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### **The role of the regular teacher in a whole school approach to guidance counselling in Ireland.**

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#### **Abstract**

A whole school approach to guidance counselling has been promulgated by Irish policy-makers as a model of good practice in the delivery of guidance counselling in the post-primary sector since the 1998 Education Act (DES, 2005a, 2009, 2012). This approach to guidance counselling provision is viewed as a whole school responsibility where schools are expected to collaboratively develop a school guidance plan to support the needs of their students (DES, 2005a, 2012). The role of the regular teacher in a whole school approach to guidance counselling has received very little attention either in the Irish education system or in empirical research. This article will address this deficit through its discussion of a case study carried out in one school in 2012. It will position the findings from the study in the context of the re-allocation of post-primary guidance counselling provision in the national Budget 2012 that has witnessed the substantive erosion of the guidance counselling service in the last two years.

**Key Words:** guidance counselling; whole school approach ; regular teacher; pastoral care

#### **Introduction**

This article will discuss the findings of an Irish case study on the role of the regular teacher in a whole school approach to guidance counselling in the context of a turbulent period in guidance provision nationally. Up to quite recently, regardless of it not being a curricular subject, the provision of guidance counselling in the Irish post primary sector might have appeared to be quite well protected from legislative changes because of the allocation of ex-quota hours to its delivery within the curriculum (DES, 2005a). However, in 2012, as a result of the Irish Government's on-going reform measures and budgetary correction strategy to deal with the economic recession, the nature of provision has radically changed (Government of Ireland, 2014; Quinn, 2012). In essence, guidance posts are no longer allocated to post-primary schools on an ex-quota basis and provision is now being managed by schools from within their standard staffing schedule allocation (DES, 2012). Prior to this, for example, the allocation of guidance hours was one post (22 hours) for a student population of 500-799 (DES, 2005b).

A whole school approach to guidance counselling is viewed as a “model of good practice” (DES, 2009, p.8). This approach involves collaboration between guidance counsellors, school management, teachers and resource staff with the guidance counsellor having overall responsibility for guidance planning and delivery of the service in the school (DES, 2009, 2012). However, since September 2012, professionally qualified guidance counsellors are also teaching curriculum subjects in conjunction with their guidance work. Furthermore, the role of the regular teacher has been emphasised in relation to enabling “some of the curriculum elements of the planned guidance programme to be delivered through other teachers such as SPHE staff” (DES, 2012, p.5). Despite the highly centralised Irish education system, comparisons can be made with recent developments in England where greater governance has now been given to school management in the allocation of career guidance resources in their schools (Evans & Rallings, 2013; Ofsted, 2013). Current evidence from both countries suggest that such changes have resulted in a diminution of the quality of guidance provision to students (ASTI, 2013; Evans & Rallings, 2013; IGC, 2013, 2014; JMB, 2012; NCGE, 2013; Ofsted, 2013).

The case research that will be discussed here was carried out in a large post primary school in Spring 2012. The school is a mixed gender DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) designated school with a current student population of 760, two full time guidance counsellors and 30 regular teachers. In the year the study was undertaken the guidance counselling allocation in the school was a total of 30 hours per week with 12 hours allocated for one to one guidance counselling. Over the subsequent two years it has become eroded to the point where in 2014 it now consists of 12 hours per week in total with only three hours available for one to one guidance counselling.

In the Irish education system ‘regular’ teachers, a term coined by Hargreaves (1994), are classified as subject teachers who do not perform specific roles such as Principal, Deputy Principal, Assistant Principal, or Year Head. The non-traditional ‘service attribute’ and pastoral care role of the regular teacher is acknowledged as a very important aspect of their professional role in the prevention of student problems’, personal development and value formation (Lam & Hui, 2010; Sexton, 2007; Teaching Council, 2011). Similar to the guidance counsellor’s role, the regular teacher’s duty of care role is often referred to as ‘*loco parentis*’ and teachers fulfil this role when students are under their care (Best, 1990; Best 2007). The discussion of the 2012 case study findings will consider the regular teacher’s position in a whole school approach to guidance counselling in Ireland during a period of

diminished resources and escalating personal and societal issues effecting students' wellbeing.

