A Consideration of the Role of the Guidance Counsellor in Relation to the Decision-Making Process Regarding Subject Choices for Students in Two Single Sex Post Primary Schools.

By
Gerard Murphy
Student Number: 9942912
University of Limerick

Research Supervisor: Mr. James Galvin

Thesis submitted to U.L. for the award of Master of Arts in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development

October 2017
Declaration

The author hereby declares that this thesis is entirely his/her own work. No element of the work described in this dissertation has been previously submitted for any degree in University of Limerick, or in any other institution.

Signature ____________________________________
Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor Mr. James Galvin for his support, advice and guidance during this research.

I would like to thank all the lectures at the School of Education and those that I had the pleasure to learn from during the Masters in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development.

I would also like to thank the University of Limerick for giving me permission to complete the research study.

A special thanks to the Principals, Guidance Counsellors and students of the participant schools, who enlightened the research and facilitated this study.

Finally, to Liz, my wife, for your encouragement, support and perseverance throughout this course of study. To Odhran, Donnacha and Aoibheann, I hope I have and continue to instil the importance of education in your lives. I love you all so much.
Table of Contents

List of Tables vi
List of Figures vii
List of Appendices viii
Glossary ix
Abstract x

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction 1
1.1 Outline of Research Topic 1
1.2 Theoretical and Practice Context of the Study 1
  1.2.1 Irish Post Primary Education 2
  1.2.2 Factors Associated with Subject Choices 2
  1.2.3 Career Guidance in Post Primary School 3
1.3 Positionality of Researcher 3
1.4 Justification for Research Study 3
1.5 Research Methodology 4
1.6 Research Aims and Objectives 4
1.7 Thesis Structure 4
1.8 Conclusion 5

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction 6
2.1 Post Primary Education in Ireland 6
2.2 Post Primary Education Policy 8
  2.2.1 Education Policy 1900-1922 8
  2.2.2 Education Policy 1922-1960 9
  2.2.3 Education Policy 1960-2017 9
2.3 Factors associated with Subject Choices 11
  2.3.1.1 Irish School Provision 12
  2.3.1.2 International School Provision 13
  2.3.2 Career Decision Making and Self Efficacy Theory 14
Chapter 3: Methodology
3.0 Introduction 24
3.1 Identification of Research Questions 24
   3.1.1 Primary research question 24
   3.1.2 Secondary research questions 24
   3.1.3 Research Paradigm: Positivist (Quantitative) 25
3.2 Data Collection Methods 27
   3.2.1 Access and Sampling 27
   3.2.2 Piloting the Questionnaire 28
   3.2.3 Self Completion Questionnaire 29
   3.2.4 Questionnaire Response Rate 30
3.3 Data Analysis 31
3.4 Validity and Reliability 32
   3.4.1 Validity 32
   3.4.2 Reliability 32
   3.4.3 Positionality of Researcher 32
   3.4.4 Reflexivity 33
3.5 Ethical Considerations 33
3.6 Conclusion 34

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings
4.0 Introduction 35
4.1 Self-Completion Questionnaire 35
Appendices

List of Tables

Table 3.1: Timeline of the Collection of Data  28
Table 4.1: School Profile  36
Table 4.2: Programme Studied in School  37
Table 4.3: Number of Higher and Ordinary Level Subjects Studied  37
Table 4.4: Number of First Choice Options Received  44
Table 4.5: Issues Regarding Subject Selection  46
Table 4.6: Number of Activities undertaken  78
Table 4.7: Statements about how schools provide information about subject choices  79
List of Figures

**Figure 4.1:** Age of Respondents 36

**Figure 4.2:** Activities Undertaken to help Career Decision-Making 39

**Figure 4.3:** Breakdown of Subjects 40

**Figure 4.4:** Factors in Selecting Subjects 41

**Figure 4.5:** Parental/Guardian Factors in Selecting Subjects 42

**Figure 4.6:** Advice for Subject Selection 43

**Figure 4.7:** Results on Foreign Language Selection 45

**Figure 4.8:** Respondents Guidance Provision 47
List of Appendices

Appendix A: Number of Activities Undertaken to help Career Decision Making 78
Appendix B: Statements about how schools provide information about subject choices 79
Appendix C: Subject Information Sheet (Principal) 80
Appendix D: Consent Form (Principal) 82
Appendix E: Subject Information Sheet (Student) 82
Appendix F: Consent Form (Student) 85
Appendix G: Subject Information Sheet (Parent/Guardian) 86
Appendix H: Consent Form (Parent/Guardian) 88
Appendix I: Self-Completion Questionnaire 89
Appendix J: Acceptance of University of Limerick Child Protection Guidelines 95
## Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CAO</td>
<td>Central Applications Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE</td>
<td>Department of Education (1921–1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education and Science (1997-2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education and Skills (2010 – Present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEIS</td>
<td>Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IGC</td>
<td>Institute of Guidance Counsellors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JC</td>
<td>Junior Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JCSP</td>
<td>Junior Certificate Schools Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCA</td>
<td>Leaving Certificate Applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCE</td>
<td>Leaving Certificate Established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCVP</td>
<td>Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCCA</td>
<td>National Council for Curriculum and Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCGE</td>
<td>National Centre for Guidance in Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGF</td>
<td>National Guidance Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDST</td>
<td>Professional Development Services for Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSLE</td>
<td>Primary School Leaving Examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEC</td>
<td>State Examinations Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TY</td>
<td>Transition Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEC</td>
<td>Vocational Educational Committee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

The focus of this study is the decision-making process of 6th Year pupils regarding subject choices and the role of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to this.

Having examined the relevant literature and other published material on key factors that influence students regarding their career decisions, the researcher noticed certain issues that impact on a student’s selection.

The researcher carried a quantitative method of research by means of a self-completion questionnaire. The questionnaire was administrated to an all-boys and an all-girls school in the South East of Ireland.

The main themes that emerged from the findings related to parental involvement, gender, the developmental stages of the participants and finally guidance provision.

The conclusions suggest that parents play a very significant role in a student’s life when selecting subjects for Senior Cycle. The research also highlighted that the subjects offered in a school can impact on a student’s choice, and therefore affect possible career choices. Furthermore, the findings of the research study also identify the differences and experiences that students faced when deciding not to opt for the Transition Year Programme.

Finally, several recommendations are made to inform future policy, practice and research.
Chapter 1 Introduction

1.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the topic under investigation within the setting of related theory and practice. The chapter also outlines a justification for the research, the positionality of the researcher along with a description of the aims, objectives and methodology of the study. The chapter concludes with an outline of the thesis.

1.1 Outline of Research Topic

The aim of this research study is to consider the role of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to the decision-making process that students undertake when deciding on their subject choices for their Leaving Certificate Established (LCE). The decision to focus on Leaving Certificate students instead of Junior Certificate students was related to an interest of the researcher who has worked as a teacher of non-core subjects for the past 15 years. The researcher noticed that students more than often than not dropped subjects for their Leaving Certificate not fully realising the effect of their decisions until it came to making the choices for future careers and study.

Every student in formal education in Ireland will have to choose the subjects that they are going to study for their Leaving Certificate. Career options of students are very much influenced and shaped by the subject choices made in Post Primary school (McCoy et al. 2014; Taylor-Fitzgibbon 1999). Some students may have a very clear view of which subjects they would like to study and which career path they wish to pursue, others will face challenges on making such decisions. There are 35 subjects that are offered in the Leaving Certificate Cycle which students can choose from (SEC 2017a). The decisions students make around their subject choices may help them achieve their career goals and aspirations.

1.2 Theoretical and Practice Context of the Study

To fully understand the complex nature of the Irish Educational system, this research, will focus on the following three areas

(i) Irish Post Primary Education
(ii) Factors Associated with subject choices
(iii) Career Guidance in Post Primary Schools
1.2.1 Irish Post Primary Education

To fully understand the findings of this research the context in which the research was carried out must be established. This includes an examination of the types of second level schools in Ireland and the various curricula offered in them. The process and history of previous education policy and practice in Ireland is also examined. The initial section provides an examination of policy during 1900-1922 which was considered a high priority among prominent figures during this time (O’Buachalla 1988; Coolahan 1981). The changes that have taken place since the Department of Education was established in 1924 is also considered. Following this development, the second half of the 20th century saw vast changes to Irish society. Access and participation rates saw significant improvement during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Factors such as the introduction of free Post-Primary education (1967), free school transport (1967) and the raising of the school leaving age to 15 (1972) had a significant impact on this (O’Buachalla 1988; Hyland and Milne 1992). These factors and more will be examined with relevant literature.

1.2.2 Factors Associated with Subject Choices

A review of the evidence of students’ subject choices has identified many factors that appear to underline the patterns of subject choices and options in schools. The key factors are the perception of subjects in terms of ability, interest and relevance to future careers (Smyth & Hannan 2002). The NCCA in their report in Proposals for the Future Development of Senior Cycle lists needs, interests, school provisions and aptitudes as the factors to be considered around the area of subject choices (NCCA 2005). The subjects chosen by students for their Senior Cycle can have a considerable influence on both the educational and career options that are open to them (Thompson 2005).

Comparable research with other European and International systems is difficult because of the widespread difference in academic and vocational education. In other countries students are assigned into specialist institutions according to formal ability tests when students are aged between 15 and 16, this is referred to as curriculum tracking (Stables 1996). Ireland’s educational system differs from other countries in that most students follow the same secondary school path.

This research examines many of the factors that affects students’ subject choices. Regardless of the factors that affect their decision, students need to believe that they can achieve their
goals (Betz 2000). The term self-efficacy was coined over 35 years ago and can play a vital role in career development, even for students in Post Primary school. For many students, choosing their Leaving Certificate subjects is the first step that they take in deciding a career. Having strong self-efficacy can help in any indecisions that they may be facing.

1.2.3 Career Guidance in Post Primary School

Guidance Counsellors have the necessary qualifications and skills to assist students in their subject choice selection and future career paths. In 1966 guidance counselling was introduced into Irish post-primary schools. Six years later, guidance provision was allocated on an ex_quota basis to all Post Primary schools with more than 250 pupils. Since 2012, the ex_quota allocation for Guidance Counselling has been removed. The IGC has noted, since the budget cuts of 2012, school managements are now in a situation where they must choose between offering a curricular exam subject and guidance provision (IGC 2012b). The role of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to students’ subject selection will be the focus of this study.

1.3 Positionality of Researcher

The researcher had several roles during the process, ranging from a teacher, a trainee Guidance Counsellor, a class tutor and a practitioner researcher collecting data from students. The researcher has worked in one of the participating schools for 10 years. The researcher supported the notion of objectivity which is a key basis of positivism and remained impartial to the research at all times (Cohen et al. 2011; Thomas 2013). To address any bias during the research, a reflective approach of journaling throughout the process was utilised (Etherington 2004).

1.4 Justification for Research Study

The justification for this study is that the researcher is of the opinion that students make incorrect subject choices at various stages of their Post Primary education. This in turn can affect the courses they choose and are eligible for at third level (Warton and Cooney 1997; Smyth and Hannan 2006). In addition, the study aims to examine the factors that influence students with their subject choices and the provisions that schools make available to help students during what can be a very stressful process.
1.5 Research Methodology

A quantitative (positivist) approach underpinned this research project. This approach allowed the researcher to be objective towards the study (Thomas 2013). Self-completion questionnaires were completed by 137 Sixth Year Post Primary students in two single sex schools in the South East of Ireland. From these questionnaires, the participants’ opinions on the role of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to the decision-making process regarding subject choices were gathered. The quantitative data gathered was analysed using the SPSS, and a thematic analysis approach was utilised on the qualitative data.

1.6 Research Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of this research was to examine what factors influenced Sixth Year students when choosing subjects for the Leaving Certificate.

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Consider and review relevant literature on policy, practice and research associated with the factors that influence students’ subject choices.

2. Collect data from students and establish the factors that influence them in their subject choices and the role of the Guidance Counsellor related to this.

3. Critically examine the research findings and make recommendations for future policy and practice related to guidance counselling in Post Primary schools.

1.7 Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of six chapters in total and is outlined as follows:

Chapter 1: Gives a background to the research study. The study is introduced and explained while also outlining the aims and objectives and methodology used. Finally, it provides an overview of the six chapters.

Chapter 2: Outlines the literature that has previously been written on the research topic. This literature is presented in three areas: Irish Post Primary Education, Factors associated with Subject Choice and Career Guidance in Post Primary Schools.
**Chapter 3:** Describes and justifies the methods used for the study. It identifies the primary and secondary research questions. Data collection, analysis procedures, reliability, validity, reflexivity and ethical considerations are also discussed and outlined.

**Chapter 4:** Describes the data analysis strategy and outlines the primary findings from the 137 self-completion questionnaires.

**Chapter 5:** Discusses the findings from the primary data. The data is presented under themes that emerged from the study and is examined in relation to existing literature.

**Chapter 6:** Concludes the research with an overview of the findings and evaluates its strengths and limitations. Recommendations are made for further research policy and practice.

**1.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has given an outline of the key features of the research study. The chapter outlined a justification for the research, the positionality of the researcher along with a description of the aims, objectives and methodology of the study. It also outlined what will be discussed in the following chapters. The next chapter looks at literature associated with the research topic.
Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Career options of students are very much influenced and shaped by the subject choices made in Post Primary school (McCoy et al. 2014; Taylor-Fitzgibbon 1999). This chapter aims to review and evaluate the relevant literature in subject selection. The chapter focuses on the various issues and aspects that are associated with Leaving Certificate students subject choice. Furthermore, it assesses the affect that this may have on their future career decision making process. The role of the Guidance Counsellor is critical at this development stage of students (McCoy et al. 2006). This role will be examined and recent changes evaluated. Irish and international policy documents, journals, educational reports and current academic writing on the factors that influence students and their subject choices are also examined.

The first section in this chapter will look at post primary education in Ireland. Section two will highlight an international context in relation to subject selection. The third section examines numerous factors that influence a student’s subject choices. The closing section looks at the role of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to the decision-making process of students regarding subject choices.

The term ‘choice’ implies consideration of different possibilities and is often related to career choices. Subject choice refers to a consideration in terms of future subjects and courses, of the possibilities available to students (Smyth 2016). According to Furlong and Cartmel (1995), available opportunities play a key role in the development of occupational and educational aspirations. Decisions made at this stage may affect success at school, eligibility for third-level courses or other career paths. Taylor-Fitzgibbon suggested, “which subjects were studied may have greater impact on the long-term knowledge of students and may have more consequences for their subsequent life chances” (Taylor-Fitzgibbon 1999, p.218).

2.1 Post Primary Education in Ireland

This section will concentrate on educational policy and practice in post primary education in Ireland. To fully understand the findings of this research the context in which the research was carried out must be established, this will include an examination of the types of second level schools in Ireland and the various curricula offered in them.

Firstly, when considering the Second Level school system one should note that there are three types of second level schools. According to Department of Education and Skills figures for
2015/2016, there are 375 Secondary Schools, 265 Vocational schools, 66 Community and Comprehensive Schools (DES 2017a). The substantial number of Voluntary Secondary Schools are due to the unique history of the Irish Education system where the control by the religious orders on the Educational Establishments was not just tolerated but deemed appropriate by the various governments following independence (O’Buachalla 1988).

