

**An Examination of how Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity  
are Understood and Addressed by the Guidance Counselling  
Profession and Post-Primary Schools: The Guidance Counsellor's  
Perspective**

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**UNIVERSITY *of* LIMERICK**  
**OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH**

**Master of Arts in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development**

**University of Limerick**

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## Personal 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 any other institution

*Signed:* \_\_\_\_\_

## **Abstract**

The aim of this research study was to explore Guidance Counsellor's perspectives on how gender identity and sexual orientation are understood and addressed by the Guidance Counselling profession and in post-primary schools in Ireland. 'Being LGBT in School' (DES & Glen 2016) highlighted the role of the Guidance Counsellor and drew from the perspectives of LGBT students. This study will draw on the perspectives of Guidance Counsellors when issues relating to sexual orientation and gender identity arise within the post-primary sector.

Six Guidance Counsellors from post-primary schools in Ireland were interviewed through the medium of a semi-structured interview. Topics discussed included their level of experience as Guidance Counsellors and their perspectives on how initial education prepared them for working with students who identified as LGBT. Participants also spoke of the challenges in accessing continuous professional development namely the high administrative work load of the role and challenges with management. The appearance of sexuality and gender identity within the curriculum, through the Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) model was critiqued. Participants spoke of individual experiences of working with students who disclosed their sexuality and/or gender identity within the school community and provided their perspectives on client interactions with the Guidance service, parents, peers and social media.

The findings of the research were compiled into a number of themes one of which outlined the ad hoc nature of Guidance Counselling training in aiding their level of preparedness when working with issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity. The second theme outlined the pivotal role management, policy and curriculum play in relation to how sexual orientation and gender identity is understood and addressed by the school community. The perspectives of Guidance Counsellors on perceived positive client interactions was identified as theme three. Finally the fourth theme looked to what Guidance Counsellors viewed as a future challenge – the inclusion of students who identify with a gender different than the one they were born with in the school community.

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## **Glossary of Terms**

IGC	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
LGBT	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender
LGBTI	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex
LGBTQI	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Intersex
TGNC	Trans Gender Non Conforming
S.P.H.E	Social Political Health Education
R.S.E	Relationship and Sex Education
DES	Department of Education and Science
GLEN	Gay Lesbian Equality Network
TENI	Transgender Equality Network Ireland
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
TENI	Transgender Equality Network Ireland

# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **1.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the topic under investigation and discuss the context and justification for this study. My position as the researcher will be outlined and the research methodology, aims and objectives of the research study will be highlighted. Finally a plan of the thesis is provided.

## **1.2 Context and Justification for the Research Study**

This research will examine Guidance Counsellors' perspectives on how sexual orientation and gender identity are understood and addressed by the Guidance Counselling Profession and the school community in post-primary schools in Ireland. The decision to focus on the post-primary school setting was due to my experience as a mainstream subject teacher over the past eight years and my schooling in a single sex Catholic ethos school. Previous Irish based studies including Hearne et al (2016) have researched the role of the Guidance Counsellor within a whole school approach to guidance. The research study 'Being LGBT in School', a joint publication between the Department of Education and Skills and GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network), highlighted the importance of the Guidance Counsellor in supporting LGBT students. 'Being LGBT in School' (DES & GLEN 2016) drew from the perspectives of LGBT students. This study will gain Guidance Counsellors perspectives on how issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity are understood and addressed by the Guidance Counselling profession and the school community. With the publication of GLEN's documents 'Including Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Students in School Policies: A Guideline for Principals (NCGE & GLEN 2011) and 'Being LGBT in Schools: A Resource for Post-Primary Schools to Prevent Homophobic Bullying and Transphobic Bullying and Support LGBT Students (DES & GLEN 2016) it is clear that Guidance Counsellors have a role to play in supporting LGBT students. Consequently this project will explore how gender identity and sexual orientation are understood and addressed by the guidance counselling profession by drawing on the experiences of Guidance Counsellors.

### **1.3 Researchers Position in this Study**

In this qualitative interpretivist study it was important to acknowledge and highlight my position and assumptions on the topic and the resulting role I will play in the research process. The opportunity to carry out an investigation on this research topic appealed to me as a result of my experience as a mainstream post-primary school teacher and my own experience of attending post-primary education. A heteronormative environment was present in my personal experience of post-primary education and I was interested to explore how this impacted on any assumptions I may have made. I was aware of a lack of knowledge surrounding sexuality within my professional practice as a teacher and recognised the need to become more familiar with the literature. As a trainee Guidance Counsellor I also deemed it necessary to engage with the literature and supports available in order to aid my professional preparedness when issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity arise within my future practice. This was deemed a necessity as a result of the current social context considering the Marriage Equality Act (Government of Ireland 2015) which I feel has had a positive impact on the lives of many including those of my colleagues and friends. Engaging in the public conversation around marriage equality and witnessing the positive change in the lives of people I care about has had a profound effect on me and as a result I feel it is essential to educate myself in order to bring a sense of equality to the school environment in which I work.

### **1.4 Aims and Objectives**

The main aim of the research study was to examine Guidance Counsellors' perspectives on how gender identity and sexual orientation are understood and addressed by the Guidance Counselling profession and in second-level schools in Ireland. The purpose of the study was to focus on providing the Guidance Counsellor's perspective due to their role as a member of the student support team. A number of sub research questions, which are outlined below were devised to achieve my aim.

1. In what ways do issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity arise within Guidance Counsellors' their everyday professional lives?

2. What are the perspectives of Guidance Counsellors on their level of preparedness in approaching LGBT?
3. What are the approaches, challenges and opportunities related to LGBT identities in post –primary schools?

The objectives of the research were to:

- 1 Review the relevant literature, including policy, related to international and national examples of how sexual orientation and gender identity are understood within the school environment.
- 2 Undertake and analyse six semi-structured qualitative interviews of approximately forty to sixty minutes in duration.
- 3 Identify the main themes emerging from the critical analysis of data and make recommendations for the future practice of educational professionals when working with issues that arise as a result of sexual orientation and gender identity.

### **1.5 Research Methodology**

This project will follow a qualitative interpretive design. Qualitative research is an approach that allows you to examine people's experiences in detail using a specific set of research methods (Hennick 2011). The interpretive paradigm involves studying the subjective meanings that people attach to their experiences (Hennick 2011). The decision was made to undertake six semi-structured qualitative interviews. The possible sensitivity surrounding the topic of sexuality and gender identity was acknowledged and as a result there was a need to create a space where Guidance Counsellors could discuss their experiences in depth. This would allow an opportunity for the participant to speak on a one to one basis which would ensure the interview would take place at a pace considerate of the participants' emotional wellbeing during the interview. I also strived to gain quality rich information in order to collect an accurate picture of Guidance Counsellors' perspectives on how sexual orientation and gender identity are understood and addressed by the Guidance Counselling Profession and the School Community.

At all times, the research was undertaken in accordance with the ethical requirements of the University of Limerick's Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee and the Institute of Guidance Counsellors Code of Ethics (2012). The research was conducted in an honest manner with interviews recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The

researcher's personal ethical beliefs and morals were also at the forefront of the research and she aimed to carry out no emotional harm to the participants.

## **1.6 Outline of the Research Study**

The structure of the research study is as follows:

**Chapter Two:** provides a critical synthesis of the relevant literature and aims to contextualise the research topic. It is present through a number of sections. Section one will outline equality within the Irish post-primary sector outlining a number of policies that promote equality of all students. Section two will outline how education about sexuality and gender identity is provided and will include topics such as the level of teacher comfort and the impact of school ethos. The influence of a heteronormative school environment in silencing sexuality and gender identity will be discussed in section three. Section four will highlight the literature surrounding homophobic and transphobic bullying in post-primary schools. To conclude section five will outline the guidance provision including the qualifications and education of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to working with issues that may arise as a result of sexual orientation and gender identity.

**Chapter Three:** highlights the paradigm applied to this research study and critiques the approach chosen by outlining its strengths and limitations. The primary research question is highlighted and supported by the sub research questions. The data collection method of semi-structured interviews is outlined and justified. The recruitment process is also discussed and ethical considerations are outlined. Data analysis strategy, thematic coding, is outline and justified. The process of researcher reflexivity is outlined and methods of reflexivity including a reflective diary and peer and supervisor support outlined. The validity and objectivity of the research is also discussed within this chapter.

**Chapter Four:** outlines the primary findings generated as a result of six semi-structured interviews of Guidance Counsellors working in post-primary schools. It contains first person quotations from the participants to enhance the statements made. A number of themes derived from the data are outlined.

**Chapter Five:** discusses the findings of the study, which were generated by the guidance of the research questions. A number of themes were identified and discussed in light of previous research discussed in chapter two.

**Chapter Six:** concludes the research by reporting the overall findings of the investigation. The strengths and limitations of the research study will also be highlighted. A number of recommendations for future policy and practice will be provided along with an account of the personal learning for the researcher.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

This chapter introduced the research topic of the study including the research questions, aims and objectives. It outlined my position as researcher discussed the research methodology that will be employed. The chapter also outlined the content of the forthcoming chapters and is followed by chapter two which will critically examine the relevant literature, under a number of headings relating to the research study.



## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **2.1. Introduction**

The following chapter will examine the relevant literature to establish what is known about the position of sexuality and gender identity in post-primary schools in Ireland. The aim of the chapter is to analyse, examine how one part relates to another, and synthesise, how one brings things together, the literature (Thomas 2009). The first section will establish literature related to equality within the post-primary school system in Ireland. The place sexuality and gender identity play in post-primary education will be outlined through an analysis of the literature surrounding the introduction and delivery of the Relationship and Sexuality Education programme in post-primary schools. The concept of ‘Heteronormativity’ and the silencing of LGBT students within post primary schools will also be discussed and a discussion surrounding homophobic and transphobic bullying outlined. To conclude a brief synopsis of the Guidance Counselling provision will be provided.

### **2.2 Equality in Irish Post-Primary Schools**

The 1995 White Paper on Education, ‘Charting our Education Future,’ stated that the education system should embrace a philosophy of equality (DES 2015). There are various post-primary schools within the education sector including voluntary secondary, vocational schools, community colleges and community and comprehensive schools. School policies, including anti-bullying and enrolment policies aim to support a culture of equality.

#### *2.2.1 Anti –bullying and Enrolment Policies*

Under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 (Government of Ireland 2000) school management were required to construct and implement a code of behaviour which encompassed an anti-bullying policy (Government of Ireland 2000). September 2013 saw the publication of ‘Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary schools’ (DES 2013). This document defined bullying as ‘unwanted negative behaviour, verbal, psychological or physical, conducted by an individual or group against another person (or persons) and which is repeated over time’ (DES 2013, p.5) and highlighted the need for school personnel to explicitly include identity-based bullying including homophobic and transphobic bullying. Enrolment policies also aim to promote equality. As a result of the Education Act (1998) (Government of Ireland

1998) enrolment policies are the responsibility of managerial authorities of all schools. Management is required to ensure that schools can cater for all pupils within the area. The enrolment policy and the selection process, if there are too many applicants for a place, must be ‘non-discriminatory and must be applied fairly in respect of all applicants’ ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)).

### 2.2.2 Policy and practice in relation to students who identify as LGBT

Management in post-primary education use policy as a way to approach the appearance of issues related to sexual identity and gender orientation. Policy is essential as Swanson & Gettinger (2016) highlight how teachers feel more comfortable and confident intervening for LGBT students when there is clear policy to support their actions. Despite the publication of policy the literature shows the publication of policy does not necessarily result in appropriate implementation in practice. McNamara and Norman (2010) highlight how national policies which aim to protect ‘vulnerable minorities’ (p.535) are ‘implemented in a haphazard way or not at all in certain schools (p.535). Supporting this statement the (2009) study (O’Higgins – Norman) found 90% of teachers reported their schools did not have a policy on homophobic bullying and 41% stated this type of bullying was very difficult to deal with over other types of bullying (O’Higgins – Norman 2009). The Department of Education and Skills and GLEN have introduced guidance to schools on sexual orientation issues. Under this guidance every school must create a policy ‘which includes specific measures to deal with bullying behaviour’ of all pupils including homophobic bullying (DES & GLEN 2001, p.3). Despite the publication of policy it is clear that there seems to be a ‘disconnection between policy and its implementation in every day practice’ (Neary 2013, p.584).