### **Whole school approach to guidance counselling: roles and relationships**

Historically, the delivery of the post-primary guidance counselling service in Ireland is rooted in a holistic approach that incorporates personal and social, educational and vocational dimensions (NCGE, 2004). The need for a more integrated approach to guidance counselling was strongly promoted as a whole school responsibility in the 1990's but it did not gain legislative traction until the Irish Education Act in 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998). Section 9 (c) of the Act states that a school "shall use its available resources to ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices". This requires schools to fulfil their statutory obligation in terms of *access* and *appropriate* provision within a whole school context (DES, 2005a). In order to achieve this, specific guidelines on the delivery of a whole school guidance service were provided to school management and guidance counsellors by the DES and NCGE which emphasised the key role of the guidance counsellor in the overall provision of the service (DES, 2005a; NCGE, 2004). Following the 2012 re-allocation of provision further guidelines were issued by management representative bodies, not the DES or NCGE, that continued to emphasise a whole school approach, albeit within a backdrop of restricted resources (Association of Community & Comprehensive Schools, Irish Vocational Educational Association, Joint Managerial Board, & National Association of Principals & Deputy Principals, 2012)

There is now a consistent policy discourse related to address the high rate of youth unemployment and support young people in their transitions in education and employment through good career guidance services (DSP, 2014; OECD, 2013, 2014). In the context of lifelong guidance a number of key challenges have already been identified in relation to guidance counselling in schools by the ELGPN (2012) including better quality assurance and the collection of evidence on performance and impact. One of the major issues in Ireland, foregrounded by the 2012 re-allocation policy, is the poor level of quality assurance and the lack of a strong evidence base on the impact of guidance counselling for students. Even though a whole school approach is viewed as an established policy and good practice (DES, 2009, 2012) some pockets of research have identified disparate levels of guidance counselling delivery across the post-primary sector (DES, 2009; Hayes & Morgan, 2011; McCoy, Smyth, Darmody, & Dunne, 2006). Following the 2012 re-allocation there is now a concerted effort being made to gather data, primarily from practitioners and school management, to demon-

strate the impact of the re-allocation on students, practitioners and schools.. At least five national surveys have been conducted so far. Two by management bodies (ASTI, 2013, JMB, 2012), two by the professional body (IGC, 2013, 2014) and one by a guidance organisation within the DES (NCGE, 2013). Both the IGC (2014) and the NCGE (2013) are in strong agreement that the re-instatement of the guidance service by the DES is a major priority at this point.

With regard to the evidence, the most significant changes to guidance counselling provision include the reported decrease in guidance allocation by schools with a reduction of 26.67% (IGC 2013) and 25% (NCGE 2013) reported. The IGC (2013) also identifies that during the periods 2011-12 and 2012-13 there has been a 19.8% increase in timetabled classroom guidance delivery and a 51.4% reduction in one-to-one counselling (personal, educational and vocational). In its most recent research the IGC (2014) reports an overall increase of 12.8% in time-tabled classroom delivery of guidance, and a 58.8% reduction in one-to-one guidance counselling. Disconcertingly, it finds that:

“While there was an overall 23.7% loss of practice hours, analyses further found that guidance counsellors spent 84.1% of those hours’ time-tabled for classroom teaching of subjects other than guidance; subject teaching (62.6%), S.P.H.E. (23.8%), and other (13.6%). This equates to 1 in 5 guidance counsellors now performing a full-time teaching role which equates to a removal of approximately 168 guidance counsellors from the guidance counselling service in second level schools and colleges of further education”.

(IGC, 2014, p.6)

The proposition of a curricular whole school guidance framework, with the guidance counsellor at the centre of its delivery, by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2007) never materialised and could now be viewed by some as a lost opportunity in light of the current situation. However, concerns about the erosion of the personal counselling dimension of the work were articulated at the time by the IGC (IGC, 2008). Although the counselling dimension in the school system is a contested issue, the demand for personal one-to-one support by students has increased dramatically with a shift from crisis prevention to crisis counselling (Hayes & Morgan, 2011; DES, 2012). Since the re-allocation genuine concerns exist for the wellbeing of students despite the recent attempt by the DES to implement positive mental health and wellbeing policies through an integrated approach within schools (DES, 2013a, 2013b; IGC, 2013, 2014). Some of the key concerns of regular teachers specifically involved in pastoral care work include increased pressure being placed upon them to deal with ‘crisis issues’ for which they feel ill-equipped to address (Galvin, 2012).