Two formal public state examinations take place at second level, the Junior Certificate examines students after three years, and the Leaving Certificate, a terminal examination, after five or six years of secondary school. What is unique to the Irish educational system is the fact that regardless of the distinct types of schools, some curriculum applies to all students, at Junior Cycle level (DES 2017b). An additional programme, the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP), is offered in conjunction with the Junior Certificate, the JCSP is aimed at students who are identified as being at-risk of leaving school early (NCCA 2010). This was designed to meet the needs of all students, overcoming the traditional division between academic and vocational education (PDST 2015; NCCA 2010).

Transition Year, an optional year, provides an opportunity for students to experience a varied range of educational skills. These skills include work experience and the option of sampling leaving certificate subjects. Transition Year can emphasise one’s personal growth, life skills and social awareness (DES 2017b). By participating in the Transition Year programme students would now do a three-year Senior Cycle. Over 50% of Post Primary students participate in a TY Programme (Clerkin 2013).

When Transition Year was introduced in 1994 it brought the number of programmes at Senior Cycle to four. These include, Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Established, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). Each programme is designed to allow students maximise their potential in either an academic, vocational or practical way.

LCA or LCVP is not offered within all schools (DES 2013). Within those schools where it is available, not all students are offered the option. These two programmes could be described as programmes which have a focus on more a vocational nature and their primary aim is to prepare students for working and adult life (DES 2017c).
2.2 Post Primary Education Policy

The Irish education system can be described as an aided system with the state assisting other agencies, predominantly in the form of funding (O’Buachalla 1988). Many of these agencies at first and second level, according to O’Buachalla, are “churches, church bodies or trusts, or corporate bodies in which the churches exercise a large influence” (1988, p. 205). A single exception to this, he adds, is the vocational system, where the aided agency is the local authority.

O’Buachalla describes the developments in Irish education, through the nineteenth century, as remarkable, especially when consideration is given to the political unrest in the country and the general deprivation that people suffered. Though the root of the subsequent controversy and conflict by such a pairing’s divergent perspectives, he attributes this success equally to the initiatives of the church and to positive interventions by the state (O’Buachalla, 1988), however Coolahan states that there was an air of restraint in some initiatives with “an unwillingness to take risks” which may have hampered some educational developments for the country (Coolahan 1995, as cited in Gleeson 2009, p. 81)

2.2.1 Education Policy 1900-1922

Education reform and policy was considered a high priority among prominent figures of this time (O’Buachalla 1988; Coolahan 1981). Access to education was limited, those students who wished to pursue jobs in industry or agricultural were forgotten about after they completed their primary education. Secondary education during this period was only provided to those who could afford it. Maths and English took pride of place in the subjects that were offered in schools. Some schools proclaimed to offer other sophisticated subjects but usually did not live by this reality (Coolahan 1981).

During this period, the emphasis was on structural change which, ironically yielded very minor change to the structure on the ground (O’Buachalla 1988). However, the new programmes and regulations introduced in 1900 saw significant changes in national schools and in intermediate education. Developments within education were guided by these new programmes until the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922 (O’Buachalla 1988).
2.2.2 Education Policy 1922-1960

The Department of Education was first established in 1924 following the formation of the Free State. Since that time, the Minister for Education assumed sole responsibility for the formulation, implementation and funding of education policy (O’Buachalla 1988). Many of the cultural and political organisations which helped in forming the independent movement had a rooted commitment to improvement and reorganisation in education. Groups such as the Gaelic League pushed for the inclusion of Irish language, history and music into the curriculum (Coolahan 1981, O’Buachalla 1988). The Intermediate Education (Amendment) Act of 1924 brought the introduction of two exams, the intermediate Certificate and the Leaving Certificate (Hyland and Milne 1992).

During the first decade of the free state few changes took place in education under Cosgrave’s governments. During this period “policies of deflation and general retrenchment” were applied (O’Buachalla 1988, p.60). The Department of Education and the government were more concerned with curriculum rather than structural changes. The Vocational Educational Act 1930 addressed the issue of vocational education and pupil retention. Vocational Educational Committees (VECs) set up technical schools to provide a more vocational and technical education for pupils (Elsner et al. 2008).

2.2.3 Education Policy 1960-2017

The second half of the 20th century saw vast changes to Irish society. Growth on a European level was increasing and the Government recognised that if Ireland was to keep in line with other European countries, investment was needed (Alcroft 1978). The first such investment in education was announced in 1965 with the publication of the Investment in Education report. This report marked a clear turning point between the first and second half of Irish independence (Hyland 2014; O’Connor 2014). Coolahan has described the report as ‘one of the foundation documents of modern Irish education’ (Coolahan 1980, p.165). Much has been written about the report Investment in Education and its subsequent impact on Irish education. A subsequent OECD review of the national education policy in Ireland remains a landmark study for both national and international policy makers due to its remarkable depth and insights (OECD 1991).

Access and participation rates saw significant improvement during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Factors such as the introduction of free post-primary education (1967), free school transport (1967) and the raising of the school leaving age to 15 (1972) had a
significant impact on this (O’Buachalla 1988; Hyland and Milne 1992). Numbers were rising in both primary and secondary schools. During the twenty-year period from 1965 to 1985 the numbers in post-primary school increased from 143,000 to 340,000 (Whyte 2003).

The 1970’s saw the introduction of guidance teachers in schools to help “pupils through counselling and vocational guidance” (Coolahan 1981, p.198). With the introduction of the Vocational Education (Amendment) Act1970, the Department of Education now gave power to VEC’s to manage community colleges (Hyland and Milne 1992). Also during this time, subjects offered by schools started to change, vocational schools were now offering the Leaving Certificate and other academic subjects, while schools that traditionally offered academic subjects started to offer practical subjects such as Woodwork and Metalwork. As the country was going through an era of industrialisation, a greater emphasis was placed on technical and practical subjects (Mitchell et al. 1996).

The OECD Review of Education Policy, Ireland (1991) was a catalyst for ongoing, meaningful change in the second level education system. That review was followed by the publication of the Green Paper, Education for a Changing World (1992), and the subsequent White Paper, Charting our Education Future (DES 1995). The OECD (1991) was very critical of the Irish education authorities for their “failure to take planning seriously” (Gleeson 2009, p.75).

There was an unprecedented level of curricular reform in Ireland during the 1990s. Gleeson (2009) argues that this does not fit well with the reality which was that the junior and senior cycle reforms had more to do with changes in the content of subjects that with anything to do with school culture or classroom practice. Also, during this time, and into the early 2000s, Irish education saw many significant developments including the mainstreaming of Transition Year (TY) and the further expansion of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LVCP) in 1994. The introduction of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) came the following year in 1995. The NCCA described this time in education as a “site of ongoing innovation and change” (NCCA 2002, p. 1).

These changes in education were accompanied by a raft of legislation commencing with the Education Act 1998. This act made provisions that school systems and structures be placed under a statutory nature for the first time (O’Cuanacháin 2005). The 1998 Act set out that regardless of disability or special educational needs that every person was entitled to an education; more diversity was welcomed in schools; parents had a right to send their child to
a school of choice and schools were to work in partnership with its various stakeholders (DES 1998). This act was followed by the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, which provided an entitlement for every child to receive a certain minimum education and put an obligation on the parents/guardians to ensure that this was carried out.

In 2005, a DEIS action plan was drawn up to address the disadvantages being experienced by families from challenging socio-economic backgrounds. The main aim of the plan was to ensure that the educational needs of students located in disadvantaged areas were met through all available supports (DES 2005a). Several supports were outlined in this plan, which included the introduction of the JSCP, the support of a Home School/Community Liaison officer and perhaps most importantly related to this research, the action plan outlined the importance of the Guidance Counsellor and the support they offer. The 2005 report outlined and highlighted the key role that the Guidance Counsellor should assist students with career options and subject choices.

Other important education legislation passed and introduction in the last number of years have dealt with such issues as child protection, inclusion, students with special education needs, admission policies of schools and the dissolution of VEC’s. The most recent piece of legislation is the Teaching Council (Amendment) Act 2015, the purpose of which is to “promote the professional development of teachers, to maintain and improve the quality of teacher in the state and to provide for the establishment of standards, policies and procedures” (Law Reform Commission 2016, p.5). The changes that have taken place in educational policy and practice over the last 25 years has shown the significance that education plays in helping the economy expand and perform.

2.3 Factors associated with Subject Choices

A review of the literature of students’ subject choices has identified many factors that appear to underline the patterns of subject choices and options in school. The key factors are the perception of subjects in terms of ability, interest and relevance to future careers (Smyth & Hannan 2002). The NCCA in their report Proposals for the Future Development of Senior Cycle (2005) lists needs, interests, school provisions and aptitudes as the factors to be considered around the area of subject choices. The subjects chosen by students for their senior cycle can have a considerable influence on both the educational and career options that are open to them (Thompson 2005). In the Irish education system, most students study Irish language, Mathematics, and English (DES 2017b). For the remaining subjects, decisions
must be made. Apart from the compulsory subjects, and the ones deemed desirable or undesirable by students from experience there are other factors that play a vital role in the subjects that students choose.

2.3.1.1 Irish School Provision

Though the curriculum offers thirty-four subjects for Senior Cycle (SEC 2017a), students’ subject choice is constrained by the factors of provision and allocation. Darmody and Smyth write that “students make decisions within a specific school context and their choices are therefore likely to be influenced by school structures and practices” (2005, p.165).

Smyth and Hannan (2006) suggest that schools in Ireland tend to make assumptions about the needs of their student intake and these needs can affect the school’s decisions on which subjects to offer. Smyth and Hannon (2006) also note that despite schools having similar characteristics there is varying differences in how and when subjects are offered. Some students get to ‘sample’ subjects in the first few months of the school year, while other schools require students to choose before entry.

There are constraints on principals as to how they organise their curricula. Subjects like Chemistry and Accounting which often in comparison to other subjects attract a low uptake of students (SEC 2017b) may be subsidised by larger classes elsewhere. When Budget 2012 was introduced, 60% of schools were considering dropping subjects such as the ones mentioned above (Holden 2012). Such limits would have meant that schools may not have been able to offer a wide range of subjects, in turn possibly limiting students possible career paths. From previous budgets Holden, in her report also stated that 47% of schools had dropped subjects since 2009 (Holden 2012).

The National Parents Council referred to the reality of subject choices and the constraints on schools to consider the amount of teaching resources and hours available to them, and the need to timetable some subjects to make then available to as many pupils as it can (National Parents Council 2005). While a school may maintain some small groups to attract certain social groups of parents there is a limit to the extent this can be done (Davies et al. 2003).

The timing of when students make their subject choices vary between schools. Twenty percent of schools postpone choice until after the Junior Certificate results while twenty five percent demand that choice be made before Easter of Junior Certificate Year The remaining fifty five percent of schools take student decisions at the end of Third Year (Smyth 1999,
The range of optional subjects was seen to be dependent on such factors like school size and location, with the largest range being found in the largest schools. A participating deputy-principal remarked:

There is nearly too much choice. It can be a menace. Some don’t know their own mind. It can be based in the personality of the teacher. Their motivation is questionable. A lot of pupils change subjects

(Smyth 1999, p.171)

The advice provided by schools driven by the points system is that the standard of results is more important than the subjects in which they are achieved. The corollary is put forward by research that suggests that it is the subject’s that students study that provide a greater effect on their overall understanding and knowledge of careers and possible life chances than how well their subjects were understood or studied (Taylor-Fitzgibbon 1999)

Advice by schools, to maintain “continuity” between Junior and Senior should prevail, was found by Millar and Budd (1999), McCoy et al. (2006) and Smyth and Calvert (2011). As in practice, few subjects are taken up ab initio by few students. The pattern if choice, i.e. which subjects to continue, drop or take-up, varies from subject to subject (Smyth and Hannan 2006). Some popular subjects, like Art and Technical Drawing as well as subjects taken by few candidates like Latin and Music, were likely to de dropped (Millar et al. 2006). The research also found the school type to have a bearing on subject choices being offered. Smyth contends that subject choice is quite flexible at senior level because of the provision of open choice before optional packages are organised (Smyth 1999).

2.3.1.2 International School Provision

Comparable research with other European and International systems is difficult because of the widespread divide in academic and vocational education. Other countries assign students into specialist institutions according to formal ability tests when students are aged between 15 and 16, referred to as curriculum tracking (Stables 1996).

The degree to which a system offers students “choice” depends on several factors, but it mainly depends on the school context and is therefore hard to define. Gaskell proposed that the notion of choice is based on the idea that students are “actively involved in creating the structures in which they act…and they are aware of the nature of their participation” (Gaskell 1984, p.92). One could argue that an important determinant of subject choice is simply what subjects are available to choose. Andrew Stables, in his work on perspectives on subject
choices, suggests that freedom of curricular choice may be defined as having taken place if students are inspired to think for themselves and the effect that their decisions will have in influencing their chosen careers and courses (Stables 1997).

Irelands educational system differs from other countries in that most students follow the same secondary school path. Banks et al. (2010) note that most students will study academic subjects. The education system in Singapore differs slightly in that students pick the Express, Normal (Academic) or Normal (Technical) course of study depending on how they perform at the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) (Ministry of Education, Singapore 2017). The curricular emphasis is designed to match the students learning abilities and their interests (Ministry of Education, Singapore 2017). Secondary education takes between 4 and 5 years in Singapore, depending on the route the student chooses. The Ministry place a high emphasis on the holistic education of students (Ministry of Education, Singapore 2017). New subjects such as robotics and sport science will be rolled out over the next few years. The introduction of such subjects is different from traditional subjects such as Maths, according to the Ministry of Education in Singapore the focus will be to “expose students to applied learning, which integrates classroom learning with real-world situations” (Teng 2016)

2.3.2 Career Decision Making and Self Efficacy Theory

Self-Efficacy theory was developed by Bandura as a behavioural psychology concept and it refers to the notion that a person has an ability to achieve a duty or behaviour successfully (Betz 2000). The concept was applied first to career development and counselling by Betz and Hackett in 1981 when the term Career Decision Making Self Efficacy was coined. This refers to “one’s beliefs in one’s capabilities to successfully engage in a specific area of career behaviour” (Betz 2004, p.341). Many students that a Guidance Counsellor might work with may have strong career self-efficacy (Betz 2000). Furthermore, they may know what career they want to construct for themselves (Inkson 2004).

Ryan et al (1996) found that individuals reporting positive family relationships had stronger career self-efficacy beliefs (cited in Nota et al. 2007). According to Whiston and Keller (2004) the influences that parents play on their child’s self-efficacy are complex and differ according to the gender and the age of the child. Hampton (2006) suggests that poor career decision self-efficacy could adversely influence a person’s career journey and the development of these skills could be predictive of career indecision.
Lent, Brown and Hackett (1987, as cited in Savickas and Lent 1994) developed what they called a Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) which has roots in Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory. Not unlike Krumboltz et al. (1976), they include issues like gender, culture, life events and experiences. They propose that these aspects work together to reinforce career choice if it looks like success can be achieved in a field. Alternatively, one can be diverted if the barriers are too great. This constant change is central to the theory with vocational interests being shaped and reshaped by various influential factors.

