expansion (Nardi, 1945; The Knesset Archive, 1960). These pragmatic roots persisted and evolved into institutionalised programs that emphasised allegiance to the state, military preparedness, and ritualising national trauma, such as Holocaust commemoration (Israelashvili, 2015; The Ministry of Education, 2017).

These dynamics represent postcolonial and imperial knowledge (Fernando, 2014; Said, 1994) as well as a disciplinary machine (Foucault, 1972; 1977; 1980). Israeli school counselling illustrates how therapeutic or scientific-looking discourses can be integrated into the settler-colonial machinery of the state, making school counsellors instruments of ideological normalisation, while reproducing Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment values. Such principles highlight aspects as self-disclosure, individualism, and agency that sharply oppose Indigenous and Palestinian epistemologies that centre relationality, community imbedding, spirituality, and consciousness of history (Issacs, 1997; Clarke, 2022; Sodhi, 2024).

The domination of Zionist and Judeo-Christian values represents epistemic violence by marginalising other knowledge systems and discrediting non-Western accounts of mental health. Against the backdrop of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Sabbagh-Khoury, 2022), Palestinian epistemologies, experiences, and voices being erased from Israeli school counselling practice reflect not merely an absence but an intentional silencing. As education in Israel became multicultural in the 1990s, it remained centred on integrating multicultural Jewish ethnicities at the expense of excluding and marginalising, or pathologising, Palestinian citizens of Israel (Shefi, 2019/2022; Karayanni, 1996). This multiculturalism selectively functions as an epistemic control measure to maintain the illusion of inclusion and continue Zionist epistemological hegemony.

This study concludes that Israeli school counselling is not a culturally neutral or universally beneficent profession but, instead, a paradigmatic case of how mental health professions can be instrumentalised by the state to indoctrinate Israelis and to further colonial and ethnonationalist agendas.

This study has significant implications. Theoretically, it moves critical knowledge of the interstices between educational leadership, mental health, and settler-colonial governance, and encourages the adaptation of decolonial educational theory and deconstruction of Western professionalism norms. This research resonates with more recent calls to challenge the unproblematic embrace of dominant Western epistemologies in leadership, mental health, and education, and rather to prioritise Indigenous, relational, and praxis-focused strategies that respond to historical trauma, cultural specificity, and epistemic justice (Arar et al., 2024; Arar et al. forthcoming; Sodhi, 2024). The study empirically responds to the gap pointed out by Chaaban et al. (2025), who indicated that most literature on education leadership is silent on the structural place of settler-colonialism in the construction of professional discourses and institutional forms. Methodologically, this study validates the strengths of Foucauldian genealogy as a decolonial and critical approach to examining how professions are ideologically built and constructed over time. It calls for further research following the roots and development of decolonial-friendly helping professions through geopolitical territories shaped by colonialism, nationalism, and racial order. From a policy perspective, this work challenges educational and mental health regulators to reconsider, from a critical stance, the epistemological assumptions embedded in counselling policy, training, and curricula. Practically, this study underscores the need to cultivate critical reflexivity and political consciousness among counselling practitioners.

This study concludes that Israeli school counselling is not a culturally neutral profession but, instead, a representation and political tool of indoctrination used by the state for further colonial and ethnonationalist agendas. Offering critique and vision, this research suggests that a liberatory conception of school counselling must go beyond curricular reform—it must address root questions: Whose knowledge counts? Whose care is desirable? And whose futures are we imagining? In examining these questions, we might be able to begin re-imagining school counselling as a practice not of normalisation but of resistance, healing, and shared humanity.

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