The pedagogical involvement of subject teachers in comprehensive guidance provision has been recommended (Aluede, Imonikhe, & Afen-Akpaïda, 2007; DES, 1996).

In Ireland, according to the DES, the role of regular teachers is to provide:

“Pupils with advice and information in relation to their subject discipline; delivering on formal responsibilities through management, middle management, pastoral care and home school liaison positions. Individual teachers may be sought out by pupils on an informal basis for advice and information”.

(DES 1996, p. 5)

Traditionally, the inclusion of regular teachers in the delivery of ‘career’ related themes in their subject teaching has been evident but the quality across Europe has been unsatisfactory (CEDEFOP, 2004). Primarily, the difficulties lie in guaranteeing consistency in delivery, as well as students failing to see connections between different elements of programmes and guidance. However, it has been identified that where a course delivers a mandatory career education programme the quality can be more easily monitored (OECD, 2004). For a number of years post primary education stakeholders in Ireland have recognised the importance of the appropriate provision of careers education to students (NCCA, 2008). Furthermore, regular teachers have been identified as integral in providing a link for students to information on careers or further education, with a number of schools calling for comprehensive training programmes to be provided to regular teachers (NCCA, 2008). To date this deficit in training has not been addressed and currently regular teachers are only encouraged to take responsibility for their individual professional development (Teaching Council, 2011).

It is argued that schools can be viewed as successful when they achieve a balance between both the ‘academic’ and ‘wellbeing’ needs of the students, especially when students feel confident about teachers’ competencies to create a positive learning environment (Day & Gu, 2014). According to Smyth & McCoy (2013) Irish post-primary schools concentrate more on academic outcomes as opposed to personal development, although it is evident that positive relations with teachers have an effect on students’ self-image and wellbeing. Interestingly, Irish teachers do deliver in areas that support a whole school approach to guidance counselling through pastoral care functions and the teaching of subjects such as Civil Social and Political Education, Social, Personal and Health Education, and Religious Education. They are also involved in work experience programmes in the Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Transition Year Programme in 4<sup>th</sup> year.

Nevertheless, Lam and Hui (2010) argue that the role of regular teacher’s in a whole school approach to guidance counselling involves educative work such as the prevention of

students' issues escalating, as well as personal development and value formation. However, the delivery of the counselling dimension of guidance provision is much more complex and requires specialised training and competencies' (NGF, 2007). Irish research indicates that some students are uncomfortable meeting with a subject teacher in a counselling role (Hayes & Morgan, 2011). Finney (2006, p.24) reports that teachers approached by students looking for support have felt that they were "just a teacher" and should "leave it to the experts". The lack of skills and competencies in handling student personal issues has also been highlighted by Hui (2002). One reason for regular teachers' feelings of inadequacy in student counselling is the poor differentiation of specific roles for staff by school management (Kuijpers & Meijers, 2009). Another reason relates to teacher attitudes and time, whereby personal support sought by students have met with a teacher who "under-rated this type of support" (Fox & Butler, 2007, p.98).

Even though the 2012 re-allocation has severely circumscribed the role of the guidance counsellor and diminished the provision of a whole school to guidance counselling, the DES still specifies the vital work of the guidance counsellor in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing within the school system in its most policy directives to schools (DES, 2013a, 2013b). However, such discourse appears to be somewhat contradictory and lacking in a clear understanding of roles, functions and outcomes of a whole school approach to guidance counselling within the broader school community. Furthermore, the specific role of regular teachers within this approach has become even more blurred.