2.3.3 Gender

Male and females, to some extent, differ in personality characteristics while they also prefer different school subjects in secondary education (Korpershoek et al. 2012). Studies carried out on gender differences and subject selection found that females formed better networks with students and teachers and were usually better integrated into the school environment than males, thus accessing information from a variety of sources (Warton and Cooney 2007). Traditionally, certain subjects were seen appropriate for each sex based on gender roles. Stables (2006) states that causes for these gender differences in subject choice are largely generic, cultural or environmental. These perceptions have slowly changed in recent years.

Evidence from survey data in England suggested that the effect of gender differences on subject choices appears to be declining with time (Francis 2000; Marks 2015). Male students either prefer economics or science-oriented subjects, while female students usually opt for more socially-oriented courses such as biology, foreign languages and arts (Korpershoek et al. 2012; Van der Vleuten et al. 2016). Nonetheless, Van de Werfhorst et al. (2003), suggested that female students were far more likely to adjust the belief in their abilities with regards subjects based on external evidence rather than male students.

Gender ideology plays a key role also with subject choices as this ideology shapes boys occupational values and subject choices, whereas for girls it shapes their competence beliefs (Van der Vleuten et al. 2016). Colley and Comber (2003) concluded that:

“there is still evidence of their continuing presence, and this can only be attributed to a broader and more enduring influence from societal gender roles and the beliefs associated with them”

(Colley and Comber 2003, p.10)

Smyth and Calvert (2011), in their research, related to subject choices and their usefulness, note that there is a gender difference in what subjects’ boys and girls deem useful. Male
students find Maths, History and PE useful, while female students consider Biology, Home Economics and French as the most useful. Geography is the subject that ranks the highest in perceived usefulness among both (Smyth and Calvert 2011, p.131). While studies have shown career aspirations to be a strong factor in subject choice, one must acknowledge the fickleness and volatility of young peoples’ career aspirations (Smyth and Calvert 2011). Perrin, from his studies in the United States, refers to the drop-in Art participation as a perception of its vocational irrelevance,

it is well documented that the number of students who report participation in the Arts drop from about fifty per cent in first grade to below five per cent in middle school, when, apparently, it is time to buckle down study “real” subjects like Maths and Science.

(Perrin 1997, p.43).

External factors also contribute and influence the subjects that schools may offer. In recent times, there has been an increase in the number of students selecting Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects (SEC 2017b). This increase might also be due to the fact of an additional 25 marks awarded to students that attain a pass grade in the Honours Maths paper (CAO 2017; DES 2015). Girls traditionally might not have had the opportunity in choosing such subjects but due to the increase in comprehensive, community and vocational schools, girls now have greater choice (DES 2016).

While the issue of gender and its effect on subject choices could well form a separate study, it is vital that it be considered for the purposes of this research. The lack of consideration of females was one of the major criticisms of both Super’s and Ginzberg’s early vocational choice theories (Herr et al. 2004; Patton and McMahon 2014). In the case of Holland’s typology, it was the gender bias that was criticised with girls scoring highest in three of the six categories (artistic, social and conventional) (Holland 1985). Holland’s response was to blame society and its channelling of females into female dominated interests and positions.

2.3.4 Parental Involvement

When decisions need to be made with regards subject choices, students seek information (McCoy et al. 2014). Two factors relate to the influence of advice given by others in making decisions. The formal system of career guidance counselling in schools and the informal network of parental and guardian advice. McCoy, et al., (2014) noted that students discuss their subject choices with their parents, while, Smyth and Calvert (2011) identified the importance of peer influence from friends and siblings. The Green Paper on Education 1992
stresses the need to involve parents in the process of guidance counselling. The paper stipulates that schools should work with parents and guardians to help and assist their children to develop positive attitudes and behaviours “to make satisfying and fulfilling educational and career choices” (DE 1992, p.107). Research has also shown that parental ‘choice’ of school to be a determining factor for the kind and range of subjects available for student take-up (McCoy et al. 2006).

Research into the experiences of sixth year students in Ireland noted that “25% found their mother the most helpful source of advice” for career planning and decision making than a guidance counsellor, while “12% found their fathers most helpful” (McCoy et al. 2014, p. 69). The advice given by parents might highly influence the subjects that students pick for Senior Cycle. McCoy et al., (2006) found male students to be “more reliant on the advice of their parents” (p.117) than their female peers. However, this preference, to value the views of parents rather than guidance counsellors, could be attributed neither to the adequacy of a school advice provision nor the students’ openness to such guidance (McCoy, et al. 2014). Students may also choose subjects similar to their parents as Inkson put forward the idea of ‘inheritance metaphor of career’ where children wish to have the same career as their parents (Inkson 2004).

The Irish educational system is complex by nature. Students of parents who are unemployed or haven’t reached a high educational attainment themselves tend to seek advice and are more reliant on the guidance counsellors and year heads in the school (Hornby 2011; Smyth and Calvert 2011). On the other hand, parents who have an advanced level of education tend to be very interested in educational process and students tend to pick subjects that correspond with their parents’ interests in mind. (Van De Werfhorst et al. 2003).

Darmody and Smyth (2005), from their research, found that although parents were the most commonly mentioned influences on students’ decision making, they cautioned that parents may not be aware of changes in the subject content and assessment methods since their own schooldays. However, this lack of the most recent knowledge and changes cannot be blamed on parents whom Roger and Duffield maintain are “reported as wanting much more information about the implication of subject options” (2000, p.373). Parents may also be unaware of course requirements, for example if students drop Chemistry and wish to study medicine they are limiting their choices of universities (UCD 2017).

2.3.5 Subject Usefulness
Previous studies, (Hendley et al. 1996; Kelly 1998; Stables 1996; Smyth 2016) have reported the importance of “usefulness”, i.e. relevance of subject to career aspirations, as a strong factor in subject choices. Millar and Budd (1999) found no relationship between the occupational aspirations of young people in Britain and their subject choices. Aspirations have been found to change during the years of teenage maturity. Hill et al. (2006) indicated a low level of vocational awareness in subject choices, with schoolwork being more important than future career aims. Driscoll (2014), from her study, found that vocationalism focused students in one direction for their career preparation while disregarding other general education courses that they didn’t relate to their future careers.

Warton & Cooney (1997) carried out a study that indicated that subject choice was not a planned exercise. Instead, their research noted that students tend to make subject choices from a narrow viewpoint with short-term focus, failing to consider options beyond school. Importantly from a career guidance perspective, their study showed that information about subject choices was gathered inadvertently and largely outside formal channels.

While factors such as perceived ability, syllabus content, resources, teaching methods and even student perceptions of individual teachers undoubtedly affect subject rankings, the status of subjects can vary over a period (Smyth and Calvert 2011). Numerous reasons as to why students make certain choices exist, and, may include teachers’ retiiring, government policy and investment in education and current or perceived future economic predictions (McCoy et al. 2014). Researchers often re-examine approaches to subject choices to see whether attitudes or approaches have changed. Research by Colley and Comber (2003) in England has found a change in the ranking of practical subjects, for example, Technology and I.C.T, over the past decade, where students are opting for more practical subjects that traditional academic subjects (Colley & Comber 2003).

### 2.4 Career Guidance in Post Primary Schools

Guidance in second level schools refers to a range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence that assists students to develop self-management skills which will lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives.

(DES 2005b, p.4)

Post primary schools are allocated a Guidance Counsellor and their work entails working with students to give educational and vocational guidance as well as personal counselling (OECD 2004). This section examines the role of the Guidance Counsellor in supporting
students in their selection of subjects, the effect of Budget cuts on provision and the whole school approach to Guidance Counselling.

2.4.1 Definition of Guidance Counselling

Watts and Kidd (2000, p.489) define guidance as a “range of processes designed to enable individuals to make informed choices and transitions related to their educational, vocational and personal development”. Watts and Kidd do however, point out that there is a distinction between the three elements of educational, vocational and personal guidance. The educational and vocational elements help with “learning” and “work” while the personal guidance doesn’t usually relate to either (Watts and Kidd 2000, p.490).

Under the Education Act 1998 (9c) guidance in post primary schools is a legal requirement and each school under its school plan is required to devise and use a whole school guidance plan. The Act stated that schools should “ensure that students have access to appropriate Guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices” (DES 1998, p.13). The National Guidance Forum (NGF) was created in 2004 to explore how people could access quality guidance at various stages of their lives. Their definition of guidance states that guidance:

facilitates people throughout their lives to manage their own educational, training, occupational, personal, social, and life choices so that they reach their full potential and contribute to the development of a better society.

(NGF 2007, p.6)

Internationally, the OECD outlines that guidance plays a vital role in helping people acquire the skills needed for developing a career. It states that guidance “assists individuals to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers” (OECD 2004, P.19). As outlined previously the DES 2005 guidelines were delivered at a time when there was international attention between educational policy and career guidance (Lam and Hui 2010; DES 2005).

2.4.2 Guidance Counselling in Ireland and International Context:

In 1966 guidance counselling was introduced into Irish post-primary schools. Six years later, guidance provision was allocated on an ex-quota basis to all post primary schools with more than 250 pupils. This was increased to 500 in 1983. In 1991, schools with a student enrolment of between 350 and 499 were allocated a half-ex quota post (DES 2005c; McCoy
et al. 2006). The system of allocations expanded to include all schools (NGF 2007) and this system remained unchanged until Budget 2012. The work of the Guidance Counsellor involves personal, career and educational guidance (OECD 2004; IGC 2016a). A key function of the guidance counsellor is to help students in subject choice which might benefit their career decision making process.

Career Guidance in Singapore schools has gone through three distinct stages. Firstly, the focus was on information-giving (1965-86), and then the focus moved to career education (1987-1995). Since 1996 the focus has been on integration in which “the responsibility of giving students career guidance is shared among career teachers; classroom teachers; school counselors; parents; and members of the community, such as potential employers” (Tan 2002). One distinctive feature of the Integration Stage is the emphasis on one to one guidance to help students in developmental and pre-employment career planning (Tan 2002)

2.4.3 Role of Guidance Counsellor in Supporting Students

The issue as to whether students are properly advised regarding subject choice was raised in the context of whether education is delivering an adequate return. Stables research found “career advisors at second level to be the least used source of advice” (Stables 1996, p.99). McCoy et al. (2014), from their research note that 37% of students would not primarily seek advice form a guidance counsellor regarding subject choices. Students make subject choices at various times in their time in school that may influence their future career paths. Smyth and Calvert (2011) have also highlighted that it is essential that advice and guidance around subject choices be at an early stage. Schools are required to offer Guidance service in junior cycle so that students will have the necessary skills to make effective subject choices (DES 2012). Previous research has found that students depend more on family and friends at this stage of their education (NCCA 2007; Smyth and Calvert 2011). Currently, and with junior cycle students, is it acceptable to have this situation where unqualified guidance counsellors are giving advice that could potentially limit certain jobs and careers? (Donnelly 2016). It is widely written that the guidance counsellor supports “students in making subject choices and future career pathways”, and that they also “have the expertise to help pupils to deal with emotional and psychological difficulties” (Donnelly 2015)

The workload of a Guidance Counsellor is wide and varied, dealing with issues around the area of self-harm, bullying, transitions from primary to secondary and family issues to name but a few (Hayes and Morgan 2011). The 2015/16 audit on Guidance Counselling practice
carried out by the Institute of Guidance Counsellors outlined that Guidance Counsellors varied their time by the following activities; 25.47% on classroom guidance, 31.49% on one to one counselling, 8.25% on group work and 34.78% on other work (IGC 2016b). The most notable change from the 2014 audit figures was an increase of one to one sessions by almost 5% (IGC 2014; IGC 2016b). From the allocation of hours 67.5% of the guidance counsellors work was spent with senior cycle classes (IGC 2016b). Much of the educational work that is carried out with senior students is in relation to career choice, subject choice and study skills (Gordon and Elovitz 2002; Hayes and Morgan 2011).

2.4.4 Implication of Budget cuts on Guidance Provision:

Since 2012, the ex-quota allocation for Guidance Counselling has been removed. Since then the provision for Guidance Counselling has been managed by schools from within staff allocation. In the last five years, many students have little or no interactions with a qualified guidance counsellor in the school and student support services are gradually being eroded (IGC 2016b; Hearne and Galvin 2014). This decision could potentially rule out many courses/career paths for them in the future.

The Institute of Guidance Counsellors, in its 2012 report, stated that the changes made to the allocation of guidance hours in Budget 2012 is likely to have a major negative impact for students requiring this service and questioned whether the cut in resources would put the provision of counselling to students in jeopardy (IGC 2012). The report notes that some schools will cease to have guidance counsellors and that the provision of guidance counsellors in schools may move to provision of a service on a fee or paid for basis making the provision of guidance counselling and all its components only available to those who can afford it (IGC 2012b). The IGC have noted since the budget cuts of 2012, school managements are now in a situation where they must choose between offering a curricular exam subject and guidance provision (IGC 2012b).

There has been a slight improvement in the last 5 years. Budget 2016 restored nearly 300 guidance counsellor’s posts while Budget 2017 provides for the restoration of a further 100 posts as well as the restoration of two thirds of the posts that were withdrawn from schools in 2012, these changes should come into effect in September 2017 (DES 2017d)
2.4.5 Whole School Approach to Guidance Counselling

The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC 2008) does acknowledge that some elements of the guidance programme have a few elements of curricular content which could be taught by a wide variety of staff. The situation of each school now having an ex-quota guidance counsellor is no longer the situation since the budget cuts of 2012 were implemented, however it is hoped announcements made in more recent Budgets will reverse this situation (DES 2017d). Guidance counselling services have eroded and there is a gap for school management to fill this. The DES has given autonomy to management to fill this void (IGC 2012b). As part of this whole school approach to guidance the NCGE notes that “all members of the teaching staff are in some way involved in providing guidance to students though they may not recognise it” (NCGE 2012, p.8).

The application of a WSA to guidance is viewed as an example of good practice (DES 2009, 2012a) and the department recommends that there could be greater collaboration between the guidance counsellors and certain subject teachers such as RE and SPHE to develop and deliver an appropriate school guidance programme (DES 2009). In more recent years the NCGE (2012) promotes a whole school approach to guidance provision. A WSA to guidance should be best practice to offer the students some element of services of guidance and counselling (Hearne and Galvin 2014), however “the quality of WSA to guidance counselling currently being delivered relies heavily on the altruism and commitment of staff” (Galvin 2012, p79).

Principals have commented on the one-to-one counselling sessions and view it as a vital component of any guidance programme (DES 2006), while the IGC view this provision as one “that cannot fit into a curricular structure in any meaningful way” (IGC 2008, p7), added to this, the DES has reported that “the demand for one-to-one support by students has increased dramatically with a shift from crisis prevention to crisis counselling” (Hearne & Galvin 2014, p4).