## **2.3 Delivery of Education related to Sexuality and Gender Identity**

### 2.3.1 Relationship and Sexuality Education within the Irish Post Primary Sector

Relationship and Sexuality Education was introduced into the Irish post primary school discourse as a result of the 1995 ‘Report of the Expert Advisory Group on Relationship and Sexuality of Education’ (Department of Education 1995) which recommend an introduction of RSE into the curriculum. It recommended that RSE should aim to promote an understanding of sexuality and create a healthy attitude to sexuality and to relationships (Mayock et al 2007).

The curricular M4/95 (DES 1995) and M20/96 (DES 1996) was circulated by the Department of Education and requested schools to begin to develop their policies to include RSE within their programmes for students at Junior and Senior Cycle with guidelines provided in 1997 (Mayock et al 2007). However Social Political and Health Education (SPHE) was not introduced for Junior Cycle students until the publication of circular M22/00 (Department of Education And Science 2000) with a recommendation of one class period per week. RSE education was to take place over 6 class periods in Junior Cycle SPHE (NCCA 1997). The guidelines also highlighted the role all teachers play in creating a supportive environment and that all mainstream teachers would in effect be able to teach the programme as a result of the crossover of subject material in SPHE with other curriculum subjects (Department of Education and Science 2000). Mayock et al (2007) highlight that support of the principal, board of management and all teachers is important to the success of the programme (p.29).

### 2.3.2 The level of teacher comfort when addressing issues that may arise as a result of sexual orientation and gender identity.

The success of the RSE programme and how sexuality and gender identity are understood within the post-primary school relies on the support of management and all teachers. Hearne and Galvin (2014, p.6) showed that 80% of participants in their study felt that pastoral care was an implicit part of their work as an educator further highlighting the role a subject teacher plays in a whole school approach. However, teachers also reported a significant shortcoming in pastoral care education in their ‘initial professional qualification and afterwards’ (Hearne & Galvin 2014, p.234). O’Donoghue and Guerin (2017) highlight the importance of the student–teacher relationship in students disclosing sensitive information, such as their sexuality and instances of homophobic bullying (p.222). However, the lack of adequate education in pastoral care and in particular sexuality and gender identity can hinder the development of this relationship. Firstly, a gender imbalance in the teaching of RSE in Ireland is of great concern (McNamara et al 2010). McNamara et al (2010) highlight male teachers’ fears around teaching RSE and call for support for male teachers through in-service and the promotion of a whole school approach to RSE. The authors (McNamara et al 2010) call for every teacher to make a contribution to the teaching of RSE and highlight no teacher can ‘abdicate one’s responsibility for the personal and social development of pupils’ (p.233). Despite this statement O Donoghue and Guerin (2017) report that topics such as homophobic and transphobic bullying are often

avoided by other teachers and left to the SPHE teacher to cover as SPHE class was ‘primarily a location in which students learned about issues such as bullying, sexuality and friendship’ (p.229). School ethos is also another factor that influences the level of preparedness teachers feel when discussing topics related to sexuality and gender identity.

### 2.3.3 The impact of school ethos on issues that may arise as a result of sexual orientation and gender identity.

The relationship between sexuality and schooling is coloured by the long history of ‘complex interconnections between church and state’ (Neary 2016, p.253). The White Paper on Education (1995) discusses the role a school ethos plays in a post-primary school. It states an ethos embraces ‘collective attitudes, beliefs, values, traditions, aspirations and goals’ (Irish Government 1995). Neary (2013) highlights the influence of a school ethos on the place of RSE in post-primary education and outlines the Department of Education and Skills stance on how ‘the teaching of RSE is at the discretion of the individual school’s ethos or characteristic spirit’ (p.585). The catholic school was informed that the creation of an RSE policy should reflect the catholic moral teaching on sexuality which leads to the assumption made by O’Higgins Norman (2009) that RSE programmes would not ‘present homosexual behaviour as an acceptable way of life’ (p.382). As a result the ethos of a school, particularly a religious ethos, can often prove challenging for the school community when promoting an environment of inclusion and equality for students who identify as LGBT. McNamara and Norman (2010) support this statement by arguing that the ownership and management of a school can be ‘a significant constraint on implementing steps to enhance equity and diversity (p.535). Gowran (2004) addresses the need to recognised the ‘historical forces and factors that have shaped what is considered ‘natural’ or normal’ in this case heterosexuality and the Catholic Church (p. 38). She argues that as a result of working within this context, due to the ethos of many second level schools, teachers are ‘subject to the institutional and cultural bias of that system’ (p.38) and have ‘embodied the silence that surrounds sex and sexuality’ (p.39) which has been passed onto the generations of students that they teach. Neary’s (2013) research highlighted a concern of a teachers who feared their sexuality could be seen as a negative by the school and parents when working with students to build a pastoral and affective relationship. Many participants expressed concerns that they would be seen as ‘recruiting for the LGBTQI community’ (Neary 2013 p.590).

However in recent times the influence of the Catholic Church on Irish society has diminished (Neary et al 2016). In May 2015 the Irish people voted to amend the constitution and become the first country in the world to vote in favour of same-sex marriage (Neary 2013). Participants in the LGBTIreland Report (Higgins et al 2016) acknowledged a greater sense of awareness and acceptance of diversity and LGBTI communities. Irish society was viewed as more progressive and liberal and less under the influence of the Catholic Church with greater visibility and more representation of LGBTI people in the media including TV, film and literature. These changes were cited as positive influencing factors in the disclosure of their sexuality (Higgins et al 2016). This report also showed a desire for education around sexuality and gender identity to begin at a young age in schools so as to normalise LGBTI identity and the need for the school system to become less connected with the church so as to create an inclusive environment. Despite this literature it is clear that the connection between the Catholic Church and education will remain strong into the future. McNamara and Norman (2010) highlight how equality for all students is at risk in a school that has ‘as default faith tradition which holds particular views on specific issues such as sexual orientation’ (p.536).

## **2.4 The School Environment**

The school environment can be ‘a contributing factor in the success of adolescents in general and LGBT adolescents in particular’ (Roe 2015, p.117). The report ‘Being LGBT In Schools’ (DES & GLEN 2016) highlights just 1 in 5 students believed they completely belonged in their school as an LGBTI student (2016 p.12). Reygan (2009) states that discrimination takes place in a number of forms including ‘a presumption of heterosexuality in school systems and the silencing of lesbian and gay voices’ (p. 80).

### 2.4.1 Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is the term which can be used to ‘define a set of practices and assumptions which serve to render heterosexuality not only coherent but also privileged’ (Carrera et al 2012, p.996). The term heteronormativity refers to pervasive and invisible norms of heterosexuality, a sexual desire exclusively for the opposite sex, embedded as a normative principle in social institutions and theory. Warner (1991) spoke of the ‘often invisible heteronormativity of modern societies’ (p.3). This can be seen in the post-primary school environment. Research in

Ireland has shown that the majority of teachers and students view homosexuality as a departure from the norm (O'Higgins – Norman 2008). O'Higgins Norman (2008) continues by stating that the culture of many schools and teachers as part of that culture reads 'sexuality as innate, fixed and biologically determined' (p.328). The lack of visibility and silencing of sexuality and gender identity in schools aids in the creation of a heteronormative environment.

#### 2.4.2 Silence and Visibility

Mayock et al (2009) suggest that LGBT identities were silenced or ridiculed in the school environment. The issue of 'visibility' of LGBT students in post primary schools arises in the literature through the use of different terminology. Mayberry (2012) highlights the role of common attitudes and beliefs construct 'the school environment as a space where LGBT youth are institutionally ignored' and silenced (p.37). Formby writes of the effects of anti-bullying campaigns can 'engender greater visibility' (2015, p.627). More worryingly 'silence' is identified as 'the key schooling practice that sustained the climate of denial and avoidance' (Mayberry 2006, p.262). Similarly Reygan (2009) introduces the concept of an 'enforced invisibility' within Irish schools in his study with respondents reporting a 'negative, and predominantly stereotypical, image of LGBT people in their school (p.86). The respondents in his work also state the lack of any information on LGBT life in their school and the majority of respondents had 'no LGBT friends in school' (2009, p.86). This mirrored the findings of a research project commissioned by the Department of Education, Youthnet and Shout Out (2004) which stated that a school environment aids in the invisibility of LGBT students. The study, 'Research into the needs of young people in Northern Ireland who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender' (Youthnet et al 2004), showed that most young people were aware of a difference in their sexual orientation from a young age including from the beginning of their time in the secondary education system yet highlight on average a three year difference between knowing and disclosing (DES 2003). The most recent study, 'The LGBTIreland Report' (Higgins et al 2016) shows the average age of a participant disclosing their identity or sexual orientation was 19.63 years with a range between 4 and 63 years.

The Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI et al 2016) suggests that there are a much higher number of young people in Ireland aware they are trans or gender variant than previously believed. The report showed that 76% of participants were aware they were trans or gender

variant before the age of 12 years or leaving primary school (TENI et al 2016). McBride and Schubotz (2017) report the influence of educational environments have on reproducing gender stereotypes and reinforcing ‘a binary gender, heteronormative order’ (p.294). The school environment can be seen as hostile by those who do not identify with the gender they were born with as a result of the ethos of the school, uniform policies and gender segregated facilities. School management are required to incorporate gender neutral uniform options within their uniform policy yet the a report (TENI et al 2016) highlighted a number of challenges faced by students in regard to gendered clothing, particularly in single sex schools. Many students were provided with a third option of uniform e.g. a school PE tracksuit as opposed to wearing the clothing, assigned by the school which resulted in concern and anxiety for the student. Another influence on the silencing of students who identify with a gender other than the one they were born with included the gender segregated facilities, bathrooms and changing rooms, within the school environment. Alternative changing rooms and disabled bathrooms brought concern and anxiety to the student. The use of a disabled toilet led to concerns from students that the school was reinforcing the ‘misconceptions about trans persons being mentally unstable or unwell’ (TENI 2016, p.8). In these environments that are overtly heteronormative, with a lack of adequate whole school education, there is a greater risk that many TGNC youth fear homophobic and transphobic bullying. With this fear, McBride & Schubotz (2017) state that many TGNC youth may opt to conform to gender norms and ‘forego their authentic gender identity while at school’ (p.293).

#### 2.4.3 LGBT Students as ‘Victims’

Formby (2015) continues her use of the visible metaphor by stating that LGBT identities should be ‘visibly embedded within a curriculum’ so that anti-bullying work was ‘not the only time LGBT identities ‘*appear*’ within schools (2015, p.637). She argues that by focusing on bullying, essential elements of the school community including teacher training and school staffing needs can be overlooked (2015, p.626). She continues her argument by stating that it may lead to a ‘one-dimensional understanding of LGBT lives as only/either suffering or resilient’ (Formby 2015, p.627). Bryan & Mayock (2012) aim to create a counter viewpoint to the depictions of LGBT youth as vulnerable and ‘at risk’. They argue that LGBT people’s lives in Ireland are defined ‘in terms of their vulnerability to ‘bullying, their experience of homophobic or transphobic violence... depression, self-harm and suicidality’ (2012, p.8).