### **Methodology: case study**

The 2012 research was underpinned by a case study approach and mixed methods strategy to examine the phenomenon in depth (Yin, 2009). The strength of this methodology was that it did not inform like an experiment can about causation, but offered a "rich picture with many kinds of insights" from various angles (Thomas, 2011, p.21). The mixed methods approach is advocated in guidance counselling research (Perry, 2009). In the study it allowed for the collection of statistical and in-depth data on the issues involved in regular teacher's perceptions of a whole school approach to guidance counselling (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009). Its main strengths are that the intersection of the two approaches resides in the triangulation of results and the lack of confinement to only one epistemology through applying the strengths from positivism and interpretivism (Johnson, Onwuegbuzi, & Turner, 2007; Perry, 2009). The design was a 'multilevel mixed design' also termed 'hierarchical' (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009). Multilevel mixed design is where different types of data (both

quantitative and qualitative) are integrated at different levels. The “fitness of purpose” for the use of two methods for triangulation favour triangular techniques where a more “holistic” view of educational outcomes is sought (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p.197).

Firstly, an online survey gathered data from thirty regular teachers in the bounded case site of one post primary school. Secondly, six regular teachers who had taken part in the survey were randomly selected from fourteen participants who had indicated an interest in follow-up interviews. The online survey registered a 100% response rate. The type of questions ranged from multiple choices, rating scales and open ended data. Quantitative questions were used where biographical and educational information was sought. Open qualitative questions were chosen to elucidate “specificity of a particular situation” and to capture the rich descriptive personal views of the regular teachers (Cohen et al., 2011, p.382). The six semi-structured interviews provided rich, thick descriptions on the topic (Geertz, 1973). An interview schedule, based on Lam and Hui’s (2010) design, provided a systematic direction and protected the conversational integrity of the interviews (Cohen et al., 2011; Thomas 2009). A number of open-ended questions allowed each respondent to represent their own experiences, opinions, and feelings on a whole school approach to guidance counselling (Merriam, 2009). The analytical strategy involved two different components. SPSS was used for the application of statistical formulae and analysis of ‘quantitative variables’ in the survey (Cohen et al., 2011). Nomothetic coding and theme mapping was used in the data analysis of the qualitative data of the survey (Cohen et al., 2011). The interview data was analysed through the identification of patterns, themes, commonalities and generalisations (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The mixed method approach in the case study adhered to validity and reliability requirements relevant to both positivist and interpretivist paradigms (Cohen et al., 2011; Mertens 2005; Thomas 2009). In the case study ‘member checking’ was used whereby the interviewees were offered the opportunity view their transcripts for accuracy before the data analysis (Mertens, 2005). Additionally, a reflexive lens was used by the researcher at all times. Schön (1987) and Etherington (2004) contend that research may be understood to a greater extent by others if they have a greater understanding of the position of the researcher. In the case study this required continuous self-questioning of the personal, social and cultural position of the researcher and the contexts in which he lives and works through diary work and conversations with a critical friend (Etherington, 2004).

### **Case study findings**

This section discusses the findings from the case study. Both the quantitative and qualitative data collected was analysed by nomothetic coding and theme mapping. Four overarching themes emerged to illustrate the perceptions of regular teachers of a whole school approach to guidance counselling in the case school: (i) the delivery of a holistic education experience; (ii) the pastoral care role of regular teachers; (iii) a whole school approach to guidance counselling; and (iv) the implications of Budget 2012 for guidance counselling provision.

A key finding was that the regular teachers believed a holistic education experience is fundamental to the delivery of a quality education system to encourage the flourishing of students. Approximately 80% of participants' felt that pastoral care was a core element of the work of the regular teacher. The case school depends heavily on teachers' altruism, with many regular teachers volunteering in a number of pastoral care teams. However, the findings exposed a deficit in the pastoral care training of the regular teachers in their initial professional qualification and afterwards.

The whole school model of guidance counselling being delivered in the case school predominantly applies the central curricular aspects of the humanistic western tradition. The consensus amongst the participants was that the delivery of 'appropriate guidance' was a whole school responsibility. One element that supported a "whole school response" within the case school is its pastoral care structures. These structures are the Personal Safety Board which delivers a whole school approach to anti bullying measures; the Student Support Team which focuses on students at risk; the Dean and Assistant Deans deliver pastoral care support; and extracurricular activities delivered by regular teachers across a number of disciplines. Due to its DEIS status the case school also receives additional pastoral care supports including the Home School Community Liaison, Schools Completion Programme and Junior Certificate Schools Programme. Consequently, the quality of the whole school guidance counselling model being delivered relies heavily on the commitment of staff and the schools DEIS status.