Central and critical to this whole school approach are schools’ guidance counsellors. In many cases the Guidance Counsellors were expected to take a leadership role with this initiative (Hearne et al. 2017). Many staff, due to their curricular subjects and experience, have significant and valuable contributions to make to the development and delivery of many aspects of the various programmes available at post primary school. Smyth and Calvert (2011) note that, “A whole-school approach to guidance is likely to provide better support for
student choice, since young people also depend on their subject teachers for advice on the content of subjects.” (Smyth & Calvert 2011, p.xix). It is vital that with the harsh cutbacks to education and limited time now available to the guidance counsellor to carry out their duties with students that any assistance to deliver an appropriate and effective guidance programme in the areas of personal, educational and vocational counselling should be welcomed.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed some literature examining the influences on students in relation to their subject choices and the affect that choices have on career decisions. The policies and practice of the Irish educational system were highlighted and the changes that have taken place to assist students in post primary education. Numerous factors that influence students with their subject choices were outlined. The role that the Guidance Counsellor plays in helping students with subject choice was identified. The implications of budget cuts to the service and the emergence of a whole school approach was also illustrated.
Chapter 3 Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter describes and justifies the research approach and the chosen paradigm used for this study. Methodologies refer to the underlying approaches implemented by researchers, whereas methods are essentially techniques for data collection and analysis (Tight 2003). It presents the primary and secondary questions which underpin the study. Furthermore, it provides a critical analysis and rationale for the data collection method used and theory as to why these methods were chosen. Issues relating to validity, reliability and reflexivity are discussed.

3.1 Identification of Research Questions

3.1.1 Primary research question:

All research dissertations should have a primary or overarching research question (Miles et al. 2013). Deciding on this primary research question can be the most challenging and critical aspect of research design, which can only be achieved after relevant literature has been considered and reviewed or summarised (Bryman 2007; Hogan et al. 2009). This research primarily explored the relationship between subject choices and the decision-making process for Sixth Year students in Post Primary schools. Creswell stated that the identification of a research problem consists of “specifying an issue to study, developing a justification for studying it, and suggesting the importance of the study for select audiences” (2007, p.8). Prior to selecting a research methodology it is vital to choose various key questions that tackle the phenomena being researched (Merriam 2009; Merriam and Tisdell 2015)

The primary research question asked, “What factors influenced Sixth Year students when choosing subjects for the Leaving Certificate?”

3.1.2 Secondary research questions

The following secondary questions were also asked:

1. What are the main influences for students choosing Leaving Certificate subjects?

2. Consider the main factors for students choosing Leaving Certificate subjects.
3. What advice did students receive before making subject choices for their leaving Certificate?

4. How has the provision of the services of the Guidance Counsellor helped students in choosing their subjects?

Once formulated, the researcher had to consider a suitable paradigm to answer these research questions (Blaikie 2000). The following sections will discuss the research approach.

3.1.3 Research Paradigm: Positivist (Quantitative)

This section considers the quantitative approach. Furthermore, it provides a brief explanation of the rationale behind the decision to use this approach.

People are very much an active part of the research process. A research paradigm is a structure of views and beliefs about how research should be carried out to establish the truth and inform the research design (Cohen et al. 2011; Cryer 2006; Thomas 2013). Researchers, then, should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it (Schwandt 2001). The battle between quantitative (positivist) and qualitative (interpretivist) methods has been a long-running one, though it is not quite clear for how long this conflict has existed. There appears to be little sign of it before 1960s in the general methodological literature (Oakley 1999).

Quantitative research is a scientific approach where the focus is on numerical data, measurement and proof. The purpose is to gather measurable evidence that allows the researcher to come to general conclusions. Aliaga & Gunderson (2002, as cited in Mujis 2004, p.1) sum it up well saying “quantitative research is explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analysed using mathematically based methods”. Reality, in this paradigm, is made up of variable properties that can be measured and compared (Robson 2002). A key characteristic of quantitative research is being objective in nature. The researcher remains at a greater physical and emotional distance from the study compared to someone using flexible or qualitative methods (Robson 2002).

There are many ways of conducting educational research, from a survey of literature to longitudinal studies of individuals or groups of individuals (Evans 1968). Most studies are, however, broken down into two types; quantitative and qualitative. For this study, the researcher applied a positivist quantitative method, by means of distribution of a
questionnaire to Leaving Certificate students. Using this positivist approach, Thomas (2013) notes that the researcher will be independent and an outsider.

The self-completion questionnaires helped this research as many varied viewpoints can be gathered in comparison to conducting interviews or focus groups. (Bell 2005). With this quantitative design of the research, the strategy was non-experimental as there was no intention on the researcher’s part to change the situation or the experience of the research participants (Robson 2002). The intention was to gather information from the participants on their experience of choosing subjects for the Leaving Certificate. Of the many approaches in questionnaire research the cross-sectional design which “involves the examination of several groups at one point in time” appeared to be an appropriate fit (Mertens 2005, p.172).

A drawback and weakness of a positivist approach is that the data derived can be used to support theories but at the same time may also be used to support contradictory hypothesis, it depends on the background assumptions being made by the researcher (Luttrell 2005). Another weakness of this approach can occur when a test of the research hypothesis fails to achieve the anticipated outcomes. If this happens researchers may not reject the hypothesis but instead modify assumptions to make sense of data while retaining the original expectation (Luttrell 2005). Cohen et al. claims that the trouble with this approach is that it considers human behaviour as passive and in “essence is controlled” (2011, p.15)

An alternative approach to positivism is interpretivism (qualitative). Interpretivism is based on the fact that researchers are interested in people, their views and their ideas about the world (Thomas 2013; Wildemuth 1993). This approach attempts to locate the observer in the world with the intention of interpreting or making sense of the phenomena in question, based on the meanings attached to them by the key actors (Mertens 2010). The main instruments used in qualitative research include interviews, focus groups, case studies and observations of which rich descriptive information can be gathered (Vine 2009). The researcher decided against an interpretivist approach. Although limited, to a certain extent, the personal information gathered, it was felt that using such an approach would limit the number of results and responses in comparison to that of the questionnaires that were used (Vine 2009). Others such as Macdonald et al. 2000 and McMurray et al. 2004 (cited in Vine 2009) would disagree with this view and favour the insights and perspectives that can be gathered through an interpretivist approach. However, some qualitative elements were used in the
questionnaire in the form of open questions to extract more in-depth evidence on specific areas.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

This element presents a critique of the quantitative element of this research which was dominated by gathering data concerning the students who are in Sixth Year and have experienced the procedure of subject choice selection and are now able to access how decisions made might affect their career choices.

The self-completion questionnaire is the most commonly used descriptive method of data gathering in educational research (Mujis 2004). The uses of such questions are advocated by many as a structured and manageable data-gathering tool (Mujis 2004; Punch 2005). Robson (2002) outlines that the advantages of questionnaires for data collection are that it is easy to administer and provides direct responses.

However, Robson (2002) also notes drawbacks such as the data may be affected by the characteristics of the respondents and respondents will not necessarily report their beliefs and attitudes accurately.

Due consideration was given to the most appropriate design frame that allowed the researcher to get detailed information from a large group of participants in a brief timeframe. A design frame is a plan for research that is adopted, a “scaffold” in which the researcher can organise and combine decisions within the design (Thomas 2013; Thomas 2009)

3.2.1 Access and Sampling

To collect data, the researcher needed access to Sixth Year students in two Post Primary schools. A subject letter and consent form was provided to the gate keepers (principals) of the two schools. The consent form was signed and returned confirming their participation (see Appendix C and Appendix D). There was a total of 150 potential students whom the researcher could access. Students over the age of 18 were provided with a participant information sheet (see Appendix E and Appendix F). Students under 18 were given a participant information sheet and a consent form for their parents/guardians to complete and sign (see Appendix G and Appendix H). Students who returned consent forms could take part in the survey (Wiles et al. 2005).
Table 3.1 outlines the timeline for data collection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Timeline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pilot Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics Approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Consent Received</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Consent Received</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Execute Survey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1: Timeline of the Collection of Data

3.2.2 Piloting the Questionnaire

Mertens (2005) recommends piloting a questionnaire with a small group similar to the one that will form the population of the study. The questionnaire was piloted with a group of Fifth Year students. This group was chosen because they were of similar age to the participants. Also, they have also made subject choices and have informed opinions on making such decisions.

The researcher first outlined to the group the purpose of the exercise, this was mainly to ensure the clarity of the questionnaire. The pilot sample were told their participation, comments and questions were a necessary step in revising the language and layout of the questionnaire so that all future participants understood what was being asked. They were afforded the opportunity to highlight any difficulties they may have had with the structure of the questionnaire or the layout and style of the questions. They could do this by both verbal and written means.

Following the piloting, adjustments proved necessary to improve the questionnaire and the individual questions as deemed appropriate. This supported the ethics application.

A population is the entire group of interest to which findings of a study are related. However in some cases, a researcher may not have access to an entire population and so has or may have to generate a sample. A sample is a representative subset of an entire population (Robbins 2008). There are two main types of sampling groups, probability and non-probability sampling (Cohen et al. 2007 and 2011). The researcher used purposive sampling which is an example of non-probability sampling. This type of sampling involves recruiting participants on the grounds of their potential significance, experience and insights on the research that is being carried out (Hogan et al; 2009). While this method suited the needs of
the researcher, it was not taken for granted that the views of the entire population of Sixth Year Post Primary students would be represented (Cohen et al. 2011).

Sampling is a situation where a group of people are drawn from a total research population who could potentially participate in the study (Thomas 2013). The researcher used stratified sampling in the research. By using this type of sampling the researcher ensured that the sample being used reflected the characteristics of the actual population (Thomas 2013). The target population for this research was comprised of male and female Sixth Year Post Primary students from two single sex schools in the South East of Ireland.

3.2.3 Self Completion Questionnaire

The aim of the quantitative self-completion questionnaire was to discover the general responses from students in relation to specific elements of the subject choice process that they undertook. A detailed quantitative questionnaire facilitated the collection of answers to these questions. A survey can be defined as, a means to

“gather data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions, or identifying standards against which existing conditions can be compared”

(Cohen et al. 2011, p.256).

Cohen et al. (2011) notes that some advantages of using a questionnaire are that, its appeal to generalisability and its ability to make statements which are usually supported by large banks of data. Conversely, Cohen et al. (2011) describe the questionnaire as an unsuitable means to portray the uniqueness of a situation, the interpersonal dynamics therein, explanations of why a situation occurred or the behaviours of the actors involved.

Questionnaires and surveys are widely used by researchers and have been described as useful instruments for data collection by Cohen et al. (2011). For this research, the questionnaire was the most appropriate means to collect the quantitative data required. It offered the following advantages: it was economical and efficient. It allowed useful biographical, explanatory, descriptive and numerical data could be generated. The questionnaire would be easily piloted and subsequently revised as necessary and finally it generated data that could be readily processed statistically.

The collection of predominantly closed-ended information (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007) combined with some open-ended items, was achieved by use of a six-page questionnaire (see Appendix I). Open ended questions were also utilised in this research as previous studies have shown that there are many benefits to these types of questions. Frakfort-Nachmias and
Nachmias (1996) believe that these types of questions do not compel the respondent to follow certain preconceived answers. The researcher in turn gets a more personal and honest response of what the respondent believes (Thomas 2013). Using the open-ended questions gave the researcher more in-depth rich description that assisted in overall findings.

The questionnaire was divided into three parts:

Part One: this gathered biographical data including age, gender and the type of school they attended and the Leaving Certificate programmes being studied. It also required students to list the subjects chosen for their Senior Cycle. It asked about siblings attending college and parental/guardians’ educational achievements. The purpose of this section was to develop a basic biographical profile of the participants and to generate variables to allow comparison and contrast.

Part Two: this section was concerned about information that the students received at various stages regarding subject choices and the career decision making procedures which they undertook. Students were asked to give information on certain subjects, for example if the subject lived up to their expectations. Finally, students were asked if any of the subjects that they picked are now restricting their career decisions. The section was designed to give the researcher an insight into the thought process that students had when making subject choice selection.

Part Three: of the questionnaire gathered information about the guidance counselling provision in the school. It asked if students availed of any individual meetings with the Guidance Counsellor and elicited the participants’ views as to what they assumed the role of the Guidance Counsellor to be. Finally, in this section, students had the option of giving any other information that they felt relevant.

3.2.4 Questionnaire Response Rate

One advantage of the questionnaire as a data collection instrument is that it can be administrated without the presence of the researcher (Cohen et al. 2011). The researcher did introduce the topic that was being researched and respondents returned their completed questionnaires to a designated box in the reception area of the school. The response rate of the questionnaire was very positive. From 150 surveys that were administrated, 137 were returned, giving almost a 92% return rate, a very positive attrition rate. Students were given every opportunity to withdraw, even after the appropriate consent forms were completed.
Only 13 students did not return the questionnaires to the designated drop box. The high response rate could be due to the fact that the researcher kept the questionnaire short, precise, clear and easy to follow for the target audience (Thomas 2013). Although some research suggests that participants find online questionnaires easier (Boudah 2010), studies have found that paper questionnaires tend to lead to better response rates as online questionnaire sometimes only give a 25%-30% return rate as many times a follow up email is required to participants to complete the questionnaire. (Fincham 2008)

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of using the data collected from research to analyse the situations that are being explored (Thomas 2009). Processing information from quantitative methods can be complex, it is recommended that advice should be sought from an expert in the field (Langdridge, 2002 as cited in Robson 2002). For this research, Microsoft Excel was used to enter results from the questionnaire. This facilitated the transfer of information to the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science) package later. SPSS analysed variables such as frequencies of gender, age, location, programme studied. To facilitate this some of the questions on the questionnaire have a Likert-type scale scoring system attached.

According to Cohen et al (2007; 2011) there are several ways in which qualitative information can be analysed. Data can be presented by individuals, groups, issues, instrument or research questions. Thematic analysis was used for the data analysis of the qualitative elements of the questionnaire (Thomas 2009). This thematic analysis was carried out by the researcher who went through all completed questionnaires and grouped respondents’ answers based on recurring themes. These themes were then coded (Bryman 2012). The theme analysis can give a mini representation of certain parts of the questionnaire as quotations can be used from respondents. Codes were given to these recurring words and themes (Thomas 2013). The researcher when necessary referred back to these codes and themes when analysing the data.

A drawback of using SPSS or other computer packages is how easy it can generate “elegantly presented rubbish” with the readily available analytical software that exists (Langdridge 2002, p. 393). The researcher collated the questionnaires separating them according to the two schools. The data was then transferred to Excel separated into the three sections of the questionnaire.
3.4 Validity and Reliability

The need to validate the research and to ensure that the research data is reliable so that the research can be deemed worthwhile will be examined in this section.