Formby (2015) warns of the dangers of portraying ‘LGBT people as inherent victims’ (p.627) as long term discourses of ‘at risk’ may have a negative effect. Bryan & Mayock (2012) state that there is a need to recognise that sexuality is ‘one facet of identity’ (p.11) which must be considered in relation ‘to a range of other contexts and experiences which shape and influence individuals’ lives’ (p.11). Identifying LGBT students as being in need of protection can ‘mark them out as fundamentally different from their heterosexual and/or cisgender peers’ (Formby 2015, p.627) thus encouraging a culture of heteronormativity. Bryan and Mayock’s (2017) study also aimed to counteract the portrayal of LGBT youths of being ‘at risk’ so as to challenge the heteronormative structures and ideologies that sustain LGBT oppression. However ‘The LGBTIreland Report (Higgins et al, 2016) highlight that students attending post- primary schools (14-18 year olds) rated four times higher than those in the 19-25 year group in relation to experiencing ‘severe or extremely severe depression, anxiety and stress’ (p.23). Higgins et al (2016) state that participants in their study recommended strategies for ‘increased visibility and normalisation of LGBTI identities in schools’ (p.26) in order to combat the strong role ‘heteronormativity, rejection, victimisation and harassment have on LGBTI people’s feelings of social acceptance, sense of belonging, mental health outcomes and willingness to publicly disclose their identity’ (p.26)

## **2.5 Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying**

### 2.5.1 What is Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying?

Various studies including Mayberry (2006), O’Higgins -Norman (2009) and DES & Youthnet (2003) have spoken about homophobic bullying of LGBT students by fellow peers and a lack of action from teaching staff which aids the heteronormative culture and silencing of LGBT identity. Homophobic bullying is bullying that is ‘motivated by a dislike or fear of someone because of the real or perceived lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender identity (DES & GLEN 2001, p.3). The school environment was deemed a negative environment for the disclosure of sexuality with many experiencing physical violence and name calling. (Youthnet et al 2004) Transphobic bullying is defined as any form of bullying with ‘the added dimension of being based on actual or perceived gender identity’ (DES & GLEN 2016). 67% of the research participants in the ‘LGBT Ireland Study (GLEN et al 2016)’ had witnessed LGBTI bullying in their school. Higgins et al (2016) also highlights the challenges post primary school management face with the school environment described as challenging for students who



identify as LGBT due to the lack of a ‘significant reduction in anti-LGBTI bullying in recent years’ (p. 3)

### 2.5.2 Effect on the student

Formby (2015) highlights the effects of bullying on young people’s mental health and well-being including depression, self-harm and suicide. Arora (2016) state that LGBT youth are at a higher risk of mental health concerns compared to their heterosexual peers. A relationship between ‘mental health issues, suicidal ideation, and suicide and sexual orientation and identity’ exists within the LGBT population (2013 p. 56). The ‘LGBTIreland Report’ (Higgins et al 2016) found that those who experienced LGBTI bullying in school were more likely to self-harm and 19% more likely to have attempted suicide. The effect of LGBT related bullying on post-primary students with those who experienced bullying had ‘significantly higher scores on the depression, anxiety, stress and alcohol use scales indicating more problematic alcohol use’ (Higgins et al. 2016 p.24). Johnson et al (2013) highlights the risk of mental ill health among the LGBT population could be increased due to the ‘lack of coping skills and protective factors that promote resilience’ (p.57). Protective factors are defined as ‘characteristics that promote resilience and make suicide less likely’ including peer and family support (Johnson et al. 2013, p.58).

### 2.5.3 Peer and Parental Support

Roe (2015) also highlights the positive role peers can play by suggesting a number of ways to improve ‘affective empathy among the student body’ (p.117) Swanson & Gettinger (2016) state that the presence or absence of social support may determine the extent to which LGBT students are able to cope effectively with bullying and harassment in schools. They define social support as ‘the perception and/or actuality that support is available from individuals within one’s personal social contexts such as schools’ (2016 p.327). Ryan et al (2010) make a strong point for the positive role family acceptance can play in a LGBT student’s life. They argue that family acceptance ‘protects against depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation and behaviours’ (Ryan et al 2010 p.205). However, the study also concludes that relationships between parents are challenged around the time of disclosure of sexual identity which can prove challenging for an adolescent within the school environment. The

LGBTIreland Report (Higgins et al. 2016) reports the most common reason for hiding their sexuality was fear of rejection, fear of being treated differently and fear of harassment. The importance of school environment, peer and family relationships to an LGBT adolescents wellbeing can be support further by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory where 'youth are nested in several successively larger and interconnected systems with the individual operating within a microsystem e.g. family, friends, school (Roe 2013, p.154).

## **2.6 Guidance in Post-Primary Education**

### 2.6.1 What is Guidance?

The National Centre for Guidance and Education (2014 p.12) defines guidance in post primary schools as 'a range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence that assist students to make choices about their lives'. Section 9(c) of The Education Act (1998) imposes a responsibility on all schools to provide 'appropriate guidance' to assist students in their education and career choices' and also highlights the importance of promoting personal and social development (IGC 2008, p.4). It is argued that whole school guidance planning allows schools to recognise the guidance needs of students and respond to these needs using all available resources to them by identifying the roles and responsibilities of school staff and management (ACCS et al 2012, p.4) and fulfil the requirements of section 9(c) of The Education Act 1998 (Government of Ireland 1998)

### 2.6.2 Guidance in Post-Primary Schools Post 2012

Guidance posts were no longer allocated to post primary schools on an ex quota basis, as a result of Budget 2012, which proved a challenge for both school management and Guidance Counsellors (Hearne & Galvin 2014). Many Guidance Counsellors were faced with embracing a dual role as Guidance Counsellor and mainstream teacher. The timetabling of Guidance Counsellors for SPHE delivery and other curriculum subjects can have a negative impact on students in crisis. It is argued by the NCGE (2014, p.58) that this practice could lead to a lack of access to a professional guidance service. The reduction in one to one counselling, despite the insistence from the Department on the importance of providing this service in Circular 0009/2012, which outlined the need to ensure that the guidance counsellor has 1:1 time with those in difficulty or crisis (DES 2012) is a casualty of Budget 2012. The National Centre for Guidance in Education, in the aftermath of Budget 2012, researched guidance provision in post

primary schools and found that maintaining the guidance programme and managing time effectively were the main challenges faced by management (NCGE 2013, p.57).

### 2.6.3 Qualifications and Training when working with students who identify as LGBT

Roe (2013) identifies school counsellors as ‘uniquely positioned’ to provide support to LGBT students as a result of their training (p.153). Power-Elliot & Harris (2012) highlight that as a result of their training Guidance Counsellors are well equipped to handle situations of bullying. Irish post-primary school Guidance Counsellors are qualified secondary school teachers who have undertaken postgraduate education in Guidance Counselling (Leahy et al. 2017). Post-graduate education in Guidance Counselling involves a holistic approach incorporating ‘three separate but interlinked areas of personal, educational and career guidance counselling’ (Leahy et al. 2017, p.99). Roe (2015) outlines a way of supporting LGBT youth is to provide support during the ‘coming out’ process through one to one counselling and support groups (p.122). The National Centre for Guidance in Education and GLEN (2010) outlined that many Guidance Counsellors felt they ‘were not experts on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues’ (p.3) but highlighted that individual unique experiences of clients and this ‘ought to be the guiding principle in a counselling session’ (NCGE & GLEN 2010, p.3). ‘Being LGBT in Schools’ (GLEN & DES, 2016) provide guidelines for counsellors when working with students who identify as LGBT and is the first to offer advice when working with transgender students. This advice involves adopting a personal response to an individual’s experience and encourages Guidance Counsellors to employ ‘the general skills of counselling’ (GLEN & DES 2016, p.42). Lemoire & Chen (2005) argue that person centred counselling has the potential to ‘create necessary conditions that counteract stigmatization, allowing adolescents to cope with their sexual identity in a manner that is more constructive for them (p.146). Carl Rogers introduced this radical approach in the 1940s and outlined that the counsellor promotes an ‘actualizing tendency’ through congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding (Freire et al. 2005, p.227). Lemoire & Chen (2005) state that the core conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence have also provided a ‘safe, understanding and facilitative helping environment that is appropriate for LGBT clients’ (p.149). Guidance Counsellors were also warned to beware of personal bias, stereotyping and stigmatising clients (NCGE & GLEN 2010) and to access supports to ‘broaden [their] knowledge and

understanding of the issues experienced by LGBT people in general' (NCGE & GLEN 2010, p.3) via online resources.

#### 2.6.4 Supportive Strategies when working with students who identify as LGBT

Swanson & Gettinger (2016) write of the impact of one positive role model in the lives of LGBT students. They state that a supportive relationship with at least one teacher results in students experiencing significantly fewer school difficulties and lower rates of depression and anxiety when compared to other LGBT students (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). Roe also suggests the need for counsellors to advertise through posters or stickers which affirm LGBT students but also to be conscious that some students may not understand the symbols so support will need to be shown in another way (Roe 2013). Another strategy that has been embraced internationally includes the establishment of Gay Straight Alliance groups. These groups are 'student- led, school- based clubs which provide support and promote safety for LGBT students in schools' (Arora 2016, p.724). GSAs emerged in the 1980s 'to provide support for LGBT youth who were struggling to overcome the feelings of difference and isolation they experienced in the school environment' (Mayberry 2012, p.36). American studies show that the presence of a GSA adds to the perceptions among LGBT students that the school is 'safer and more supportive than without a GSA (Swanson & Gettinger 2016, p.330). Swanson & Gettinger (2016) state that students in schools with GSAs experience less harassment and bullying and a stronger sense of belonging and participation in the school community (p.330). The presence of GSAs in schools also results in improved academic achievement for members and also act as a vehicle through which to counteract the heteronormative culture that exists within the school community. However, the common theme running through literature is 'fear of potential backlash from parents and other community members' (p.38) when issues arise as a result of sexual identity and gender identity arise within the school community especially when school policy is not clearly established. However students who identify as LGBT are hesitant to communicate with school based professionals Arora et al (2016) state that only one half of LGBT students indicated their willingness to speak about LGBT issues with school based professionals (p.772). A joint publication between GLEN, the ASTI and the TUI (2009) also highlighted that 60% of Irish post-primary students felt there wasn't a teacher or other adult to speak to in school.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has shown a national drive by the Department of Education to promote a supportive environment for all student, including students who identify as LGBT, with the publication of policies, curriculum programmes and guidelines for school principals and staff. Despite the publication of these documents the literature shows challenges surrounding the implementation of policy, delivery of curriculum, education of staff and a lack of acknowledgement when issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity arise. Guidance Counsellors have been recognised as key personnel by the Department of Education and Science and organisations such as TENI and GLEN. As a result it is necessary to gain Guidance Counsellors' perspectives on how sexual orientation and gender identity are understood and addressed by the Guidance Counselling profession and the school community.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.0 Introduction**

This chapter will outline the methodology and methods employed for this research. The primary and secondary research questions will be identified. Research paradigms will be examined and a justification for the chosen paradigm of the study will be provided. Data collection, analysis and recruitment process will be outlined along with issues related to objectivity, validity and reliability of qualitative research. Ethics in Guidance research and personal reflexivity will conclude the chapter.

### **3.1 Research Paradigm**

Ontological and epistemological assumptions create a difference between quantitative and qualitative approaches. Guba (1990) explains ontological and epistemological assumptions with the use of questions. He poses the question ‘What is the nature of reality?’ (p.18) to explain ontological assumptions. In other words ontology is the study of reality. The question ‘What is the nature of the relationship between the knower (the inquirer) and the known?’ explains the epistemological assumption (Guba 1990, p.18). My perception of reality has an impact on what I view as genuine knowledge and combined these have an impact on how I decide to conduct my research. I engage with an idealism standpoint and acknowledge that ‘there is no single reality’ (p.77) but multiple realities based on individuals’ experiences (Slevitch 2011). My experience working in school environments has influence this position as the school community encompasses individuals of varying ages from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds thus recognising there are multiple realities. An inductive research strategy will be employed for this research work. This will involve the collection and analysis of data and an attempt to develop generalizations using ‘inductive logic’ (Blaikie 2007, p.8). As a result I took an interpretivist inductive approach to this research.

Both research paradigms and research strategies vary in their ontological and their epistemological assumptions. Blaikie (2007) defines a research paradigm as a ‘broader frameworks of theoretical or philosophical perspectives’ (p.12). McCusker and Gunaydin (2015) distinguishes between quantitative and qualitative by assessing the aims of both

methods. They suggest qualitative research aims to ‘answer questions about the ‘what’, ‘how, or ‘why’ of a phenomenon rather than ‘how many’ or ‘how much’, which are answered by quantitative methods’ (McCusker & Gunaydin 2015, p.537). The approaches can be summarised the view that quantitative research involves numerical data while qualitative research engages with narratives. There are issues regarding validity and reliability while using both methods. Quantitative research for example a questionnaire, despite its construction by the researcher, requires a respondent to have 100% memory recall, understand questions completely and answer sometimes sensitive questions honestly, in order for the data to be considered fully reliable (Lakshman et al. 2000). Qualitative research on the other hand requires the researchers to acknowledge biases and to employ critical reflection of methods to ensure there is sufficient reliable data (Noble & Smith 2015). Some suggestions by Noble and Smith (2015) include encompassing respondent validation, engaging with other researchers to reduce researcher bias and to demonstrate clarity during the data collection phase.