In 2012, the role of the two guidance counsellors' in the case school was multifarious and integral to the design and delivery of a whole school approach to guidance counselling. It was prominent in all of the pastoral care structures delivering a supportive, advisory and coordinating role. However, one of the participants' in the study feared that a direct effect of Budget 2012 would be a diminution of the role to the detriment of student wellbeing.



Disturbingly, the regular teachers had not received any specialised training in pastoral care in their initial teacher education or subsequently, and some felt ill-equipped to deliver areas of the guidance counselling service in the case school. Furthermore, a specific issue emerged for the guidance service itself with regard to the level of communication that the teachers receive from the guidance counsellors in relation to the sharing of confidential information about students' wellbeing.

Finally, there were genuine concerns raised by the regular teachers about the impact of the Budget 2012 re-allocation on guidance provision in the case school into the future. As regular teachers are currently under significant pressure to deliver a diverse academic and pastoral care role the changes in provision are likely to exacerbate this further if they are expected to plug gaps in a whole school approach to guidance provision. It was argued that this would have a detrimental impact on the quality of pastoral supports to students in the school. The newly emerging discourse within educational policy and the Irish teaching profession is the need to respond to a changing economic environment and produce highly skilled learners thus increasing the burden further on teaching staff. Therefore, teachers could be faced with a choice; either to provide a greater pastoral care role or withdraw from volunteering for pastoral care activities altogether.

## **Discussion**

The Irish Teaching Council (2011) outlines that a fundamental responsibility for teachers is to acknowledge and respect the individuality of each student and promote their 'holistic development' as well as practice a duty of care in their role. A supportive school community can contribute to a positive holistic education experience for the student (OECD 2012), especially if it views students as 'whole beings' rather than 'brains to be programmed' (Miller, 2000). A sentiment espoused by some of the regular teachers in the case study. Additionally, if there is a strong community relationship of trust fostered in school with good relations between teachers and students it provides possibilities for growth and autonomy in students (NEWB, 2008; Smyth & McCoy, 2013).

The Irish Education Act (1998) clearly outlines that it is a requirement of the school to provide 'quality' education and effective individual teacher engagement. In Ireland, the professional role of teaching has overwhelmingly centred on a 'traditional approach' (Sexton, 2007). Conversely, the shift in educational discourse resulting from Budget 2012 has redirected the focus onto the more non-traditional professional roles of regular teachers (DES, 2013a, 2013b). The role of the regular teachers in the case school straddles both the

‘traditional’ class based role and the ‘non-traditional’ pastoral care role. The participants in the case study viewed ‘quality of teaching’ as an integral part of their teaching and through an appropriate, caring environment students are able to flourish and develop a sense of agency in their learning. However, there was a consensus amongst the regular that the quality of pastoral care education delivered in their initial teacher education training and subsequent continuing professional development was inadequate. Although, a review of initial teacher education by the DES and the Teaching Council has been taking place it still remains to be seen whether pastoral care pedagogy will become more pronounced in the new curriculum.

According to Sexton (2007) a key attribute of teacher professionalism is the ‘service’ one (altruism, responsibility and ethics). This attribute refers to the ‘care’ and the ‘do’ aspect of pastoral care (NAPCE, 1997). In 2012, the regular teachers in the case school had full autonomy in relation to the level of pastoral care support they provided with some being more heavily involved than others. They perceived that they offered a level of guidance to their students outside of their traditional classroom role. When a supportive role is not provided it has a direct effect on the quality of education and pastoral care being delivered, the success of the individual student and the stress levels of students. However, teacher autonomy is starting to become eroded due to the drive for greater efficiencies and accountability now infiltrating the Irish post primary sector (Devine, Fahie, & McGillicuddy, 2013; Sexton, 2007; Smyth & McCoy, 2013).