3.4.1 Validity

Validity deals with the issues of trustworthiness and credibility of research outcomes. Validity is an essential component of effective research (Thomas 2013). The researcher should measure what it claims to measure (Robson 2002). In quantitative research validity is ensured through selecting suitable instruments, careful sampling and appropriate statistical analysis of data (Cohen et al. 2007). The qualitative aspect of the research was more difficult to validate. The researcher was objective and honest when analysing the received data (Cohen et al. 2007). The researcher could have been biased with the information that he extracted from the qualitative information in order to support his goals (Maxwell 2013). In order to avoid such pitfalls, the researcher used his reflective journal to address issues that surfaced which required reflection at a later date. The researcher also kept returning to the data to check that the correct and accurate information was being transferred (Creswell 1998)

3.4.2 Reliability

Reliability in quantitative research is the extent to which it produces consistent results when the features being measured don’t change (Leedy and Ormond, 2001). Reliability relates to the ability of methods in research to always return comparable results on separate occasions (Rudestam and Newtown 2001; Thomas 2009). If the questionnaire were to be given out to the same respondents again the results should be very similar, this is test-retest reliability (Thomas 2013). The answers to the questions in the questionnaire issued should be the same regardless of whoever oversaw the administration as they were predominantly objective in nature. The questions of a more subjective nature were clear and in no need of explanation. Although the respondents’ opinions might change depending on circumstances, time of year, etc, the researcher had no objective of such interferences.

3.4.3 Positionality of Researcher

Thomas defines positionality as a situation where the researcher “has on undeniable position and this position affects the nature of the observations and the interpretations that they make” (Thomas 2009, p.110). The researcher had several roles during the process, ranging from a teacher, a trainee Guidance Counsellor, a class tutor and a practitioner researcher collecting
data from students. The researcher supported the notion of objectivity which is a key basis of positivism, the researcher remained impartial to the research always (Cohen et al. 2011) None of the sample group were students taught by the researcher. This position posed both advantages and disadvantages. It made the distribution of the questionnaire easier. However possible drawbacks were a personal interest in the outcomes (Punch 2005). To overcome some of these elements the researcher applied a reflexive approach (Etherington 2004)

3.4.4 Reflexivity

The area of reflexivity is related to the notion of understanding and acknowledging the existence of a researcher within the domains they are exploring. A researcher’s background and opinions can affect and impact the research. According to Grenfell and James, reflective practice relates to “the idea of continual leaning supporting professional problem-solving, requiring reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action” (Grenfell and James 1998, p.123). Etherington (2004) writes that reflection for a researcher is fundamental and should be carried out throughout the research by means of self-questioning. She also notes that research can be better interpreted and understood by others if they are aware of the position held by the researcher. The researcher was aware of his position in the process (Cohen et al. 2007). The researcher was fully conscious of the position that he held as a teacher and trainee Guidance Counsellor within one of the participating schools, but was also entirely mindful of undertaking research as an outsider in the second school. Reflection in the form of journaling was used by the researcher to address any issues that occurred. At the start of the research process the researcher wrote general comments, feelings and concerns that arose at various stages of the research. At certain times, the researcher found that writing about his feelings on the process allowed him to take stock and revaluate what direction the research was taking and what needed to be done to continue the process. Critical self-reflection took place during the research in the form of a reflective research diary.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethics in research is something that needs to be considered from the outset and should be an integral part of the planning and on-going development of the work (Mertens 2005). Cohen et al. (2011) writes about the importance of considering the effects that research can have on certain participants. To prevent any such matters the researcher identified any ethical issues at the beginning of the research and which were submitted through the University of
Limerick Research Ethics Committee. The researcher received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee for this study in March 2017.

Before undertaking research, the researcher should examine the potential social benefits against the personal costs to the participants (Cohen et al. 2011).

Potential benefits from this research may include capability of potential areas of new delivery; highlighting issues students face in dealing with subject choices and contributing to wider community of Guidance Counsellors and even policy makers.

Potential Costs include the loss of personal time for the 6th year participants in completing the questionnaire in their already busy schedules.

As a member of a professional body, the researcher was bound by the IGC (2012) Code of Ethics in the conduct of the research (IGC 2012a) and the National Centre for Guidance in Education Research Code of Ethics (NCGE 2008). The research also observed the ethical requirements of the University of Limerick School of Education Research Ethics Committee.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodology that underpinned the research. It presented the primary and secondary research questions and the reasons behind the methods of a self-completing questionnaire used to obtain the answers. The research design used was intended to give the most appropriate way in which to gather the required data to answer the research questions. Population access and sampling were discussed while issues pertaining to validity, reliability and positionality were also considered. Finally, data analysis procedures and ethical considerations were addressed. Chapter 4 deals with the data analysis procedure and findings from the questionnaires.
Chapter 4 Data Analysis and Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents and examines the main findings of the data collected. In addition, it discusses the data analysis strategy and the themes that emerged. The primary aim of the quantitative element of this research was to gain an understanding of the students’ insights into the role of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to their decision-making process regarding subject choices.

4.1 Self-Completion Questionnaire

A self-completion questionnaire was administrated in two Post Primary schools. The researcher projected that 150 respondents would complete the questionnaire. The response rate consisted of 137 replies. SPSS was used to analyse the quantitative data and a thematic analysis approach was utilised on the qualitative data.

4.2 Data Analysis Strategy

The SPSS programme was also used to assist the quantitative analysis and to support the interpretation of the survey results. The researcher used an inclusive approach to extract data (Noyes and Lewin 2011). This approach involved extracting and gathering all relevant data that would help gain an insight to help answer the research questions. Although a time labour intensive process, this approach allows all information to be included (Noyes and Lewin 2011).

The thematic approach was used which allows the researcher to identify, analyse and gather relationships from the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Some researchers debate if it is correct to summarise qualitative data in this method (Thomas and Harden 2008). The researcher used Braun and Clarkes (2006) six phases of thematic analysis, which included, familiarisation, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes and finally producing the report. Using this approach allowed flexibility to integrate both quantitative and qualitative data (Bran and Clarke 2006; Dixon-Woods et al. 2008).

4.3.1 School Profile

Two schools in the South-East region of Ireland took part in the self-completion questionnaire. Convenience sampling was applied in selecting the schools. The two schools
are both single sex in the voluntary Secondary School sector. Table 4.1 outlines the demographic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School No.</th>
<th>School Gender</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>837</td>
<td>Voluntary</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>639</td>
<td>Voluntary</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1 – School Profile

4.3.2 Demographic Information

The first section of the self-completion consisted of closed questions to gain quantitative data on the respondents. The questions gathered information around participants, such as their age, gender, subjects currently being studied for Leaving Certificate and finally information on the educational attainment of their parents/guardians.

The total number of respondents in both schools were 83 females (60.5%) and 54 males (39.5%). The students surveyed aged in ranges from sixteen to nineteen years of age. Most of the students (84.68%) were eighteen years of age or older completing their Leaving Certificate. See Figure 4.1.

![Figure 4.1 – Age of Respondents](image)

This higher percentage of students over the age of eighteen could be due to the fact that 125 (91.2%) of the respondents had stated that they had completed Transition Year. One hundred per cent of respondents are pursuing their Leaving Certificate, with 16.7% of respondents also pursuing the additional Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. Table 4.2 presents
the list of programmes that students are currently studying or have previously studied in school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>Response Percentage</th>
<th>Response Figures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transition Year</td>
<td>91.2%</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCVP</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving Certificate</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 – Programme Studied in School

From the 137 respondents, an overwhelming majority, 85.4% live in a rural area while 14.6% respondents indicated that they live in an urban area. Of the 117 respondents that live in a rural area 46.1% have a sibling in college while 20% of those that live in an urban area have a sibling in college.

One hundred per cent of respondents stated that they were studying both English and Maths while 93% indicated that they were studying Irish for their Leaving Certificate. A total of 75.1% of respondents stated that they are studying a language other than Irish or English. Both schools offer a choice of languages. One school offers Spanish, French and German, with Spanish the most popular choice, while the other offers French and German, with French being the more popular choice among respondents. 4.3% of the total cohort stated that they are studying Spanish as an additional subject outside of school. Table 4.3 outlines the amount of male and female students that are doing higher and ordinary level subjects. Overall, the respondents are doing more higher-level subjects than ordinary level subjects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Higher Level Subjects</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 or more</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Ordinary Level Subjects</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 or more</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3 – Number of Higher and Ordinary Level Subjects Studied

The last section of the general information questions gathered data related to the education level of the respondent’s parents/guardians. Interestingly, 40% of respondents’ fathers didn’t
complete their Leaving Certificate, in comparison to 13% of respondents’ mothers. When asked about Third Level College courses, 30% had stated their father completed a course but 51% of respondents’ mothers have completed a Third Level Course.

4.3.3 Subject Choice Selection

The second section of the self-completion questionnaire looked at respondents’ subject choice for Leaving Certificate. In this section, a range of both open and closed questions were posed to elicit students’ opinions on the subject choice process.

The first section asked respondents questions related to Transition Year. 91.2% had completed this programme. These respondents were then asked if they had an opportunity to do taster subjects for the Leaving Certificate. 66% had the opportunity and from these responses 77% stated that they found the experience useful. One student remarked: “They were useful as I got a reminder of what all the subjects entailed again and it influenced me to take up Business,” while others commented that they “now love” certain subjects, while other respondents got to sample “different subjects.”

Survey respondents were then asked if they had received any presentation on selecting subjects. 63% had received a presentation of which 85% found useful. From 19% of the respondents that gave additional information on this question almost 40% stated that the presentation was very useful for knowing their options going into Leaving Certificate and the effect of dropping certain subjects.

The final question for those who completed the Transition Year programme asked if students had attended an information evening on subject choices. An astonishing 69% of respondents answered they didn’t attend. When asked why they didn’t attend 34% said their parents had attended instead. Of the 31% of respondents that did attend, an overwhelming majority 85% said they found it useful, with one student stating: “It helped me make a final decision on my subjects and if I hadn’t attended I would probably not have picked a language and would not be able to apply for my first choice in university.”

Survey respondents were then asked what activities had helped them in their career decision-making process. There were a possible 6 activities that could have been ticked with the option of letting the respondents add in any additional activities they undertook, but no respondent selected this option. Table 4.6 (Appendix A) outlines the number of respondents. Almost
70% of respondents engaged four or more activities to help them in with career decisions, yet only 30% of respondents participated in 3 or fewer activities.

Figure 4.2 outlines the most popular activities undertaken by the respondents to help them in their career decision-making. Interestingly, almost all (99%) of respondents ticked that they had completed the Differential Aptitude Tests (DATs) to help them choose subjects in their career decision-making. Career Guidance Classes played a very important role for respondents with 96% indicating that they took part in this activity, moreover a total of 45% stated that they had engaged with individual guidance sessions.

![Graph of activities](image)

**Figure 4.2 – Activities Undertaken to help Career Decision-Making**

The next question was divided into seventeen statements about how the school provides information and advice to Third Year/TY students (See table 4.7 Appendix B). From these statements, the respondents had to say if they: strongly disagreed, disagreed, agreed, strongly agreed or were unsure or if the question was not applicable to them. Some of the findings highlighted in this area included that 78.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that a career guidance class would be useful in 3rd Year, this figure jumps to an astonishing 84.9% from the respondents that completed the TY programme. Regarding one on one sessions with the Guidance Counsellor, during 3rd Year, 70% of respondents felt the Guidance Counsellor was available for appointment to discuss subject choices but surprisingly this figure fell to 66.3% from respondents who undertook the TY Programme.
With regards the information that students felt they received on subject choices, during 3rd Year almost half (48.8%) of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the notion that they received information on the actual content of subjects. There was a slight drop to 35.9% of those who completed TY, probably since many students stated that they had the opportunity to do “taster” subjects. Another major element resulting from the findings was that 50.3% of respondents from their 3rd Year experience stated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the fact that the Guidance Counsellor provided information to them on possible further jobs from subjects. This figure dropped dramatically to 13.3% from the respondents who completed TY.

When asked about guest speakers, the majority, 81.9% of those that completed TY agreed or strongly agreed that they had the opportunity to meet with guest speakers on career opportunities, in comparison only 38.5% had this opportunity when they were in 3rd Year. Interestingly, when asked about subject selection, an overwhelming majority, 79.5% agreed or strongly agreed that they were free to choose any subject for the Leaving Certificate, but 27% of respondents disagreed that all subjects were available to them.

Respondents were then asked if they thought any subject was promoted as being more important than others. From the 137 responses, 54.7% stated that this was the case. Figure 4.3 shows the breakdown of the subjects.

![Subject Breakdown](image)

Figure 4.3 - Breakdown of Subjects

When asked why they thought certain subjects were promoted more than others, respondents commented that “Maths and in particular Higher Level Maths gives 25 extra CAO points”,

whereas another survey respondent noted that: “The extra points for Higher Level can distort views on how necessary higher level is”. Other comments included: “Because we are a girls’ school.” This was related to subjects like Business and Home Economics. In relation to science subjects and why the respondents thought they were promoted comments included: “Chemistry is essential for certain careers” and “If you don’t have a science subject you may be limiting your college options.”

The next issue looked at which factors, the students themselves felt, influenced their choices. To try and elicit this information a list of four possible factors were drawn up, which respondents had to rank from number 1 to 4, where 1 being the most crucial factor. The factors included: interest, ability, relevance of future career and teacher. Overall the most key factor, as the students saw it, when it came to making subject choices was interest. 72% of respondents ranked interest, followed by ability at 16% closely followed at 11% by respondents ranking relevance of future career. Interestingly, only 1% of the respondents ranked teacher as a crucial factor. Figure 4.4 illustrates the main influences.

![Figure 4.4 – Factors in Selecting Subjects](image)

Keeping the same criteria and ranking, the respondents were asked what they thought their parents deemed to be the most important factor when deciding on subject choices. Interestingly the results changed dramatically both in terms of positioning and percentages.
34% of the respondents now felt that their parents would pick relevant future careers, 30% deemed interest to be important, 24% put ability and interestingly 9% respondents noted that they felt their parents thought the teacher was a key factor when deciding on subject choices. Figure 4.5 outlines the factors.

![Figure 4.5 – Parental/Guardian factors in selecting subjects](image-url)
Survey respondents were then asked to select, in a ranking order, the people that they took advice from in making subject choice selection (Figure 4.6). Interestingly, both parental figures were rated highly by the respondents with 52% rating their mother as number one support and 14% rating their father as the third most influential person. The Guidance Counsellor was deemed to be the second most important person when the students were selecting their subjects. Neither the Principal nor Vice Principal were people who students took advice from for subject selection. Students were given the option of adding in additional suggestions. The main ones included: people already in college (4.5%), grandparents (3%) and college websites (3%).

![Figure 4.6 – Advice for Subject Selection](image)

Related to the above question respondents were asked if they received enough advice before choosing subjects. From the responses, 52% (71 respondents) felt they didn’t receive enough advice, while 48% (66 respondents) said were satisfied with the advice they got before choosing subjects.