### 3.1.1 Paradigm Selection

This project will follow a qualitative interpretive design. Corbin (2015) states it is a form of research in which

‘The researcher or a designated coresearcher collects and interprets data, making the researcher as much a part of the research process as the participants and the data they provide’ (Corbin 2015, p.4).

Qualitative research is an approach that allows you to examine people's experiences in detail using a specific set of research methods (Hennink et al 2011). The interpretive paradigm involves studying the subjective meanings that people attach to their experiences (Hennink et al 2011). The possible sensitivity surrounding the topic of sexuality and gender identity was acknowledged and as a result there was a need to create a space where Guidance Counsellors could discuss their experiences in depth. This would allow an opportunity for the participant to speak on a one to one basis which would ensure the interview would take place at a pace considerate of the participants’ emotional wellbeing during the interview. I also strived to gain quality rich information in order to collect an accurate picture of Guidance Counsellors’ perspectives on how sexual orientation and gender identity are understood and addressed by the Guidance Counselling Profession and the School Community.

### 3.1.2 Strengths of Qualitative Approach

Silverman (2006) maintains the main strength of qualitative research is the ‘ability to study phenomena which are simply unavailable elsewhere’ (p.43). His argument is continued by suggesting the strength of qualitative research is the ability to describe how a ‘phenomenon is locally constituted’ (p.43). Corbin (2015) summarises Silverman’s stance by stating that qualitative research creates an opportunity to ‘take a holistic and comprehensive approach to the study of phenomena’ (p.5). Other strengths of qualitative research include the opportunity to explore participants’ inner experiences and to see the world from their perspective (Corbin 2015). An advantage of the qualitative research for this study lies in the opportunity to gain ‘detailed and exact analyses of a few cases’ (Flick 2015, p.12) due to the low response rate of participants.

### 3.1.3 Limitations of the Qualitative Approach

As mentioned previously an advantage of qualitative research is to gain ‘detailed and exact analyses of a few cases’ (Flick 2015, p.12). This advantage also provides a disadvantage as these analysis prove difficult to generalize results to a larger cohort or as Flick (2015) states ‘the broader masses’ (p.12). Face to face interviews can also prove time consuming due to the distances involved in travel and the transcriptions of recorded data this may make it difficult to recruit participants. Due to the time constraints and timescale of the research project it was decided that six interviews would take place. Exploring participants’ inner experiences can also prove a limitation of qualitative research as participants may be slow to disclose information or may become upset during the course of the interview. Finally, considering Corbin’s (2015) researcher inclusive definition of qualitative analysis, there is a risk of biased data if the researcher does not employ reflexivity within the qualitative research process. Reflexivity requires the researched to engage in ‘conscious self-reflection’ so as to ‘make explicit their potential influence on the research process’ (Hennink et al 2011, p.19).

## **3.2 Identification of Research Questions**

Blaikie (2007) states the importance of research questions and refers to them as the ‘foundations of all research’ and makes ‘a research problem researchable’ (p.6). Research questions are ‘questions that you propose to answer through data collection’ and direct ‘all



other subsequent tasks in the research process' (Hennink et al 2011, p.33). According to Flick (2015), answering research questions should lead to development by providing new insights into the subject of the study. Reflecting on modules studied in the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan I was prompted to research sexuality and gender identity in relation to Post-Primary schools. A review of the literature showed a need to highlight the role of the Guidance Counsellor and how sexual orientation and gender identity are understood and addressed within the profession and the school community. Research questions need to be 'as focused and specific as possible instead of being vague and unspecific' (Flick 2015, p.52). Considering Flick's advice I spent time drafting and editing both the research and sub research questions through the use of peer and supervisor feedback. This occurred in order to ensure focused and precise research questions shaped the research project. The important role played by the Guidance Counsellor is highlighted by their specific inclusion (Section 5.3) in the publication 'Being LGBT in School' (DES & GLEN 2016, p.41-44). Roe (2013) also identifies school counsellors as 'uniquely positioned' (p.153) to provide support to LGBT students and states the provision of one to one counselling as a prime opportunity to support a student. In light of previous study, and Roe's (2013) positioning of the Guidance Counsellor I felt it was appropriate to use qualitative research questions to seek 'insights into perceptions, opinions, beliefs and feelings' of Guidance Counsellors. 'What' questions were selected as I was aware that I would be 'trying to interpret the situation in order to illuminate what is going on' (Thomas 2013, p.11). I felt 'what' questions provided an opportunity to highlight the role of the Guidance Counsellor and their perceptions in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity within the post-primary school environment. Thomas (2013) offers a number of considerations when utilizing 'what' research questions and encourages the researcher to use 'your own self – your intelligence and experience – to make sense of the subject' (p.12). Thomas (2013) warns that similar to light the subject will 'appear different from various viewpoints and to different people' (p.12). As a result I aimed to use qualitative data analysis methods which would be influenced by my own personal stance thus requiring the need for reflexivity.

Upon keeping the above in consideration, the aim of the research and themes appearing in the literature the following research question shaped this project.

- What are Guidance Counsellors' perspectives on how lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) identities are understood and addressed in the Guidance Counselling profession and second level schools in Ireland?

The sub-research questions of the study were

4. In what ways do issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity arise within Guidance Counsellors' their everyday professional lives?
5. What are the perspectives of Guidance Counsellors on their level of preparedness in approaching LGBT?
6. What are the approaches, challenges and opportunities related to LGBT identities in post –primary schools?

### **3.3 Ethics in Guidance Research**

The research project required a number of ethical considerations. The need to consider the potential social benefits of completing the research against the potential personal cost to participants (Cohen et al. 2007) was acknowledged. There are a number of potential benefits from this research. This project provides insight into the role and experiences of the Guidance Counsellor when working with LGBT students in post-primary schools. It highlighted issues that arise as a result of students' sexual orientation and gender identity. This information may be used to enhance current policy and practice. The project also highlighted the supports available to Guidance Counsellors when working with LGBT students. Potential costs to the participant included the possibility of a participant recalling some personal experiences when discussing their work with LGBT students which may have been upsetting. If this did occur participants were reminded of the option to take a break or cease the interview if this was to occur. Participants were also required to give up their free time for the interview lasting approximately one hour. Attendance at the interview may also have required participants to travel to an agreed location.

All participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the research project. A detailed information sheet (See Appendix 1.3) and informative recruitment letter (See Appendix 1.1) was provided during initial recruitment. Participants were provided with a second copy of the detailed information sheet before the commencement of the interview. Participants were required to sign an informed consent form before the recorded interview commenced. As a trainee Guidance Counsellor the decision was made to follow the Institute of Guidance Counsellors Code of Ethics (2012). The participants were also bound by their code of ethics in reporting any individual cases which will ensure clients/students and their school name and location will remain anonymous in all descriptions/recalling of cases/stories/incidents. In the

unlikely event, in any reporting of the data, a student or the particular school would be identified within an interview, all names/locations will be given pseudonyms. The use of pseudonyms were employed to ensure the confidentiality of all participants and their places of employment. The research project did not begin until ethical approval had been sought and granted from the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee in the University of Limerick. It was also ensured that participants were reminded of their option to cease the interview at any time they wished. The location was decided upon by the participant so as to conduct the interview in a safe space. This allowed participants to feel secure and comfortable and avoid any emotional harm from being experienced. All data will be stored on a password protected computer. All transcriptions will be encrypted and stored on a password protected computer. Data, in all write ups, will be presented as fragmented responses from across participants to preserve confidentiality.

### **3.4 Recruitment Process and Research Process**

The recruitment process involved the recruitment of Munster based Guidance Counsellors who hold membership with the Institute of Guidance Counsellors. A contingency plan to extend the recruitment nationally if sufficient participants did not volunteer was also in place. Purposive sampling took place. Hennink et al (2011), state that with purposive sampling participants are chosen because they have particular characteristics or experiences that can contribute to a greater understanding of the phenomenon studied. Convenience sampling took place, due to time constraints within the timescale of the study, by recruiting Munster based participants who were geographically located in close proximity. Flick (2015) define convenience sampling as 'choosing those cases that are more easily accessible'. As a result it is hoped to secure six Munster Based Guidance Counsellors who work in the post-primary sector. Participants may be of any age, gender or ethnicity. It was hoped that this would provide diverse, information rich data regarding the experiences and perspectives of Guidance Counsellors and allow opportunities for Guidance Counsellors to explain their unique thoughts and insights.

A recruitment letter outlining the nature of the study and contact details and a detailed information sheet (appendices 1.1 and 1.3) was sent to the President of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) who acted as gatekeeper. A gatekeeper is defined as;

‘People who have a prominent and recognized role in the local community; they typically have knowledge about the characteristics of community members and are sufficiently influential to encourage community members to participate in a study’ (Hennink et al 2007, p.92).

The IGC office administered the letter on my behalf to their members in Munster Branches. Three participants volunteered as a result of the initial email with two more participants as a result of a reminder email that was sent three weeks after initial contact was made. A decision was made at this stage to engage the contingency plan to open recruitment to all provinces due to a low response rate. However it was not assumed or intended that this sample would be representative of all Post-Primary School Guidance Counsellors.

When participants consented to taking part in the research they were contacted by email by the investigator. An agreed location, time and date were established. On meeting participants were reminded of the nature of the study, had access to the detailed information sheet (Appendix 1.3) and were asked to sign an informed consent form. Participants were also reminded of the freedom to cease the interview at a time they so wished. A range of open and closed questions were asked with the inclusion of an open ended statement at the end of the interview that allowed the participant to add additional detail. Participants were thanked for their involvement and offered the opportunity to have access to the findings of the study.

The theoretical principle, ‘saturation’ guided this research. Hennink et al (2011) explains saturation occurs at the point when the information collected begins to repeat itself. Reflective practice occurred after each interview with information saturation occurring after the sixth interview. The sample consisted of six participants, 5 females, Maura, Ann, Freya, Denise and Rose and 1 male, Declan. Participants ranged in age from 30 years to 50 years of age. All participants had completed the Post Graduate Diploma in Guidance Counselling with experience working in the post- primary sector ranging from 10 to 27 years. Five of the Guidance Counsellors were employed in community schools with one participant, Denise, working in a Catholic Voluntary School. Taking ethical practice into account the names allocated to participants are pseudonyms

### **3.5 Data Collection Method: Qualitative Interviews**

Various qualitative data collection methods including interviews, focus groups, observations and participant journal entries were considered. Focus groups and observation did not provide an opportunity to gain rich data from individual Guidance Counsellors. Focus groups were also

discarded due to the time constraints of the participants as it would have proved difficult to arrange a suitable time and place which suited all participants. Participant journal entries would have also proved challenging due to the time commitment that would have placed upon the Guidance Counsellor. It was feared that this would be seen as an added extra to the high administrative workload of the Guidance Counsellor. Byrne (2004) that qualitative interviews are 'particularly useful as a research method for accessing individuals' attitudes and values' (p.182). An interview is a 'discussion with someone in which you try to get information from them' (Thomas 2013, p.194). Hennink et al (2011) supports this statement by stating interviews are used by researchers when pursuing data on 'individual, personal experiences from people about a specific issue or topic' (p.109). Richards (2009) views interviews as 'the most ordinary and most extraordinary way' (p.42) to discover an individual's experiences. He summarises that they can be 'as ordinary as a conversation, and as intrusive as a spy camera' (Richards 2009, pp.42-43). Boeije (2010) also highlights this point by stating participants given an 'opportunity to share their story..... and provide their own perspective on a range of topics' (p.62). Considering this information and the aim of the research project, a face to face interview was deemed most suitable. It was also acknowledged that interviews are also particularly suitable when researching sensitive issues such a sexuality and take place in a more confidential intimate setting (Hennink et al 2011). An interview provides an opportunity for the participant to disclose information they would not have considered providing to a stranger and may offer insights that surprise the researcher (Richards 2009). Another strength to the approach is the face-to-face and intimate nature of interviews which would gain contextual information from the participant and also use the reactions of participants as an opportunity to gain quality rich, in depth data (Hennink et al. 2011, p.131). As a result of these findings, a qualitative interview would be most suitable to the aims and objectives of the research project due to the sensitive topics of sexuality and the confidentiality based work of the Guidance Counsellor.