The central aim of a whole school approach to guidance counselling is to support a student’s personal, social, emotional, vocational and educational development (DES 2012). A whole school approach in the case school was viewed by the regular teachers as involving the entire school community, all members of the teaching staff and other relevant stakeholders through appropriate pastoral care structures. This aligns more with the eastern perspective, where teachers and school personnel are directed to become involved in student guidance responsibilities in order to foster a students’ holistic development, not just a curricular based model (Hui, 2002; Lam & Hui, 2010). Additionally, the findings emphasise a ‘caring’ culture in the case school, similar to Lam and Hui’s (2010) idea of a ‘love and care’ culture in eastern schools

Since Budget 2012 the term ‘appropriate guidance’ has become central to the discourse on the provision of guidance counselling in Irish post-primary education. In the Education Act (1998), ‘appropriate guidance’ is stated as a statutory responsibility for the whole school community. This responsibility element was echoed by the regular teachers in the case study. Whilst the central aspect of early vocational guidance was to provide and

support career decision making (Savickas, 2008) contemporary guidance provision now embodies the three distinct but overlapping areas of personal/social, educational and vocational (ACCS et al., 2012; DES, 2005a; NGF, 2007; Watts & Kidd, 2000). The view of the regular teachers in the case study was that personal guidance involves working with students who are dealing with “*personal and sensitive issues*” and “*major emergencies*”, and empowering them to develop coping strategies and resilience to resolve issues in their lives. Educational and vocational guidance involves guiding students with CAO forms (third level college applications), career choices, information on further education/training and personal development related to helping students to become aware of their talents and abilities. The role of the guidance counsellor was not just seen as a service for the students, but a key element of the design and delivery of a whole school approach to guidance counselling and pastoral care provision overall. Nonetheless, whilst the quality of the guidance service was validated by the regular teachers, it was suggested that if the guidance counsellors were to become more involved in the promotion and in-house training of a whole school approach, as well as pastoral care training, it might encourage more regular teachers to engage in pastoral care activities in the school. Furthermore, the guidance counsellor role was alluded to by some participants’ as a discreet service shrouded in a veil of secrecy, whereby the policy is to reveal just enough information to regular teachers whilst safeguarding confidentiality for the students. This raises particular boundary issues for the school’s guidance service with regards to the sharing of confidential information and appropriate referral amongst the guidance service and the regular teachers who are providing pastoral care support, especially if the guidance service is under strain due to limited resources.

Finally, the consequences of Budget 2012 for the regular teachers and the school guidance service emerged as a key issue in the case study. There was a general observation by the research participants that the school’s guidance service was already under pressure to deliver a whole school approach to guidance counselling. A number of concerns were articulated by the regular teachers in relation to the newly emerging landscape: the likely increased pressure on them to deliver a diverse academic and pastoral care role; the diminishment of the whole school model of guidance counselling and pastoral care profile in the school; the unrealistic expectations of others as to the levels of involvement of regular teachers in the whole school guidance counselling model; and the insufficiency of provision of appropriate guidance counselling supports to students. Overall, such concerns reflect the research findings on the changed nature of delivery within the sector since 2012, especially that of the IGC (2013, 2014) and NCGE (2013). The newly emerging picture is one of a gradual dismantling of one

of the most important professional supports available to students during their formative years in Irish post-primary education.

## Conclusion

In Ireland, the delivery of a quality whole school approach to guidance counselling involves all school stakeholders, including regular teachers, and it is recommended that a coherent programme for its delivery is in place (ACCS et al., 2012; DES, 2005a; 2012; NCGE, 2004; OECD 2004). However, the recent policy changes to guidance counselling in the Irish post-primary sector calls into question the commitment of the government to support such endeavours. Whilst guidance counsellors are validated for their guidance counselling and pastoral care work in some policy discourse (DES, 2013a, 2013b), they are also being curtailed in providing a quality service to all students (DES, 2012). The findings from the case study research outlined here are that the impact of the re-allocation of guidance provision in 2012 has not only had a detrimental impact on guidance counsellors and the overall student body, it also effects other members of the school community, such as regular teachers, whose commitment to pastoral care and student wellbeing is likely to become more compromised into the future unless the re-allocation is reversed.

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