The next area explored if students were aware of the teacher who would be teaching a subject before they made their selection. 53% were not aware. Interestingly, the next question asked if this knowledge would influence their choices. 65% said it would not influence their choice, which links back to Figure 4.4 regarding the factors that influence their subject choice. When asked to comment on this, one respondent stated that: “I had genuine interest in the subjects so it didn’t bother me which teacher I had.”
Others had the view that there were “multiple teachers” who could teach the subject, while on the other hand, one respondent wrote that: “My dislike of some teachers did influence my decisions as I felt a good relationship with a teacher was vital”

Respondents were then asked how their school provided information to their parents/guardians to advise them on subject choices. Information Evenings were by the far the most popular method with 52% stating that their parents/guardians attended. Meetings were the second most popular with 34%, followed by an information leaflet at 10% and the fourth most popular method of providing information to parents was a school website with 4%.

The next question examined how many of the respondents got their first choice of subjects. Table 4.4 outlines the breakdown and percentage of the number of first choice subjects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount of Options Received</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Five Options</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four Options</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Options</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Options</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Option</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.4 – Number of First Choice Options Received

Linked to this question the respondents were asked if they were studying any additional subjects outside school. 90% of respondents stated that they were not studying an additional language. From the respondents who were undertaking an additional subject, seven were studying Spanish, four studying Music, two studying Religion and one studying Lithuanian. Additional comments included in this section from the respondents included that: “I am only studying Spanish at Ordinary Level, I need to pass it to meet requirements for college, I didn’t pick it in school as I wanted to do my better subjects at Higher Level for more points.”

When asked if any of the subjects were different from what the respondents expected, 55% said yes. Some of the comments related to this included:

“There is a lot more material to learn in certain subjects like Geography and Biology that I wasn’t aware of” (Survey Respondent)

“Accounting has a management accounting section which was never explained. It’s very different from bookkeeping” (Survey Respondent)
Following on from this, the respondents were then asked if they were picking subjects again would their choices be different. An astonishing 65% stated they would choose differently. 17% of these respondents would pick Geography as some considered it “easy” and with “no big project involved”. Five respondents commented that they would choose to study Spanish at Ordinary Level “outside school” or “in my own time”.

When asked if there were certain subjects not provided for in their school, 47% said yes. The main subject that respondents wanted offered was Agricultural Science, this being the case in the all-girls school. 26 respondents stated that they would like to see subjects like Engineering, Metalwork and Woodwork, many of these comments came from the male cohort of respondents. Another common sentiment from the additional comments was that: “Certain subjects were not provided as they weren’t suitable for a girls’ school.”

The next set of questions in this section elicited information from the respondents on whether studying a foreign language was mandatory. When asked if it was compulsory to study a foreign language for the Junior Certificate, 39.4% stated no. The figures remained the same when respondents were asked was it compulsory to study a foreign language for the Leaving Certificate. The respondents who stated no were all from the male Post Primary school where the students have the option to drop their foreign language after first year. The last question on foreign languages asked respondents if they needed a foreign language to gain access for a third level course, the figures changed slightly with 43% stating that they didn’t need a foreign language. Figure 4.7 shows results from the foreign language selection section. The fact that some students stated previously that they study a foreign language outside school for matriculation reasons also needs to be considered when analysing these results.

Figure 4.7 – Results on Foreign Language Selection
The last question in this section asked respondents to state if there was any issue in selection of subjects that are now restricting their career decisions. 20% of total respondents gave additional information, which is grouped below in Table 4.5. Most worryingly from the findings is that over 38% of the responses didn’t make the correct choices regarding subject selection, which has now limited the courses or universities that they can apply for. On the other hand, 25% kept their options open when it came to choosing a variety of subjects in order not to limit their future career options.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>% of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not having a foreign language denied certain course and colleges</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did a subject in the Business or Science area to keep my options opened</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t pick Biology or Chemistry which has limited my choice for medicine/veterinary</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not allowed to do a Higher-Level subject as I had done Ordinary Level for Junior Certificate</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certain subjects not offered in the school which I would like to study in university</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to an I.T so no language needed</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.5 – Issues regarding subject selection
4.3.4 Guidance Counselling Provision

Various questions throughout the questionnaire posited the guidance counselling provision in the schools. The concluding part of the questionnaire specifically focused on this area. Figure 4.8 outlines the Guidance Counselling provision which students received in 3rd Year, Transition Year and if respondents received any individual meetings with the Guidance Counsellor. Interestingly, there is an increase of 14.5% of respondents that had access to Guidance Counselling with regards subject selection from Third Year and Transition Year. Perhaps more importantly is that almost 74% of respondents had an individual meeting with the Guidance Counsellor in relation to their subject choice selection.

Figure 4.8 – Respondents’ Guidance Provision

The students could avail of a wide variety of activities to help them in their subject selection. As discussed earlier from the findings, the Guidance Counsellors in both schools offer varied activities which include, for example, organising college open days, psychometric testing and providing information evenings to name but a few.

In relation to Guidance Counselling provision in their schools, the respondents were asked what they understood the Guidance Counsellors’ responsibilities were in supporting them with subject choices. 17.5% didn’t give any additional information, 1.5% stated they didn’t know. However, 81% gave additional information. The overwhelming theme emerging from this question according to 40.5% was that they felt the Guidance Counsellor provided all the
information about universities and courses, one respondent said that the: “Guidance Counsellor always kept me informed on the different closing dates and deadlines for CAO”. Another comment included that the: “Guidance Counsellor kept us up to date with new courses that were available”. Crucially this links in to earlier questions, when respondents were asked when they were in 3rd Year if the Guidance Counsellor provided them with all the information needed for future careers, almost 40% agreed or strongly agreed with this. This figure took a significant jump to 67% for those who completed the TY programme.

Two other significant responses to this question was that, firstly, 17.5% noted that the Guidance Counsellor helped them choose subjects which they were interested in, while 16.5% noted that the Guidance Counsellor helped them in assessing their strengths and weaknesses.

Finally, respondents were afforded the opportunity to give any additional information. 91% felt they didn’t need to provide any further information. From the 9% who gave additional information, three themes emerged. 4.3% felt that more guidance was needed in Transition Year, 2% felt that more contact was needed with the Guidance Counsellor in 5th/6th Year, while 2% also noted that females were pushed into certain careers like “teaching” and “nursing.”

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the findings that were gathered through a self-completion questionnaire. The data shows several points that are significant to the research being carried out. Chapter Five will provide a synthesis of the data analysed along with the research questions set out and with issues that were disclosed in the literature review.
Chapter 5 Discussion

5.0 Introduction
This chapter discusses the overall findings from the study by exploring the emerging themes. The primary research of the study is to examine: ‘Which factors influenced 6th Year students when choosing subjects for the Leaving Certificate?’ The overarching themes from this could be categorised into: parental involvement, gender, psychological developmental stages and finally career guidance provision. In this section, these themes are developed into further sub-themes.

5.1 Research Question
The primary research of the study was to examine: “Which factors influenced 6th Year students when choosing subjects for the Leaving Certificate?”. The researcher surveyed the views of 6th Year male and female Post-Primary students attending two single sex schools to establish what influenced them in their subject choice selection. The results are based on a sample of 150 respondents with a very positive response rate of 91%. There were also secondary research questions, which elicited the respondents’ views on who the main influences were when choosing subjects, what the main factors for students choosing certain subjects, what advice they received and finally how the services of the Guidance Counsellor helped them. The themes that have surfaced from this research related to this question could be categorised into the following areas: parental involvement, gender, the developmental stages of the participants and finally school and guidance provision. These themes are broken into further sub-themes and are supported using direct quotes from participants of the study.

5.2 Parental Involvement:
One of the dominant themes that emerged during the research was the role that parents play regarding their child’s selection of subjects. Under this theme of parental involvement there were subthemes that emerged which included parents’ attendance at subject choice meetings, the vital role they offer with advice and how their own educational achievement may affect the advice they offer.

Previous research has shown that students value parental opinion when it comes to subject choices and selection (Smyth and Calvert 2011). According to McCoy et al. (2014) students discuss their subject choices and future careers primarily with their parents and guardians. Fan and Chen (2001) note from their findings that parental involvement is an extremely
crucial factor when it comes to academic attainment and personal growth. Numerous socio-demographic factors were identified from their study. One was gender, where mothers are more likely than fathers to take an active part and interest in educational related events (Phares et al. 2009). Highlights from this research support this point when you consider that a slight majority (52%) rate their mother as number one for support and advice on subject choices for Senior Cycle. Fathers’ were the third most popular choice for advice, at 14%. Interestingly, when you consider that male students can be very much swayed by their fathers’ careers and often want to study for the same career path (Ginzberg et al. 1966), he also added that although some children may be influenced by their father’s career path, their formulation can also include their own likes and dislikes of the profession. For many of the respondents and perhaps the male respondents they may view their father as a role model, Savickas (2011a; 2011b) in his work emphasises the importance of ‘role models’ when building a career.

There may be a few reasons for this, firstly, the educational achievement of parents plays a significant role regarding the involvement and interest that they have in their child’s education (Smyth and Calvert 2011, Van de Werfhorst et al. 2003). Hornby (2011) notes that students of parents who are unemployed or not as well educated tend to seek advice more from teachers and Guidance Counsellors. Boethel (2003) has researched that parents who are socio-economically disadvantaged are more likely not to take an active role in their child’s education, mainly due to negative experiences that they had in their own formal education. Byrne and Smyth (2010) have also reported that the more education a parent has, the more likely they are to be involved in their own child’s education. The findings of this research, show that a staggering 87% of participants’ mothers had completed their Leaving Certificate and 51% of those had achieved some form of a Third Level qualification. This high academic level could account for the numbers that value parental support over that of a Guidance Counsellor.

Another factor that has emerged in relation to this research regarding parental involvement has been the attendance and interest that parents show for information evenings and events. For many parents, recent educational changes, for example, regarding the new Leaving Certificate points system and additional points for Maths need explanation. Parents may feel that they need to know this up to date information so that they can support their child in choosing a correct course and career path. The research found that from the participants who completed Transition Year almost 70% hadn’t attended an information evening. When asked
why, 34% responded saying that their parents attended instead of them, one respondent noted that: “I was going to be the first child in the family to head into Fifth Year so my mother wanted to be reassured that all my options were covered, that’s the reason why she attended”. Parents need the correct information, to feel involved and be knowledgeable (Finders and Lewis 1994) and for many the school is the primary place to avail of this. 50% of respondents agree with or strongly agree to the statement that they felt their parents/guardians were fully informed of the benefits of choosing each subject.

5.3 Gender

The second major theme that has emerged from this research is related to gender. This should come as no surprise as the research was carried out in two different single sex schools, one male and one female. In relation to the theme of gender, most of the issues that emerged were related to subject choices and provisions within the school. Naturally enough male and females will have to a certain degree different interests when it comes to subjects in schools. (Korpershoek et al. 2012).

However just because the respondents attend single sex voluntary secondary schools shouldn’t be a reason for limiting the subjects that they can choose. Almost 86% of respondents live in a rural area, these schools are more than likely the only option for Post Primary education they may have. School type will of course affect subject choices that are offered (Smyth 1999). Certain subjects such as Maths were deemed to be promoted in both schools as being important, a compulsory subject to be studied for the Leaving Certificate. For non-compulsory subjects, there was a high emphasis put on science-related subjects.

The debate regarding gender differences and subject choices has been prevalent for many years, however Francis (2000) noted that it is declining, yet from Stables research in 2006 he noted that certain subjects are still appropriate for each gender. The findings from this research would also support that point especially when you consider that a respondent commented that: “The school encouraged us to consider subjects like Biology or Home Economics because we are a girls’ school, and these subjects would suit girls more than a subject like DCG”, furthermore one female respondent expressed that she: “Was encouraged to take such subjects like Biology as a career in “nursing or teaching would be very suitable for girls”. Van de Werfhorst et al. (2003) remarked that girls are more likely not to choose certain subjects as they are deemed to be more difficult and girls tend not to have the confidence in themselves to achieve the high grades. According to the SEC, girls out
performed boys in achieving a H1 grade in 27 of the 35 subjects that were offered in the 2017 Leaving Certificate Examinations. (SEC 2017b).

One of the subjects where females out-performed males in achieving a H1 grade in the Leaving Certificate 2017 was in Agricultural Science (SEC 2017b). Information that has emerged from the research found that 33% of the females who responded to the questionnaire would have liked to have seen Agricultural Science been offered as choice. Again, due to the high percentage of students that come from rural backgrounds, they may have had a key interest in areas related to such a subject. When asked to comment on certain subjects not been offered one respondent wrote that: “Certain subjects were not provided as they weren’t suitable for a girls’ school”, while another respondent was told that: “Demand wasn’t there for certain subjects so the school couldn’t justify putting on a small class”. Limiting subjects at Senior Cycle could potentially narrow career options which in turn may affect income, for those students who have to study art, languages and social science subjects tend to earn less than those who study science subjects (Chevalier et al. 2002).

5.4 Developmental Stages of Participants

From the research that was carried out it became clear that some students were not at the correct developmental stage to make decisions around subject choices or decisions related to their future career paths. In saying that only 15% of respondents were under the age of 15 when their choices had to be made, the majority of respondents (81%) were only 16 years of age. For some of these respondents it must have been an extremely tough decision to make subject choices for their Leaving Certificate, with the small majority still not having their Junior Certificate results to reflect on or to consider where their weaknesses lay.

Ginzberg et al. (1966) argued that some children from the age of six often develop ideas for their careers. From the research of some respondents this could be the very reason why they felt they didn’t need to attend any information evenings. An extremely high percentage, almost 70% of those students that completed Transition Year did not attend. In response to this, one respondent added that: “After I had completed my work experience in a lab I knew I wanted to work in the medical science area, for me I knew I had to pick science subjects.” Completing TY for some students can give them the confidence and perhaps maturity to make the correct decisions (Jeffers 2007).

Another reason for poor attendance at information meetings could be similar to what Smyth et al. (2011) highlighted from their research that several 6th Year students when looking at
career decisions and subject choices appeared to have always known what they wanted to do which was helped previously by their work placement experience. Some students might have a very clear goal of their career path, Ginzberg et al. (1966) believed that the way in which adolescents approached the problem of occupational choice was dependent on the level of “emotional and intellectual development” (p. 119) which he added was more reliant on age rather than experience, a crucial point when one might consider that the clear majority, 85% of respondents were young when they made their subject choices.

Examining the notion of students having the ability to develop the idea of ‘self-concept’, Super (1957) emphasised the importance of maturation and he described it as a key component to adolescent career development. Many studies show that a child’s “sense of who they are is shaped by their characteristics, their behaviour, and their understanding of themselves, their family and others” (NCCA 2009 p.25). Overtime, they tend to gradually become less dependent on some of these factors and a stronger sense of identity tends to be formed. This formation, to a large degree, takes place during the time that young people spend in Second Level school, for 91% of respondents they had spent 5 years in Post Primary education, perhaps during this time their focus changed and they developed a powerful sense of self-identity. People with low self-esteem might be more dependent on the Guidance Counsellor, to help and guide them in making choices and process information with them.

Linda Gottfredson, in her research, concentrated on development stages. She examined how the position in family and society affects how people view themselves (Sharf 2010), almost 70% of respondents have or had siblings in college, with such a high figure, this surely influenced respondents when it came to subject choices or at least to make the correct choices in order to have the minimum requirement for some third level institutions and courses. I think the social construction at this stage with the interaction of siblings focused respondents on what needed to be achieved (Sharf 2010).