### 3.5.1 Semi-structured Interviews

There are three subtypes of interviews – structured, unstructured and semi-structured (Thomas, 2013, p.194). The use of semi-structured interviews was employed with research participants. Semi-structured interviews contain 'a list of issues to be covered together with the freedom to follow up points' (Thomas 2013, p.198). Boeije (2010) highlights the role of the researcher in the definition of a semi- structured interview. He (Boeije 2010) states a semi structured

interview is created by thorough preparation from the researcher will result in ‘a list of topics and/or questions to be asked at some point in the interview’ (p.62). The aims and objectives of my study and also current topic related literature influenced the list of topics to be explored in the interview. Semi-structured interviews are often scheduled in advance, in this case through the use of email and telephone, at an agreed time and location suitable to both the participant and the researcher. These interviews are ‘generally organised around a set of predetermined open-ended questions’ (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006, p.315) which create opportunities for other questions to emerge as a result of the dialogue between the researcher and the participant (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006). Thomas (2013) agrees with the above statement by stating the essence of a semi-structured interview is that the structure reminds the researcher of their aims and themes but equally does not ‘constrict’ (p.199) the researcher.

### 3.5.2 Interview Guide

A framework for interviews was designed so as to ensure that the same approach was applied in all interviews (see Appendix 1.4). Hennink et al (2007) states that an interview guide can contain ‘introductory points’ (p.112) to remind the interviewer of information that is required to be outlined to the participant. The framework guided the interviewer and contained questions that related to the education and training of the Guidance Counsellor, the guidance provision and the approaches taken by school management in relation to curriculum and policy. The participant was greeted and reminded participants of the project aims and objectives, confidentiality and ethical issues. After this information was shared the framework created a space for the participant to decide if they were willing to partake in the interview and sign the consent form if this was the case. The opening section contained mainly closed questions that required short response. Examples of these questions included, the ethos of the school and the gender division of the pupils. The aim of these questions were to build rapport with the participant to create a comfortable environment. Following on for the opening section more open questions were asked which allowed the interviewee to provide more detailed answers. Open questions also allowed space for the interviewee to include their opinions, experiences and perspectives. As the topic of sexuality is complex it was felt that open questions were more suitable in order to gain a true insight into the perspectives of Guidance Counsellors. Closing questions were included in the framework. Hennink et al (2007) state the inclusion of closing questions is good practice so as to allow the researcher time to ‘slowly reduce the rapport that

has been established' (p.114). The participant was asked some closing questions, had an opportunity to add to their previous statements and were thanked for their participation.

### **3.6 Objectivity, Validity and Reliability**

Objectivity is required in the positivist paradigm. The researcher in a positivist study acknowledges that they must 'reject all popular conceptions of the processes in society' (Walliman 2011, p.73). Walliman (2011) also warns that the positivist researcher must 'look at the social world as if for the first time' (p.73). A positivist approach was not suitable for this research project due to the nature of the research question. I had hoped to gain the perspectives of Guidance Counsellors and aimed to explore their thoughts and experiences. As a result the nature of this research project is an interpretive approach which differs strongly from the positivist view with regard to subjectivity and objectivity. Interpretivism accuses the positivist stance of presenting a misleading picture of the individual in society and failing to acknowledge 'the unique personal theoretical stances upon which each person bases his/her actions' (Walliman 2011, p.74). An interpretive approach embraces subjectivity. Subjectivity acknowledges that both the researcher and the participant carry their perspectives or social views into the research process which will influence the research process, data collection and interpretation (Hennink et al. 2011). I am now aware that my 'background, position or emotions' (Hennink et al 2011, p.19) are an essential part of producing data. I also understood that the process of reflexivity was necessary when acknowledging my personal stance and emotions so as to 'make explicit their potential influence on the research process' (Hennink et al 2011, p. 19).

Validity and reliability are two important indicators for the quality of the research. Boeije (2010) defines validity as 'being specific about what you set out to assess' (p.169). My personal and unique position was clarified from the outset of the study in the introduction section. I commented on any past experiences or biases that could alter 'the interpretation and approach to the study' (Creswell 2013, p.215). This was necessary so as to ensure the reader understood my position and how it may 'impact the inquiry' (Creswell 2013, p.215). In the name of validity my supervisor was also provided with transcription documents and also questioned me about 'methods, meaning and interpretations' during face to face meetings. Reliability, an idea imported from psychometrics, is the degree to which a research instrument will give the same result on different occasions (Thomas 2013). I enhanced reliability by maintaining detailed

field notes, employing the use of an audio recorder and transcribing the data. Transcription was necessary in order to ‘indicate the trivial, but often crucial, pauses and overlaps’ (Creswell 2013, p.253). Transcription documents were read multiple times ensuring time for reflection and the data analysis method of coding. Using reflexivity, a reflective journal, I reflected on the data collection and data analysis processes (See Appendix 1.5)

### **3.7 Reflexivity and Self- Awareness in Research**

Pillow (2003) highlights the important stance reflexivity holds in qualitative research. She states that reflexivity is a method that can and should be used ‘to legitimize, validate and question research practices and representations’ (p.175). Berger (2015) states that reflexivity has been recognised as a ‘crucial strategy in the process of generating knowledge’ (p.219). He states that ‘reflexivity is the self-appraisal in research’ (Berger 2015, P. 220). A reflexivity stance requires the researcher to be critically aware of their own identity, position and interests and the impact this has on ‘all stages of the research process’ (Pillow 2003, p.178). The process of reflexivity in this research project was facilitated through the use of regular supervision with the research supervisor. Transcripts and findings were shared so as to reflect on the interpretation process. Reflexivity in this research project is also facilitated through the use of a reflective journal. A research journal provided a space for thoughts to be recorded including thoughts regarding the recruitment and interview process. Post interview analysis was also recorded containing my own thoughts and opinions on how the interview was conducted and my reaction to the information that was shared. Researchers have used reflective journals to ‘record their own perspective on their research over time (Gerstl – Pepin & Patrizio 2009, p.302). Gerstl-Pepin & Patrizio (2009) state a reflective journal is an example of a ‘scaffolding tool and activity that addresses issues of quality and encourages reflexivity’ (p.301) while also supporting the student researcher. I employed the use of a reflective journal so as to create an opportunity to store my experiences and thoughts for ‘later reflection and meaning making’ (Gerstl-Pepin & Patrizio 2009, p.302).

### **3.8 Data Analysis**

Data analysis involves preparing and organising data, organising the data into themes through a process of coding and displaying this data as discussion or figures (Creswell 2013, p.180).



Boeije (2010) supports this definition by stating data analysis as a process of breaking up pieces of data and recombining them to transform the data into findings. As this is an interpretivist research project the constant comparative method will be employed to analyse the data gained from semi-structured interviews. This method involves reading through data numerous times and comparing each element such as a phrase, sentence or paragraph with all of the other elements (Thomas 2013, p.235). After numerous readings thematic coding will be used to analyse the data. Thematic coding is an approach involving analysis of data in a comparative way for certain topics after interviews have been done (Flick 2015). As Thomas (2013) states data will be marked with codes - abbreviations, names, marks and or colours, with themes emerging that will capture or summarise the contents of your data. The data will be coded without trying to fix it into the researcher's preconceptions (Braun & Clarke 2006). Connected themes will be identified and grouped together and the interpretation of the findings will take place. Conversations with a supervisor will help to redefine the themes. Transferability of data analysis may take place as the data can be applicable to similar situations or individuals.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the research methodology and methods employed for this research study. It discussed the qualitative and quantitative research paradigms and highlighted the strengths and limitations of the qualitative approach for this research project. Research questions were identified and recruitment of participants was outlined. The chapter also discussed the methods used for the collection, analysis of data and also considered the objectivity, validity and reliability of data. Finally the chapter concluded with a consideration of ethical issues and researcher reflexivity. The next chapter will discuss data analysis and findings.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

### 4.0 Introduction

This chapter will present data findings from the semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted with the aim of researching how sexual orientation and gender identity are understood and addressed by Guidance Counsellors and second-level schools in Ireland. Four central themes emerged. Theme 1 outlines the ad hoc nature of Guidance Counsellors' education and continuous professional development in the area of sexual orientation and gender identity. Theme two discusses the pivotal role of management in relation to their influence on curriculum delivery, namely RSE and S.P.H.E, and the adoption of policy within the school community. Guidance Counsellors understanding of positive client interactions with the Guidance Counsellor, peers, parents/guardians and social media forms theme 3. Finally the fourth theme outlines an unequal access to progress in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity.

### 4.1 Theme 1:

#### ***The ad hoc nature of education to aid in a level of preparedness when working with issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity.***

##### *4.1.1 Introduction*

The participants spoke about a number of factors that led to gaps in their knowledge related to sexual orientation and gender identity. In this section the lack of formal input during guidance training programmes and consequently the influence of peers, colleagues and counselling skills on participants' level of comfort in relation to sexuality and gender identity issues will be discussed. The reasons behind the ad hoc nature of participants accessing professional development in this area and support at professional body level will also be outlined.

##### *4.1.2 Training and Qualifications*

All participants completed the Post Graduate Diploma in Guidance on either a 1 year full time or two year part time basis across a number of Irish third level universities. Participants failed to recall the offering of modules that related to or dealt with the area of sexuality and gender identity. The participant who most recently undertook a MA programme in the last year also

acknowledged that there was no input related to the area of sexual orientation and gender identity on the programme. Participants recognised the role of family, friends, colleagues and life experience as the main source in aiding them when working with students who identified as LGBT.

I know one of my colleagues [on the course] was gay. That in itself was an education to the rest of us. Just the fact that he would bring up things as part of discussion which would make you sit up and have a look at your identity and your own way of looking at things. (Rose)

While participants outlined gaps in specific knowledge related to LGBT identities, the majority of participants recognised the high quality training they received in counselling skills during their education and viewed this as one of the main strengths they relied on when working with students who identify as LGBT. One participant noted her training was ‘very strong’ (Freya) in the area of counselling skills which aided in her work. Similar sentiments appeared in all transcripts. Participants also referred to the role of continuous professional development in increasing their level of preparedness when working with students who identify as LGBT.

#### 4.1.3 Personal Choice in Accessing Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

While it is unknown whether this is reflective of the wider Guidance Counsellor population, the vast majority of participants had engaged in continuous professional development in the area of sexuality. Some cited personal interest in the topic due to relationships with family or friends as a motivation for acquiring CPD while others sought CPD as a result of a meeting with a client. In a number of cases the Guidance Counsellor alluded to the optional nature of in-service in the area

There are opportunities if you wish but they’re not compulsory. They are optional and are choices so you know. (Freya)

I think if you look for it you would find it. (Ann)

Both participants introduced the concept of choice when accessing CPD in this area and alluded to the possibility of some Guidance Counsellors avoiding or not taking an interest in gaining the training by saying ‘so you know’ and ‘if’. The non-compulsory element of receiving CPD in the area may result in some Guidance Counsellors never accessing in-service or training. This was the currently the case of one participant who has been working as a Guidance counsellor for over 10 years.

I haven't attended any workshops and to my knowledge I don't think I attended a CPD workshop on it either so really it's just been kind of by chance that I meet a student. (Declan)

An element of personal choice plays a significant role in the level of training Guidance Counsellors have received in the area of sexuality and gender identity. One factor that appeared strongly in the narrative was the demands of balancing a desire to attend in-service, with the demands of the Guidance Counsellor's work load and the achieving a healthy work/life balance.

#### 4.1.4 Balancing access to professional development with demands from professional and personal life

The majority of the participants recognised the role of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors and agencies such as BeLonG To and GLEN in providing in-service in relation to sexuality and gender identity to Guidance Counsellors.

If there was a need locally, we sit down at the beginning of every year and we work out what CPD training we would like as a branch on a Tuesday afternoon and if enough people are interested you would be free to go off and research it and come back to the branch with a proposal and run training. (Freya)

Freya illustrates the optional nature of in-service in the above quote when she suggests a demand to access specific training is required before access to the information is provided. Some participants found it difficult to attend branch meetings due to a number of reasons including the demands of the guidance counselling role.

I don't attend the Tuesday afternoons frequently and I should do but very often I stay here and try to catch up on some work. Time is a big issue. (Declan)

However the demands of the role of the Guidance Counsellor and high administrative workload were also highlighted as a negative consequence of attendance at in service during timetabled hours.

The issue with Guidance Counselling, it's got a really big administrative load so that's waiting for you when you come back. (Denise)

In one case the day assigned to the IGC branch meeting, a Friday, proved to be problematic for the Guidance Counsellor to attend. She felt that there was a view amongst staff that she was gaining 'a long weekend' if she left the workplace early on a Friday afternoon.

'It's a really big PR problem. Other staff see you in their eyes fecking off on a Friday. I find it problematic anyway to get there.' Denise.

Another participant found it difficult to attend branch meetings due to being timetabled for 6<sup>th</sup> year classroom guidance. Substitute cover was provided when she insisted on attending, yet the Guidance Counsellor felt conflicted.

I would have been timetabled even though I would have requested not to and quite often that would have been a sixth year group so I would have found it difficult for a few years to go.  
(Rose)

Access to CPD was also selective as a result of balancing a life/work balance. A number of female Guidance Counsellors highlighted the challenge of being primary caregiver and training. There was a consensus that the delivery of CPD during non-timetabled hours including evenings and weekends had a strong impact on the Guidance Counsellors' life/work balance.

If stuff is on a Saturday I simply cannot do it most of the time because the children have extracurricular activities and my husband is involved in GAA. It's rare that I get to go. (Denise)

Despite the challenges faced when accessing training, participants stated that they would attend branch meetings when they felt the in-service provided was important to attend. Topics chosen included child protection guidelines, CAO and the HEAR and DARE. Although not representative of all Guidance Counsellors, participants did not deem training surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity a necessity.

#### 4.1.5 Conclusion

Initial training in Guidance proved inadequate with regard to input on the topic of sexuality. Continuous Professional Development in the area of sexuality and gender identity, although provided by organisations, appears as an optional element of Guidance Counsellor training. Access to the ad hoc delivery of in-service is limited as a result of the demands of balancing professional and personal life. Although Guidance Counsellors displayed a strong knowledge of counselling skills, the ad hoc delivery of training does not guarantee a concrete understanding of issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

## 4.2 Theme 2:

### *The Pivotal Role that Management, Policy, Ethos and Curriculum play in relation to how sexual orientation and gender identity is understood and addressed by the school community*

#### *4.2.1 Introduction*

All Guidance Counsellors spoke of the pivotal role that management, policy and curriculum play within the post-primary sector. In this section, the role of management in influencing how gender identity education is included in curriculum, namely RSE and SPHE, and policy will be discussed. Following this discussion the influence of a school's ethos on LGBT friendly initiatives will be outlined.

#### *4.2.2 Management*

In most cases management were deemed to be very supportive and accepting of students who identified as LGBT with initiatives undertaken by the students and Guidance Counsellors. With the support of management and at request of students, one ETB school had established a gay-straight alliance within the school. However on being asked about the establishment of LGBT support groups in the post-primary sector one Guidance Counsellor admitted,

It would take a person of great courage and great conviction to set it up within a secondary school and it would take a very open staff and a very liberal staff and management as well to actually agree to it. (Declan)

However there were also accounts of unsupportive management. One case highlighted a principal challenging a Guidance Counsellor for keeping a student's confidence in relation to her sexuality.

The student told her I knew and then I got a bollicking for not telling her. (Rose)

The Guidance Counsellor recognised that her office was viewed as a 'safe space' by the students. She reported that a group of heterosexual and homosexual students were consistently moved away from the guidance office by management which has left her with regret.

I was very annoyed about it and I tried to speak about it and I wasn't heard and I didn't continue to speak about it and I kind of let myself down. I was just too overwhelmed by my job and I just couldn't fight that fight at that point in time. (Rose)

A direct link between the ethos of the school and the supportive level of management was stated in a number of interviews. The role of the Catholic Church was cited as the reason for one Guidance Counsellor to assume management would not be supportive of LGBT friendly initiatives.

I don't know what type of pressures they [management] would be under from the Edward Rice network kind of thing but I would imagine surely somewhere it has to be enshrined that we are all equal. (Denise)

Schools part of Education and Training Boards were viewed by the Guidance Counsellor as more liberal and accepting of difference.

I wouldn't sort of be running down to the principal and say we are going setting up a rainbow crossing and expect him to say 'ya no bother'. In an ETB I'd expect that to be more probable. We are still under the shadow of the cross. (Denise)

Management's knowledge of policy was also cited as an aiding factor in promoting a tolerant school culture. The publication 'Being LGBT in Schools' (DES & GLEN 2016) was cited numerous times throughout as a valuable resource for aiding in the creation of policy, particularly in relation to gender identity. The majority of participants had discussed the issue with management at pastoral care or student support level. All Guidance Counsellors reported knowledge of policy, adopted by management, which aimed to provide equality to all students and cited policies such as anti-bullying, admissions policy, with equality appearing the mission statement of the school. However the delivery of curriculum subjects that teach issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity were cited as being strongly influence by the opinions of management.

#### 4.2.3 Curriculum

All Guidance Counsellors acknowledged the delivery of RSE through SPHE, religion and life skills, as essential to providing information to students of issues related to gender identity and sexual orientation. The majority of Guidance Counsellors interviewed suggested management's view of the subject influenced their decision when allocating personnel to deliver the SPHE programme.

Throw anyone into it. Now we have a new boss who is very pro it so I think that is going to change. (Denise)

In some schools the programme was delivered by those with an interest and/or qualifications in SPHE. However in other schools, management assigned SPHE classes to teachers in order to enhance the classroom based hours of the teacher.

Some people would be landed with it as well who would have zero interest. Get them up to the 33 classes which is crap like. Go through the book like and you've no training. (Denise)

Some participants interviewed felt this was unacceptable as SPHE is often a place where homophobic language is used in class due to the discussion led nature of the syllabus.

I know from other teaching colleagues that they do cover it [the use of homophobic language] in SPHE but they find the boys in particular are very homophobic and anti-gay. (Ann)

However Guidance Counsellors also acknowledged the challenges faced by management in relation to timetabling constraints with new initiatives including Junior Cycle and the Wellbeing programme.

The timetables are jammed packed like. Where do you fit stuff in? It's all lovely in theory but the reality of how you make it into practice is often very different. (Freya)

However, it was clear that the demands of new initiatives, curriculum changes and managing teacher's contracted hours influenced the delivery of RSE.

#### 4.2.4 Conclusion

This section discussed the role school management play in the creation of a LGBT friendly school environment. Although not representative of all Guidance Counsellors' views, management in a Roman Catholic school were deemed to be unsupportive of LGBT friendly initiatives by one participant. In this case, the ethos of the school was deemed as an obstacle for both the management and the Guidance Counsellor. The importance placed on individual managerial style, with regard to the adoption of policy and the delivery of the RSE programme, was evident in this section which highlighted their pivotal role.



### 4.3 Theme 3:

#### *Guidance Counsellors Perspectives on Perceived Positive Client Interactions with Guidance Counsellors, Parents, Peers and Social Media*

##### *4.3.1 Introduction*

This section will outline client interactions which in the whole, were seen as positive by Guidance Counsellors. Guidance Counsellors perspectives on client interactions with the guidance service, parents, peers and social media will be discussed. The contrast of Guidance Counsellors experience in sexuality and gender identity will be discussed followed by Guidance Counsellor's perspectives on how clients received mainly positive support when disclosing their sexuality to their parents and peers will be outlined. The role of social media in the lives of clients will be also be discussed.

##### *4.3.2 Client Interactions with Guidance Counsellors*

The majority of Guidance Counsellors interviewed had experience of working with students in relation to sexual orientation. Some Guidance Counsellors interviewed stated that they have not had an instance of a student distressed or confused about their sexuality in recent times and if attending the Guidance Counsellor it is related to areas independent of sexuality. Guidance Counsellor's experiences with gender identity issues were in stark contrast to this. Only two Guidance Counsellor discussed an interaction with a client who had recently discussed her confusion around her gender but this disclosure was put in the context of the child's history of abuse and learning needs.

We haven't had any gender identity issues except this girl questioning and she has a lot of learning needs too so at the moment..... (Maura)

Another Guidance Counsellor also had a similar experience with a student who questioned their gender identity and also related this confusion to other issues.

'I think it was more to with, now I don't know but there was a family history of depression anyway and that integrated with gender identity issues' (Freya).

Interactions with the Guidance Counsellor were seen mainly as positive when discussing sexuality. However confusion in relation to gender identity was viewed as a consequence of an

influence factor or experience in the student's life. A silence around gender identity was also evident when Guidance Counsellors discussed their perspectives on client interactions with parents, peers and social media.

#### 4.4.3 Client Interactions with Parents

The majority of participants had experience of working with a client who disclosed their sexuality to their parent. As previously mentioned there was no opportunity for a participant to work with a client who disclosed a concern around gender identity to a parent. All Guidance Counsellors reported their main goal would be to encourage the student to disclose their sexuality to their parents or a family member. In some cases Guidance Counsellors reported a sense of unease amongst clients about disclosing to their father or the father figure in their lives.

More so for boys it appears to be a difficulty with telling dad. It can be that they tell mum and mum tells dad and that makes it easier for them. (Freya)

The role of culture and ethnicity was also recognised as a factor that would influence a student's disclosure to parents.

One guy just felt it was absolutely impossible within his own polish culture to come out absolutely impossible. (Denise)

Although many Guidance Counsellors noticed that students often assumed parents' reactions would be negative, they reported the vast majority of parents were supportive of their child's sexuality.

Sometimes their fears are unfounded because they perceive their parents to be different than how they really are. (Freya)

Participants interviewed were positive when disclosing interactions between parents and clients who had disclosed their sexuality. Only two cases were reported where parents of clients had acted negatively when informed. In these cases, neither Guidance Counsellor spoke of the interactions between a client and parent post disclosure.

#### 4.4.4 Client Interaction with Peers

The majority of participants reported that peer relationships appeared to be supportive of students who identified as LGB with disclosure of sexuality often occurring between a client and their peer. As a result, in recent times homophobic bullying did not appear as an issue within the Guidance Office. Only one participant, Denise, admitted that a student was currently a victim of homophobic bullying. The use of negative language such as ‘faggot’ and intimidation tactics were used by peers despite the fact that the student had not disclosed himself as gay or bisexual.

He is the target of homophobic bullying because he is quiet, is pretty and so on and so forth and the boys have identified him as being gay. They were calling him faggot and stuff like that.  
(Denise)

All cases discussed the use of language within the school community and acknowledged the observation of derogatory language both in the classroom and the corridor. One participant acknowledged a strong connection between an accepted use of homophobic language and parenting style.

I think there is a big piece of work to be done with children whose upbringing is tolerant of using the word gay as derogatory. (Freya)

Maura, a Guidance Counsellor in a Band 3 DEIS school, highlighted the importance of awareness weeks to aid in developing empathy and promoting tolerance of difference.

We do a lot of things like that because children from challenged backgrounds can often lack empathy, they can have been treated badly themselves by carers. (Maura)

In the majority of cases students who disclosed their sexuality while attending post-primary school sought and gained support and friendships from other students who identified as LGBT as well as online through the medium of Social Media

#### 4.4.5 Client Interaction with Social Media

Social media, namely ‘Facebook’, was used by younger students in two schools to disclose their sexuality before disclosing to parents or the Guidance Counsellor. In all cases the students received positive reaction from their peers but in some cases this caused parental upset.

I had another parent whose child came out on Facebook and there was this big hulla ballo. The mother said to me ‘instead of coming out to a few trusted friends look what she did’. (Ann)

Social media was seen as a vital positive resource for students who identified as LGBT with Guidance Counsellors reporting student's use of social media to access information, seek support and build relationships online.