Gottfredson also put forward the notion that people may have to compromise about their careers at some stage in their life (Herr et al 2004; Patton and McMahon 2014), this may be very relevant for some respondents especially when you consider that one respondent remarked that: “I had dropped my European language in First Year and now I can’t apply for a course in UCD, I will have to go a different route”.

5.5 School Subject and Guidance Provision:
Secondary schools in Ireland are allocated a Guidance Counsellor and this post involves working with students to give vocational and educational guidance as well as counselling for personal issues (OECD 2004). The Education Act 1998 (9c) states that guidance in Post Primary schools is a legal requirement and each school under its school development plan is required to devise and use a whole school guidance plan. Guidance should be provided to all students in a school (DES 2005b, OECD 2004).

How this guidance provision is utilised by students in schools can vary, but perhaps more importantly since the Budget cuts to Guidance of 2012 were introduced, there is a gap and it is necessary for management to fill this, the DES has given autonomy to management to fill this void (IGC 2012b). How school managements decide to utilise resources may have a greater impact on guidance provision and/or subject choices.

It has emerged from this study that many of the respondents were extremely happy with the guidance which they received, 67% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Guidance Counsellor provided information on the possible jobs related to each subject. However, when respondents were asked if they had enough time to seek advice on subject choices, almost 40% strongly disagreed or disagreed. More importantly still, over 50% also strongly disagreed or disagreed that the subject teachers informed them of the possible jobs that their subjects may lead to. With a whole school approach to guidance it is essential that regular practising teachers play their part in filling this void and provide the vital information needed so students can make more informed and correct choices (Hearne et al. 2016; Hearne and Galvin 2014).

Despite the high percentage of respondents who were happy with the information they received from the Guidance Counsellor, it materialised from the study that 65% would pick different subjects if they had the opportunity again. This extremely high figure would go support other literature around subject choices which noted that some students don’t examine all options, especially such decisions that affect career decisions (Warton & Cooney 1997). Respondents may be unhappy with their subject choices as the subjects they wanted may not be available in their school. Naturally enough it is highly unlikely that all curriculum subjects available are offered in every school. However, you would expect if demand is high from students, efforts would be made to facilitate such choices. 47% of respondents from this study highlighted that certain subjects were not provided, 23% of respondents wanted to study Agricultural Science but respondents were informed that this subject would not be
offered as it was: “Not considered a suitable subject for a girls’ school”. Practical solutions, although not examined in the research could be the possibility that each school specialise in certain subjects that would offer students a wider variety for Senior Cycle (Darmody and Smyth 2005).

Another factor that emerged from this research was the difference in guidance provision for students in Third Year and Transition Year. Although 91% of respondents did opt for the Transition Year programme, the research examined the difference between the two years. For those who opted for the additional year the respondents seemed to benefit in some areas when it came to guidance provision. Almost 80% agreed or strongly agreed that they would have like to have a guidance class in Third Year, this figure increased to 84.9% for those who opted for Transition Year. Even though these students might have developed personal skills and confidence they still lacked perhaps the guidance and advice needed.

Smyth et al. (2011) note that a benefit of participating in the TY programme is the opportunity to sample Leaving Certificate subjects and be aware of the subject content. This research would support that and in particular regarding subject choices and the difference between Third Year and Transition Year was the information that respondents received in relation to the content of the subjects. 48 % of Third Years disagreed or strongly disagreed that they received no information, in comparison to 72% of those who completed Transition Year who agreed or strongly agreed that they received information. The subjects chosen by students for their Senior Cycle can have a considerable influence on both the educational and career options that are open to them (Thompson 2005). Smyth and Calvert (2011) have also highlighted that it is essential that advice and guidance around subject choices be at an early stage, for those who don’t do TY they may be missing out on certain opportunities.

5.6 Conclusion

The chapter discussed the main themes that emerged from the primary findings in relation to the literature that was discussed in Chapter Two. This chapter provided a discussion into the factors that influenced 6th Year students when choosing subjects for their Leaving Certificate. Parental involvement was highlighted as a key theme and it emerged in a few areas from the questionnaire. Parents take a very keen interest in their child’s education and seem to be involved and informed on the subject choice process from the schools through information evenings and other material sent from the schools. The high percentage of parents, and in particular, respondents’ mothers who have a Third Level qualification was also discussed as a
factor that increased parental involvement. The research was carried out in two single sex
schools, it was no surprise then that gender also emerged as a theme from the findings. The
discussion highlighted that certain subjects were not provided in the girls’ school despite
there being a high interest in the subject area. The findings also showed that girls were more
encouraged to pick ‘female’ type careers. Another area discussed in the chapter was the
factor related to the development stage of respondents. There was a high percentage of
respondents who didn’t engage in certain areas that affected their subject choices and
potentially their future careers, low participation information evenings and high
dissatisfaction with subjects picked could be a factor related to the development and maturity
stage that some respondents were at. Finally, the schools’ provision in relation to subject
selection and guidance was also a theme that emerged. From the findings, overall the
respondents were happy with the guidance provision but there still seems to be a lack of a
whole school approach to guidance when you consider that respondents highlighted that
subject teachers couldn’t inform them of possible careers from their chosen subject. Chapter
Six will provide overall conclusions and highlight any strengths and limitations of the study,
recommendations will also be provided in the next chapter.
Chapter 6 Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to conclude the research study by presenting a summary of the research findings within the context of the aim and objectives of this study. This chapter will also describe the strengths and limitations of the study, provide several recommendations and finally the researcher outlines personal learning gained from the study.

6.1 Overview of Research Findings

The overall aim of this research study was to examine the factors that influence 6th Year students when choosing subjects for the Leaving Certificate. There were several objectives outlined that would address the overall aim, these included:

1. Examine and review relevant literature on policy, practice and research associated with the factors that influence students’ subject choices.
2. Collect and analyse data from students and establish the factors that influence them in their subject choices and the role of the Guidance Counsellor related to this.
3. Report on the research findings and make recommendations for future policy and practice related to guidance counselling in Post Primary schools.

Firstly, parental involvement was a key issue from many questions in the research. Parents, and in particular mothers were the main source of advice for students in selecting subjects for their Leaving Certificate. A high percentage of respondents’ mothers had a Third Level education qualification (Smyth and Calvert 2011; McCoy et al. 2014). Therefore, it is my assertion based on the findings that this was an influence and no doubt played a part in interest shown by parents/guardians in their child’s education. For those parents/guardians who hadn’t achieved high educational levels information was crucial for them, information evenings inclined to be attended more by parents/guardians than students.

Secondly, the issue of gender was addressed and was highlighted during the findings at various stages. It emerged from the findings that girls were less satisfied with their subject selection, and wanted greater variety in the subjects that the school offered (Korpershoek et al. 2012; Smyth and Calvert 2011). Also, it emerged that the female respondents were encouraged to pursue certain subjects that would be required for particular careers that would suit ‘girls’. The male respondents from the study were overall happy with the subject selection process and availability in their school.
The next theme that emerged from the findings was related to students’ developmental stage at which they were asked to select subjects (Bandura 1995; Betz 2000). Interestingly, many students took little or no interest in information evenings/events that were made available by the Guidance Counsellor or the school. Also, students failed to carry out appropriate research into subjects especially when you consider the high percentage of respondents who would make different choices or that didn’t realise the course content of a particular subject before choosing it.

Finally, from the findings it emerged that an overwhelming majority of respondents opted for the Transition Year option that was on offer in both schools. What clearly emerged from the research was the disparity that Third Year students faced regarding lack of information, access to taster subjects of Leaving Certificate subjects and guest speakers, etc. over the students who took the optional Fourth Year. Guidance provision overall was highly praised from the research findings but the idea of a whole school approach to guidance delivery would certainly enhance the students’ experience with subject choices (Hearne and Galvin 2014; Hearne et al. 2016).

6.2 Strengths and Limitations of Research Study

6.2.1 Strengths

A key strength of this research is that the study has highlighted that the area related to the role of the Guidance Counsellor in helping students make informed subject choices to support them in their career decision-making process seems to be under-researched in an Irish context. Many studies and research have taken place under the guidance of the ERSI related to exam and student stress in the Leaving Certificate. The application of a quantitative method used in this study has now generated in-depth results in this area.

Another key strength from the research was the high response rate achieved from the questionnaires. The researcher had a personal interest in subject choices. This study aimed to address the issues that students face in choosing subjects. Also the study hoped to consider the role of Guidance Counsellors in helping students through this period in their lives. The findings may highlight the differences that students face when making subject choice decisions for their Leaving Certificate and the gap that seems to have emerged in information for those who opt to go straight into Fifth Year as opposed to take the Transition Year option.
While this research study may act as a basis for future research in the area of subject choices, there are a number of limitations that need to be considered.

6.2.2 Limitations

Firstly, while I was happy to work with two single sex schools in the voluntary sector, on reflection, it may have been more beneficial to access co-educational schools from the vocational and community and comprehensive sector. This may have given more insightful information regarding the gender aspects that were highlighted.

Although I was extremely pleased with the high response rates of the questionnaire, in hindsight perhaps a mixed method approach should have been used in the form of interviews or focus groups among a small number of the respondents. This may have generated additional valuable information and highlighted some themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysed.

6.3 Recommendations

As a result of conducting this research the following recommendations are made:

6.3.1 Policy

➢ School management should ensure that the school provides adequate and timely information and advice regarding subject content to its students. This process should be a collaborative one which involves a whole school approach, led by the Guidance Counsellor and supported by subject teachers of Senior Cycle subjects.

➢ School management should promote all subjects equally among the school community and ensure adequate future planning takes place to provide a broad range of subjects to cover varied interests.

➢ With the introduction of the new Junior Cycle and the Wellbeing subject, there is an opportunity for the Guidance Counsellor to give a weekly class to First Year students in the third term informing them of the benefits and limitations of choosing certain subjects.

➢ Past students should be encouraged back to the school to give a presentation to younger students on their experiences of subjects and their relevance to future careers.
6.3.2 For Practice

- Parental involvement was identified as a major factor for students when deciding on selecting subjects. With an ever-changing educational system regarding points, Third Level requirements, etc. communication is essential. The Guidance Counsellor needs to make sure that parents are fully informed of such changes as parents/guardians play a vital role in their children’s lives. Attendance at information evenings, etc. is vital. For those unable to attend, the information should be made available through email or other forms of communication.

- It was clear from the research that those who do not partake in the Transition Year programme are at a disadvantage in certain areas, in that case the following is recommended:
  a. That DATs and other psychometric testing should be administrated in Third Year as a source of guidance for students in selecting subjects for those that are considering going straight to Fifth Year.
  b. School management should structure the timetable so that Third Year students get adequate and appropriate guidance and information to enlighten their choices.
  c. A subject choice day/evening should be organised for Third Year students and their parents/guardians so that they can meet with teachers of Senior Cycle subjects and gain an insight into the practical elements and content of subjects.
  d. That Third Year students should be able to attend guest speakers who give presentations in the school regarding their profession, university requirements, etc.

- All teachers in the school should be encouraged to provide information to students from an early age of the career choices that would be available to them if they were to study their subject at Senior Cycle and proceed with it into third level education.

6.3.3 Research Recommendations

- Since the research was carried out in two single sex Post Primary schools, gender was also going to be a factor. Further research into a comparison of students’ experience of selecting subjects from those who attend a co-educational Post Primary school and single sex school might highlight differences and opportunities available.
6.4 Personal Learning and Reflexivity

I came to this research study with several preconceptions about how students engage and process the decisions they must make in choosing their subjects for their Leaving Certificate. These preconceptions were based on my experience as a Post Primary teacher of non-core subjects for Senior Cycle in one of the schools in the study. As a former Transition Year Co-ordinator in one of the schools I had on numerous occasions students ask my advice on keeping on or dropping the subjects that I teach. These questions were more often than not asked by students returning from work experience placement. The level of support available to students to seek adequate advice was often unavailable due to budget cuts and management decisions on where they decided to best use resources.

Most teachers would of course like to have all students pick their subject or have their subject deem popular within the school. I could easily have taken advantage of students’ lack of information and pushed them into choosing my subject and inform them of its value for a Third Level place. In doing this I would have been feathering my own nest and not looking out for the best interests of the students. To help me with this process, I supported the notion of objectivity which is a key basis of positivism; I remained impartial to the research at all times (Cohen et al. 2011). I critically self-reflect during the research in the form of a reflective research diary. At certain times, I found that writing about my feelings on the process allowed me to take stock and revaluate what direction the research was taking and what needed to be done to continue the process.

In engaging in this research study, I have learned aspects that will help in my future practice. These include: promote a whole school approach to guidance in the school and in particular with subject teachers during the time of subject selection for Junior and Senior cycle students. Communication with key stakeholders and in particular with parents/guardians to ensure that they are fully aware of all new and relevant information that might affect a subject choice decision. Finally, in consultation with school management that proper planning and resources be put in place so that all students are afforded the opportunity to avail of guidance counselling sessions throughout their Post Primary education.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter provided a conclusion to the research. It presented a summary of the main findings. The strengths and limitations of the study were outlined; the researcher also
identified some recommendations which emerged from the research. Finally, the researcher outlined the personal learning gained from the process.
References


Galvin, J. (2012) *A case study exploring the perceptions of regular teachers of a whole school approach to guidance counselling in a mid-west post-primary school* (M.A), University of Limerick.


Perrin, S.B. (1997) *Education through the Arts in Secondary Schools*. Centre for the Arts in the Basic Curriculum, available: [http://education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/strategies/topics/Arts%20in%20Education/The%20Center%20for%20Arts%20in%20the%20Basic%20Curriculum/perrin2.htm](http://education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/strategies/topics/Arts%20in%20Education/The%20Center%20for%20Arts%20in%20the%20Basic%20Curriculum/perrin2.htm) [accessed 27 August 2016].