They can go on forums and can follow different celebrities who are gay. It's a great support and they know they are not alone via it. (Denise)

However, social media also played a negative role in the lives of students who identified as LGBT. Guidance Counsellors also reported negative client interactions by engaging in online relationships which negatively impacted the decision making of students when completing the college application process.

#### 4.3.6 Conclusion

This narrative showed an overwhelming positive view of client interactions with the guidance service, parents, peers and use of social media. Guidance Counsellors reported positive disclosures of sexuality to parents and an accepting environment for students who identify as LGB in post-primary schools. However a silence surrounding gender identity was obvious due to the lack of Guidance Counsellor and student experience of gender identity issues in the post-primary school.

### **4.4 Theme 4:**

#### *The Changing Landscape*

##### 4.4.1 Introduction

This section will discuss Guidance Counsellor's positive views on the impact of equality legislation within the school community. All participants acknowledged the marriage equality act as a turning point in how sexuality became more accepted and tolerated in the school environment, particularly in relation to student tolerance and acceptance. However the progress has been unequal when one considers gender identity. Both of these points will be outlined below.

#### 4.5.2 The Impact of Equality Legislation on Promoting a Tolerant School Community

All Guidance Counsellors cited the marriage referendum act as an influencing factor on the experiences of students who identify as LGBT within the school community. It was viewed that the public support of this act encouraged heterosexual students to acknowledge and accept difference thus enhancing the school environment.

With the referendum that was passed there, the referendum on same sex marriage, more and more students now have confidence and have a little bit more, I suppose, status and courage to knock on the door (Declan)

One participant also acknowledged that the marriage equality act had an influence on parents and guardians which created a more open attitude that was visible by the Guidance Counsellor.

I think all that education, public eye, marriage equality referendum all those things have moved parents to a different place about it and parents are better than they used to be, not always but a lot of time. (Ann)

Other supporting influences mentioned included celebrities disclosing their sexuality publically and the influence of education, travel and a multicultural Ireland. One participant stated a change in the way in which disclosure of sexuality was disclosed was obvious in her practice.

Over the course of my time as a Guidance Counsellor it seems to have become less and less of an issue for students to come out as gay. To begin with someone would kind of whisper to me in the office whereas now it's kind of like 'you know I'm gay don't you'. (Freya)

A sense of security in disclosing sexual orientation appears to be present in the post-primary school. However, Freya's statement could not be applied to students who have concerns around gender identity

#### 4.5.3 Issues related to gender identity issues in the post-primary school

A number of Guidance Counsellors are aware that their experiences of working with students who identified with a gender other than the one they were born with was limited. Gender identity was seen as a challenging issue that was yet to be raised in the post-primary school.

I think transgender is probably still the one – is now the one that is going to be more, a little more difficult. (Freya)

Some recognised the challenges in relation to infrastructure and gender neutral toilets with the disabled toilet cited as the toilet that would be employed as gender neutral.

We are bursting at the seams. We are waiting for a new school to be built. (Rose)

The challenge in addressing issues related to gender identity in a single sex, catholic ethos school was also highlighted. When asked if her Roman Catholic school was attempting to create a more supportive environment for transgender students she replied,

(Laughing) I could only imagine the faces if that suddenly happened. There would be widespread ridicule. (Denise)

When asked if ‘widespread ridicule’ would take place by staff or students she replied,

Both. Both, I’d say that would be a hard bridge to cross now.’ (Denise).

There was also emphasis placed on the need to inform staff of policy and supports available to them. Although recognising the addition of a student who is questioning their gender identity as a challenge for the school environment the majority of Guidance Counsellors were confident in their ability to access supports to support them in their work.

#### 4.4.4 Conclusion

This theme outlined the impact equality legislation had in creating a more tolerant culture yet highlighted the unequal level of tolerance that exists in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity.

### **4.5 Summary of findings**

The themes discussed in this chapter raises a number of issues for Guidance provision in relation to students who identify as LGBT. Access to modules and in-service related to sexual orientation and gender identity were not delivered during initial education and were offered as CPD choice modules to Guidance Counsellors. The discussion chapter will strive to discuss the consequences of this in relation to Guidance Counsellors understanding of students who identify as LGBT. The opportunities and challenges that arise as a result of the pivotal role of management will be outlined. Client interactions, viewed mainly as positive by the Guidance Counsellor will be critiqued along with the visible silence of discourse surrounding issues related to gender identity.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter will discuss the findings of this study, situating them within the body of literature that pertain to this topic area. To do this, I draw upon the literature synthesised in Chapter Two. The primary research question of the study was ‘What are Guidance Counsellors’ perspectives on how gender identity and sexual orientation are understood and addressed in the Guidance Counselling profession and second level schools in Ireland?’ The study took the form of a qualitative interpretive design. Data collection took place via six semi structured interviews with the findings illuminating Guidance Counsellor’s opinions and views on the issues that influence how students who identify as LGBT interact with the Guidance Counsellor and the school community. As outlined in the previous chapter, four major themes emerged in this study. This chapter will begin by discussing theme one, the ad hoc nature of education related to sexual orientation and gender identity available to both teachers and Guidance Counsellors. It will outline the influence of the complicated relationship between the Catholic Church and state in relation to education policy and highlight concerns surrounding the inadequate level of pastoral care education in teacher training programmes. Participants’ reliance on a specific counselling approach as opposed to specified education will also be critiqued. Theme two outlined the pivotal role management, policy, ethos and curriculum play in relation to how sexual orientation and gender identity is understood and addressed by the school community. Topics such as how the individual school manager effects the desire of Guidance Counsellors to engage in LGBT friendly initiatives and the influence of the school ethos on management style and adoption of policy will be discussed. The ad hoc delivery of the RSE programme within the post-primary school will also be discussed. Another theme arising from the data included Guidance Counsellors’ perspectives on perceived positive client interactions with Guidance Counsellors, parents, peers and social media. This theme will be critiqued in relation to the final theme that arose in the study which looked to future issues that may arise around the topic of sexuality and gender identity. Guidance Counsellors perceptions of positive progress will be critiqued and an unequal acknowledgement around the concept of gender identity discussed.

## **5.2 The ad hoc nature of education about sexual orientation and gender identity**

This study has indicated that there is a cohort of Guidance Counsellors who failed to receive education in the area of sexuality and gender identity either in their Teacher Education Programme in their initial Guidance Counselling Programme. All participants in this study had undertaken qualifications in Guidance across a number of universities in Ireland. Guidance Counsellors interviewed received Postgraduate, and in recent times Masters level, qualifications without receiving education in this area. Participants who engaged in the course over ten years ago were keen to highlight the contextual status of sexuality in society during this time as one of the main reasons for a lack of input. As mentioned in Chapter two, the church has had a long history in the provision of education in Ireland. Reygan and Moane (2014) highlight the influence the Roman Catholic Church had on sexuality, which confined sexual expression to heterosexual marriage and intercourse for reproduction, and created a homophobic culture. The criminalisation of homosexuality based on laws dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century was overturned in 1993. Participants were keen to discuss that discourse around LGBT was non-existent in society at the time and as a result did not appear within their initial education.

‘Being LGBT in Ireland’ (DES & GLEN, 2016) highlighted that all teachers play an important role in creating and supporting a holistic supportive environment for all students. As outlined by Hearne and Galvin (2014) there is a significant majority of mainstream teachers willing to embrace pastoral care as an implicit part of their work. However all participants in this study stated that their initial teacher and Guidance Counsellor Education failed in preparing them for working with students who identify as LGBT. This supports findings in Neary et al (2016) report which reported a lack of education as a concern of primary school teachers when addressing homophobia and transphobia in school. McNamara et al (2011) also highlight teachers’ fears when teaching topics related to sexual orientation and gender identity including a lack of education and introduced a gender consideration to the delivery of the subject. As a result of a lack of confidence and education a number of teachers reported passing the responsibility of teaching topics related to sexual orientation and gender identity to specialised teachers such as SPHE teachers and the Guidance Counsellor (O’Donoghue & Guerin, 2017). Although some teachers will have specific roles in creating a school environment supportive of all, including the delivery of RSE, it is concerning that Guidance Counsellors and classroom teachers have entered the school community without the necessary skills and supports to aid in this endeavour. It is clear from Hearne & Galvin (2014) that there is a desire from mainstream



teachers to partake in pastoral care. However O'Donoghue & Guerin (2017) cite a worrying concern of some teachers shifting the responsibility to a subject specific teacher e.g. SPHE and Religion teachers. One must wonder if this is the consequence of an ad hoc level of education in relation to issues that may arise as a result of sexual orientation and gender identity. The practice of shifting the responsibility of RSE education to the SPHE teacher may also be a concerning factor on why some Guidance Counsellors have failed to engage in CPD in the area of sexuality and gender identity. Consequently if a whole school approach is deemed best practice there is need for the delivery of suitable modules to prepare teachers and Guidance Counsellors when issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity arise within the curriculum.

Life experience was cited as a factor that prepared Guidance Counsellors in their work. While this was on an individual by individual basis, all Guidance Counsellors reported a strong foundation in counselling skills, particularly Carl Rogers (1940s) Person Centered Approach, as the main strategy Guidance Counsellors employed when working with students who identified as LGBT. Participants cited the importance of displaying the core conditions outlined by Corey (2009) namely congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding. This supports Lemoore & Chen (2005) who have highlighted how the person centered approach provides empathy to the individual, a condition that needs to be present in order to allow the individual to overcome their insecurity and fear of rejection. They argue (Lemorie & Chen) that the person centred approach has the potential to allow adolescents to address their sexual identity in a constructive manner. It is positive to see support in the literature of an approach the participants rely on however there are a number of limitations to this approach to counselling. Firstly adolescents who identify as LGBT require assurance and validation, approaches that are not condoned when employing a strict person centred approach. Secondly, the person centered approach requires a large time commitment between counsellor and client in order to develop a relationship that encourages the client to reach 'self-actualisation' (Corey, 2009) which can prove challenging in the current school climate. Due to an ad hoc approach to education Guidance Counsellors may not have accessed specific education in relation to gender identity and sexual orientation and as a result may be unaware of the limitations of the person centred approach when working with students who identify as LGBT. However the benefits of the approach cannot be over looked and participants were hopeful that the Guidance Office would be a welcoming, inviting, secure place within the

school environment which would encourage individual students to engage in dialogue with the Guidance Counsellor through their display of empathy, unconditional positive regards and congruence. Considering the hope for a whole school approach to pastoral care and the establishment of a supportive environment one might argue that it is necessary for all teachers within the post-primary school to engage in basic counselling skills within their initial teacher education so as to feel adequate in their ability to create meaningful one to one relationships with students.

The delivery and access of in-service in areas related to sexuality and gender identity is also an area for concern. It was recognised that the selective nature of choosing and attending Continuous Professional Development aided in the ad hoc delivery of education in areas related to sexual orientation and gender identity. Participants were clear on their reasons for gaining in-service in this area which mainly consisted of a personal interest in the topic or as a result of a current or past experience with a client further supporting the ad hoc nature of education provision. The NCGE report (2014) highlighted that timetabling of Guidance Counsellors for SPHE delivery and other curriculum subjects can have a negative impact on the Guidance Service. The findings of this study supported the NCGE report (2014) as two Guidance Counsellors were restricted from attending continuous professional development due to timetabling restraints and as a result limited their opportunity to develop their practice. Worryingly this study found participants, when choosing a topic to gain in-service on, often favoured topics that related to the educational aspects of guidance with particular reference to college application schemes such as the CAO process, Higher Education Access Route, the Disability Accesses Route to Education and Child protection issues. It was deemed a necessity to attend these in-services with Guidance Counsellors citing a challenge in managing their high administrative workload and attending in-service. This finding also supported the NCGE (2013) stance that managing the guidance programme and managing time effectively were the main challenges post Budget 2012. Considering the model of Guidance Counselling adopted in Ireland namely, the incorporation of three different interlinking areas including personal and social guidance and counselling, educational guidance and counselling and vocational guidance and counselling it is clear that the participants are prioritising accessing training related to educational and vocational guidance. Further study may be required to highlight the consequences of this on the personal and social development of all students, including those who identify as LGBT, within the post-primary level sector. Secondly the unsustainable

workload and demand on Guidance Counsellors will take a physical and mental toll on those, who may be best positioned due to their training, could play the role of the one positive role model mentioned by Swanson & Gettinger (2016) in Chapter two. This will become counterproductive in creating an inclusive and open school community for students who identify as LGBT.