### Appendix A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Activities</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 activities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 activities</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 activities</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>45.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 activities</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 activities</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 activity</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 activities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.6 – Number of Activities undertaken
### Appendix B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(a) I would have found a career guidance class once a week in 3rd Year useful to advise me on subject choice.</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>54.7%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| (b) I would have found a career guidance class once a week in TY useful to advise me on subject choice. | 125 | 0% | 4.5% | 41.3% | 43.6% | 6% | 4.5% |

| (c) During 3rd Year the Guidance Counsellor was available by appointment to answer my questions on subject choice. | 137 | 2.1% | 10.2% | 50.3% | 19.7% | 16.7% | 2.1% |

| (d) During TY the Guidance Counsellor was available by appointment to answer my questions on subject choice. | 125 | 1.4% | 11.9% | 52.2% | 14.1% | 15.6% | 4.4% |

| (e) I received information during 3rd Year on the actual content of subjects which I chose for Leaving Certificate. | 137 | 13.1% | 35.7% | 26.2% | 10.9% | 11.6% | 2.1% |

| (f) I received information during TY on the actual content of subjects which I chose for Leaving Certificate. | 125 | 8.2% | 27.7% | 38.1% | 34% | 8.2% | 4.4% |

| (g) During 3rd Year the Guidance Counsellor provided information, on the possible jobs/further educational courses related to each subject. | 137 | 12.4% | 37.9% | 34.3% | 5.1% | 8.7% | 1.4% |

| (h) During TY the Guidance Counsellor provided information, on the possible jobs/further educational courses related to each subject. | 125 | 1.4% | 11.9% | 52.2% | 14.1% | 15.6% | 4.4% |

| (i) Subject teachers informed me of the possible jobs that their subjects might lead to. | 137 | 12.4% | 38.9% | 33.3% | 4.1% | 8.7% | 1.4% |

| (j) Guest speakers gave talks to us during 3rd Year, on career opportunities. | 137 | 14.1% | 34.7% | 26.6% | 11.9% | 11.2% | 1.1% |

| (k) Guest speakers gave talks to us during TY, on career opportunities. | 125 | 3% | 6.5% | 41.3% | 40.6% | 6% | 2.5% |

| (l) During 3rd Year I had access to the careers library before I made my subject choices. | 137 | 4.1% | 10.2% | 48.3% | 18.7% | 17.7% | 2.1% |

| (m) During TY I had access to the careers library before I made my subject choices. | 125 | 10.5% | 33.8% | 33.8% | 4.5% | 12.7% | 4.5% |

| (n) I felt free to choose any subject for the Leaving Certificate. | 137 | 6.5% | 10.2% | 41.6% | 37.9% | 3.6% | 0% |

| (o) All subjects were available as a choice for all students choosing 5th Year. | 137 | 9.4% | 27% | 37.2% | 19.7% | 6.5% | 0% |

| (p) My parents/guardians were fully informed of the benefits of choosing each subject. | 137 | 14.5% | 19.7% | 37.2% | 13.8% | 13.8% | 0.7% |

| (q) I had enough time to seek advice on all the issues related to subject choices. | 137 | 12.4% | 22.6% | 40.1% | 17.5% | 7.2% | 0% |

Table 4.7 – Statements about how schools provide information about subject choices
Subject Information Letter – Principal

EHS REC No.: 2017_03_04_EHS

Date:

Research title: A consideration of the role of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to the decision-making process regarding subject choices for students in Two single sex Post Primary Schools.

Dear Principal,

I am currently a student of the MA Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development course with the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Mr. James Galvin. As part of my studies I have to complete a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling.

In my research, I aim to examine the decision-making process regarding subject choices of post primary students. In order to gather this information, I would appreciate if you would give me consent to carry out the research study in your school. This would involve me asking Leaving Certificate students to complete a self-reporting questionnaire to gather information in relation to their experience of making decisions around subject choices.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence. No names are provided, the questionnaires are anonymous. Participation in the study by students will be voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis stage, in such cases participants will not have to return the questionnaire. There will be minimum disruption to both the school and students during initial information session, dissemination of consent forms and of the questionnaire. Students will have sufficient time to complete the short survey at home, which will not impact on school work. The results from this research
study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. It is important to note that the school’s name and the name of the individual participants will not be used in the research and the school will not be identifiable to anyone other than those directly involved.

If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

**Researcher:**
Gerard Murphy
Email: 9942912@ul.ie

**Supervisor:**
James Galvin, Research Team Supervisor
Email: northcorkcareers@gmail.com

**Principal Investigator:**
Dr Lucy Hearne
Course Director
MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development,
School of Education, University of Limerick
Tel (061) 202931
Email: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Code number 2017__03_04_EHS). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

**Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee**
EHS Faculty Office
University of Limerick
Tel No: (061) 234101
Email: ehs@staffmail.ul.ie
Appendix D

UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Consent Form Principal

EHS REC No.: 2017_03_04_EHS

Research title: A consideration of the role of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to the decision-making process regarding subject choices for students in Two single sex Post Primary Schools.

I have read the project Information Sheet and understand in detail the particulars of the research project. I understand that the identity of the participants and the school will not be revealed in the project of this research study. The conditions involved in the research which are designed to protect the privacy of participants and respect their contribution are:

1. Participation is entirely voluntary.
2. Participants are free to withdraw at any time prior to the data analysis stage and any contribution made will be subsequently destroyed.
3. The self-reporting questionnaires will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the research and the supervisor. Excerpts from the self-reporting questionnaires may be part of the final research dissertation but under no circumstances will names or any identifying characteristics be included in the report.

I hereby give my consent for Gerard Murphy to carry out this research in the school:

Signature: _______________________________
Printed name: ___________________________
Signature of Researcher: ___________________
Date: _________________________________
Appendix E

UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Subject Information Letter – Volunteer Participant

EHS REC No.: 2017_03_04_EHS

Date:

Research title: A consideration of the role of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to the decision-making process regarding subject choices for students in Two single sex Post Primary Schools.

Dear Student,

I am currently a student of the MA Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development course with the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Mr. James Galvin. As part of my studies I have to complete a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling.

In my research, I aim to examine the topic of the decision-making process of students with regards to their subject choices at Senior Cycle Level. In order to gather this information, I would appreciate if you would agree to participate in a questionnaire. The self-reporting questionnaire will take approximately 20-25 minutes. The questionnaire should be completed outside of class time. If you agree to participate in this questionnaire, you can place the completed questionnaire into the envelope provided and return it to the main school office to the designated drop box.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence. Neither your own name or the schools name will be identified, the questionnaires are anonymous. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the
data analysis stage. The results from this research will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences. The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick for seven years. It will then be safely destroyed according to UL guidelines. It is important to note that your name will not be used in the research.

If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

**Researcher:**
Gerard Murphy  
Email: 9942912@ul.ie

**Supervisor:**
James Galvin, Research Team Supervisor  
Email: northcorkcareers@gmail.com

**Principal Investigator:**
Dr Lucy Hearne  
Course Director  
MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development,  
School of Education, University of Limerick  
Tel (061) 202931  
Email: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Code number 2017__03_04_EHS). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

**Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee**  
EHS Faculty Office  
University of Limerick  
Tel No: (061) 234101  
Email: ehs@staffmail.ul.ie
Consent Form - Volunteer Participant

EHS REC No.: 2017_03_04_EHS

Research title: A consideration of the role of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to the decision-making process regarding subject choices for students in Two single sex Post Primary Schools.

- I understand what this research project is about, and what the results will be used for.

- I am fully aware of the procedures and of the risks and the benefits of the study.

- I am aware that my identity will remain anonymous.

- I know that my participation in the research study is voluntary and I can withdraw my involvement at any time prior to the data analysis stage.

I hereby agree to take part in this study:

Signature: _____________________________________

Printed name: _____________________________________

Signature of Researcher: _____________________________

Date: _____________________________________
Subject Information Letter - Parent or Carer or Guardian

EHS REC No.: 2017__03_04_EHS

Date:

Research title: A consideration of the role of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to the decision-making process regarding subject choices for students in Two single sex Post Primary Schools.

Dear Parent or Carer or Guardian,

I am currently a student of the MA Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development course with the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Mr. James Galvin. As part of my studies I have to complete a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling.

In my research, I aim to examine the decision-making process regarding subject choices of post primary students. In order to gather this information, I am writing to you to enquire whether you would be willing to consent to your son/daughter taking part in a research study through a self-reporting questionnaire. The self-reporting questionnaire will take approximately 20-25 minutes to complete outside of classroom time.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence. The student’s identity will not be disclosed as the questionnaires are anonymous. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis stage. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences. The data from the questionnaire will be stored in a secure location in UL, and the information will be stored for seven years. It will then be safely destroyed according to UL guidelines.
If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

**Researcher:**
Gerard Murphy  
Email: 9942912@ul.ie

**Supervisor:**
James Galvin, Research Team Supervisor  
Email: northcorkcareers@gmail.com

**Principal Investigator:**
Dr Lucy Hearne  
Course Director  
MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development,  
School of Education, University of Limerick  
Tel (061) 202931  
Email: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

If you are agreeable to your son/daughter participating in this research study please confirm your consent by completing the attached Consent Form and returning it by [insert date] it to me at Good Counsel College. A signed copy of this form must be received in advance of the day of the distribution of the self-reporting questionnaire in order for your son/daughter to participate.

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Code number: 2017__03_04_EHS). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

**Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee**
EHS Faculty Office  
University of Limerick  
Tel No: (061) 234101  
Email: ehs@staffmail.ul.ie
Appendix H

Consent Form - Volunteer Participant (Parent/Guardian of students under the age of 18)

EHS REC No.: 2017_03_04_EHS

Research title: A consideration of the role of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to the decision-making process regarding subject choices for students in Two single sex Post Primary Schools.

- I understand what this research project is about, and what the results will be used for.
- I am fully aware of the procedures and of the risks and the benefits of the study.
- I am aware that the identity of my son/daughter will remain anonymous.
- I know that my son’s/daughter’s participation in the research study is voluntary and they can withdraw their involvement at any time prior to the data analysis stage.

I hereby agree to give consent for my son/daughter to take part in this study:

Signature: _____________________________________
Printed name: _____________________________________
Signature of Researcher: ______________________________
Date: _____________________________________
Appendix I

UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK
O L L S C O I L L U I M N I G H

Questionnaire

EHS REC No.: 2017_03_04_EHS

Date: 27th March 2017

Research title: A consideration of the role of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to the decision-making process regarding subject choices for students in Two single sex Post Primary Schools.

This questionnaire will examine what factors influenced your decisions, when choosing subjects for the Leaving Certificate. When you have completed the questionnaire, you can place the completed survey into the envelope provided and return it to the box provided in the main reception.

All sections of the questionnaire should be completed.

Section 1: General Information

1. What is your gender? Male □ Female □
2. What is your age?
3. What is your school type? Boys only □ Girls Only □
4. What programmes are you studying? Leaving Certificate □ LCVP □
5. Have you completed TY? Yes □ No □
6. Do you live in an urban or rural area? Urban □ Rural □
7. Do you have siblings in college? Yes □ No □
   If ‘yes’ how many?

8. List the subjects you are studying for Leaving Certificate and tick the current level:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Higher</th>
<th>Ordinary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. Education level of Parents/Guardians:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Did your father complete the Leaving Certificate?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Did your father complete a Third Level College course?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Did your mother complete the Leaving Certificate?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Did your mother complete a Third Level College course?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Section 2: Subject Selection**

10. If you have completed Transition Year (TY) please complete this question:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Did you get to do taster subjects for Leaving Cert in TY?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Did you find them useful?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Please comment** on Q10 (b):

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(c) Did you receive a presentation on selecting subjects?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Did you find this useful?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Please comment** on Q10 (d):

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(e) Did you attend an information evening on selecting subjects?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(f) Did you find this useful?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Please comment** on Q10 (f):

11. What activities did you take part in to help you with your career decision-making? Please tick where appropriate:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DATs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRAT 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Evening in the school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Open Days/Career Fairs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careers Guidance Class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Career Guidance Class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If other, please specify:

__________________________________________________________________________________
12. Below are statements about how the school provides information and advice to Third Year/TY students about subject choices. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) I would have found a career guidance class once a week in 3rd Year useful to advise me on subject choice.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) I would have found a career guidance class once a week in TY useful to advise me on subject choice.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) During 3rd Year the Guidance Counsellor was available by appointment to answer my questions on subject choice.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) During TY the Guidance Counsellor was available by appointment to answer my questions on subject choice.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) I received information during 3rd Year on the actual content of subjects which I chose for Leaving Certificate.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(f) I received information during TY on the actual content of subjects which I chose for Leaving Certificate.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(g) During 3rd Year the Guidance Counsellor provided information, on the possible jobs/further educational courses related to each subject.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(h) During TY the Guidance Counsellor provided information, on the possible jobs/further educational courses related to each subject.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) Subject teachers informed me of the possible jobs that their subjects might lead to.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(j) Guest speakers gave talks to us during 3rd Year, on career opportunities.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(k) Guest speakers gave talks to us during TY, on career opportunities.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(l) During 3rd Year I had access to the careers library before I made my subject choices.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(m) During TY I had access to the careers library before I made my subject choices.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n) I felt free to choose any subject for the Leaving Certificate.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(o) All subjects were available as a choice for all students choosing 5th Year.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(p) My parents/guardians were fully informed of the benefits of choosing each subject.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(q) I had enough time to seek advice on all the issues related to subject choices.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
13. Do you think that particular subjects in your school are promoted by the school as being more important than others?

If yes, state which subject(s) __________________________________________

Why do you think that is?
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

14. Please rank 1-4 (1 meaning most important, 4 meaning least important) the following factors in order of importance when choosing subject.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of future career</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. Please rank 1-4 (in order of importance, 4 meaning least important) the factors you think your parents/guardians thought were most important when choosing subjects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of future career</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

16. Please rank the following in order of importance 1-5 for each of the following (1 meaning very important, 5 meaning least important) the people you took advice from before you made your subject choices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother/Sister</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance Counsellor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice-Principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If other, please specify:__________________________________________________________________________________

17. Did you receive enough advice before choosing your subjects?  

Yes [ ] No [ ] Other [ ]

18. (a) Were you aware which teacher would be teaching particular subjects before you made your decisions?

(b) Did this knowledge influence your subject choices?

Yes [ ] No [ ]
19. How did the school provide information to your parents/guardians to advice you in subject choices? (Please tick appropriate box)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>An information leaflet</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A meeting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several meetings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information evening</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Website</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If other, please specify:

20(a) How many of your first choice subjects did you receive? (Please tick)

1  2  3  4  5

(b) Are you studying any extra subjects outside of school?  
Yes  No  

If ‘yes’ please comment:

21. Are any of your subjects very different from what you expected?  
Yes  No  

If yes, explain.

22. If you were choosing your subjects again, would your choices be different?  
Yes  No  

If yes, explain.

23. Were certain subjects not provided in the school that you would like to do?  
Yes  No  

If yes, explain.
24. Foreign Language Selection:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was it compulsory for you to study a foreign language for Junior Certificate?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was it compulsory for you to study a foreign language for Leaving Certificate?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you need a foreign language to gain access for a third level course?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

25. Are there any issues in your selection of subjects that are now restricting you in relation to career decisions?
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________

Section 3: Guidance Counselling Provision

27. |                                | Yes | No |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Did you receive guidance classes in relation to subject choice selection in 3rd Year?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Did you receive guidance classes in relation to subject choice selection in TY?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Did you avail of individual meetings with the guidance counsellor in relation to subject choice selection?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

28. What do you understand the Guidance Counsellors responsibility in supporting you with your subject choices?
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________

Is there any other information you would like to provide?
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________

Thank you for taking part in the questionnaire.
If you feel you need to discuss any issues in this questionnaire an appointment can be arranged with the Guidance Counsellor.
Acceptance of the University of Limerick Child Protection Guidelines

I have read the University of Limerick Child Protection Guidelines and agree to abide by its contents. There is no reason why I would be considered unsuitable to work with children or young people.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________

Print Name: ___________________________

Department: ___________________________

This form must be retained by the signatory’s University Department