### **5.3 The Pivotal Role of Management, Policy, Ethos and Curriculum**

The findings of this study outlined the pivotal role management play in how sexual orientation and gender identity is understood and addressed by the Guidance Counsellor and whole school community. The NCGE (2004) highlighted the role and responsibility management have in implementing a whole school approach to guidance to the highest possible standard. However the findings of this study indicated that an individual manager's perspective determined how that standard was met. This was in line with McCoy et al (2006) research that highlighted the effect of decisions made by management on the guidance provision. There were many instances in the findings that highlighted the effect of individual management styles on the role of the Guidance Counsellor in schools. Individual management styles influenced the Guidance Counsellors desire or readiness to promote LGBT friendly initiatives in the school and it was acknowledged that support of management was needed for a Guidance Counsellor to feel secure in establishing initiatives such as Stand Up Week, rainbow crossings and LGBT support groups. These findings support both Arora et al (2016) and Swanson and Gettinger (2016) views that Guidance Counsellors fear potential backlash from parents and other community members and feel more comfortable and confident if there is school policy and support from management.

McNamara and Norman (2010) highlight the key role of the principal in creating an environment respectful of all. However the management of a school is closely intertwined with the values of those who own and manage the school. The participants of this study noted how the ethos of the school was viewed as an influencing factor on individual management style. Although not representative of all schools, the Guidance Counsellor in a Roman Catholic school acknowledged how a lack of support of management and the ethos of the school had limited her desire to establish LGBT friendly initiatives in the school due to the strong influence of the Roman Catholic Church in her school. This finding supports the statements made by

McNamara and Norman (2010) that a principal plays a vital role in modelling the type of behaviour and an unsupportive principal can quickly undermine a school's positive approach to establish an anti-bullying supportive atmosphere. Although Neary et al. (2016) state that the influence of the Catholic Church has declined due to governmental consensus in relation to civil partnership and marriage for same sex couples, the connection between church and state and education holds very strong. This statement appears clearly in this study with the case of the Guidance Counsellor who works in a Roman Catholic school. One may question if the findings of this study are common practice or an individual Guidance Counsellor's perspective. If so, what are the implications of this practice when issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity arise within the school community.

McNamara and Norman (2010) highlight the effect that ownership and control of schools have on the implementation of steps to enhance equality and diversity. They state (McNamara & Norman, 2010) that Department of Education led policies which aim to encourage equality and protect vulnerable students are implemented poorly. Schools owned and managed by the Catholic Church were deemed to be guilty of this to a greater extent (McNamara & Norman, 2010). Neary (2013) states the onus is on the principal and Board of Management to create and enforce policy however a number of participants in this study were unsure if management were aware of such policies. The majority of participants in this study provided their perspective on how equality, homophobic and transphobic bullying had appeared in school wide policy statements such as the mission statement, admissions policy and code of behaviour and bullying policy. However, anti-bullying policies were to be implemented under the Education (Welfare Act) 2002 (Irish Government 2002) yet a 2009 study by O'Higgins- Norman found 90% of teachers reported their schools did not have a policy on homophobic bullying. Although all participants interviewed acknowledged the presence of anti-bullying policies, which made specific reference to identity based bullying such as homophobic and transphobic bullying present in their schools, there was a lack of promotion of anti-bullying and other policies related to sexual orientation and gender identity to the whole school community including staff. These findings suggest that the implementation of policy in practice was limited in nearly all cases particularly in response to issues related to gender identity. The publication 'Being LGBT in Schools' (GLEN & DES, 2016) was mentioned a number of times within the data with the view of accessing the information when an issue or a case of a transgender student would arise within the school. There was a distinct lack of policy in creating an environment that would be

suitable for a student who may be questioning their gender and the adoption of policy was very much deemed as a reactionary approach. Although this study was based in post-primary schools it mirrors the findings of Neary et al (2016) who stated that the majority of primary schools adopted an individualised, reactive and ad hoc approaches in relation to gender/sexual identity.

The role of the individual manager and the ethos of the school also featured strongly when considering how sexual orientation and gender identity are placed within the curriculum and the creation of a space where students can engage with this topic with the support of trained staff. Section four of the Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools required schools to have a suitable RSE (relationship and sexuality education) programmes in place for all students at both Junior and Senior Cycle ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)). Guidance Counsellors interviewed reported the delivery of Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Junior and Senior Cycle was influenced strongly by the status given to the subject by management. Although the findings of this study showed time was allocated to RSE, a number of participants highlighted the lack of qualified staff in delivering the programme. In some cases staff were allocated these classes due to an interest in the subject area and in others these periods were allocated as extra class periods for part time teachers' areas. The Department of Education and Science issued guidelines (2000b) outlined how all teachers would in effect be able to teach the curriculum due to the cross over in curriculum subject. In some cases staff were allocated these classes due to an interest in the subject area and in others these periods were allocated as extra class periods for part time teachers' areas. However, participants in this study strongly disagreed with this practice. Hearne and Galvin (2014) also highlight that there was significant shortcomings in the pastoral care training of staff. The timetabling of untrained staff was seen as counterproductive by the participants as it was feared that these classes were often a source of homophobic and transphobic language, which often went unchecked due to the inexperience of the mainstream teachers. Neary et al (2016) highlighted educators' unawareness or lack of consensus of how to define homophobic and transphobic bullying. Perhaps Neary et al (2016) findings are reflective of why homophobic language is often unchecked within the classroom. Participants stated a desire for school wide education in relation to RSE training and the negative use of language mirroring O'Donoghue and Guerin (2017) who spoke of the importance of school staff receiving in-service and education so as to feel prepared in promoting a whole school approach to relationship and sexuality education.

#### **5.4 Problematizing Perceptions of Positive Progress**

The findings of the study showed an overwhelming positive account of Guidance Counsellors perspectives on their interaction with clients. The majority of Guidance Counsellors interviewed stated that the disclosure of client sexuality did not play a large role in their everyday professional lives. Clients in their care often spoke to the Guidance Counsellor about issues related to family, peers and mental health with their sexuality independent of this. It was noticed that the number of clients who disclosed their sexuality had decreased with some disclosures taking place on social media and to peer groups. Guidance Counsellors viewed this as a positive sign that students did not need the help of the Guidance Counsellor and were comfortable within the school environment. However this is in stark contrast to the findings of the literature in Chapter two. Both Arora et al (2016) and Roe (2015) highlighted that all students did not feel comfortable speaking about LGBT issues with school based professionals. Arora et al (2016) study showed only half of LGBT students felt comfortable. This raises many questions for the Guidance Counselling profession. Firstly the average three – five year difference between knowing and disclosure of sexuality and gender identity outlined in the LGBTIreland Report (Higgins et al 2016) highlight that young adolescents are aware of their sexuality or gender identity upon entering post-primary school but are not disclosing this information for a number of years. One may also question if the role of the Guidance Counsellor is being viewed correctly by all students, not just the minority in receipt of one to one support, in the school community and are Guidance Counsellors advertising the elements of their role. Are all students aware that the Guidance Counsellor works in providing guidance and counselling in personal and social matters alongside vocational and educational guidance and counselling. Is the Guidance Counsellor being viewed as the person who helps solely with educational and vocational areas such as aiding in the CAO process and subject choices for Senior Cycle? This may also be considered a reason why students are disclosing their sexuality and identity through the use of social media. The impact of student perception on the role of the Guidance Counsellor in influencing their decision to disclose their sexuality or instances of homophobic or transphobic bullying may be an area for future study

Participants interviewed also highlighted the mainly positive interactions between clients who disclosed their sexuality to their parents and peers. Only two cases were reported which

outlined negative reactions from parents in relation to their child's disclosure with Guidance Counsellors generally reporting accepting parents. This appears to contradict Ryan et al (2010) study which outlines the relationship between parents and children are challenged around the time of disclosure. Changing views of society were cited by participants as the influencing factor on parental acceptance yet the LGBTIreland report (Higgins et al. 2016) outlined how over a third of participants did not believe one could know their sexual orientation during young adolescent. A similar positive stance was taken by participants when discussing client interactions with peers. The school environments was viewed as accepting and tolerant in most cases with the visibility of LGBT friendly initiatives ranging widely from non-existent to a school wide approach. Guidance Counsellors viewed peer acceptance as high and many reported little or no instances of homophobic bullying. Only one Guidance Counsellor, working in the Roman Catholic school, reported an instance of homophobic bullying taking place currently within the school.

Participants' mainly positive view of client interactions with peers are in stark contrast with recent studies on LGBT students' experiences in school. In the LGBTIreland Report (Higgins et al. 2016). 67% of participants had witnessed LGBTI bullying in their school. Various studies by Maybeery (2006), O'Higgins –Norman (2009) and Youthnet (2004) have also spoken of homophobic bullying of students who identify as LGBT at the hands of peers. One must question the imbalance in my findings and that of the literature. From the literature it is clear that homophobic bullying is occurring in the school yet is not reported in the Guidance Counsellor's office. Is this the case with all forms of bullying or just homophobic and transphobic bullying? One must question if lack of disclosure to the Guidance Counsellor is due to the school culture and climate or the impact of the Guidance Counsellor's demanding role in the face of cuts to allocation and resources as a result of Budget 2012. Hearne and Galvin (2014) outlined the negative effect of Budget cuts in relation to one to one counselling and the reduction in student client contact time. My findings supported Arora et al (2016) study and outlined that the majority of students are no longer attending the Guidance Counsellor's office to disclose. I wonder if this is the consequence of cuts to resources and allocation, the lack of Junior Cycle Guidance in some schools, and the high administration workload hinder the Guidance Counsellor's ability to be seen by students as a person they could form a positive supportive relationship with. This may also be considered a reason why students are disclosing their sexuality and identity through the use of social media. One may also question if the cuts

in allocation and resultant fewer opportunities for Guidance Counsellors to engage in sustained supportive relationships has resulted in Guidance Counsellors perceiving fewer numbers disclosing their sexuality and gender identity as a positive occurrence.

Sexual orientation was seen by some participants as a somewhat historical challenge that has been overcome in most cases. Realising and disclosing sexual orientation was viewed by some participants as an easier process today than in the past. This finding supports the LGBTIreland Report (Higgins et al. 2016) which states the disclosure processes has been helped by increased media coverage and the 2015 same sex marriage referendum. However, there was a deafening silence surrounding the topic of gender identity when analysing the data from the semi-structured interviews. The Guidance Counsellors interviewed showed little or no experience with issues related to gender identity appearing in their everyday professional lives. When asked questions the majority of the participants related their answers towards experiences of issues related to sexual orientation. Gender identity was only discussed when a question specifically containing the word 'gender identity' was asked. TENI highlighted that a concern of TGNC adolescents arose from a fear that their disclosure would be met with hostility or their disclosure would be dismissed as trivial. Only two Guidance Counsellors reported working with a client who discussed concerns around their gender identity. Both cases were viewed by the Guidance Counsellor as a result of the clients experiencing negative and challenging circumstances. The silence around gender identity could be, as Mayberry (2006) suggests, sustaining the 'climate of denial and avoidance' (p.262). Some Guidance Counsellors, with the exception of the single sex male school reported that current policies, such as the uniform and admissions policy, were gender identity friendly. The majority of participants were aware of best practice and confident in terms of reacting when the issue may arise yet there appeared to be little policy currently in place perhaps avoiding the topic until necessary. This area highlights the lack of integration with policy and practice and perhaps the necessity for the Department of Education to assess how actively schools are prepared in promoting an inclusive tolerant school environment.

Participants were aware of how to gain support and information if a student who identified with a gender other than the one they were born and many referred to the guidelines provided in 'Being LGBT in Schools' (DES & GLEN, 2016). The majority of participants were expecting



that disabled bathrooms would be used as the unisex bathroom if the case arose. In one school the disabled bathroom was currently used as a store room due to the limitations on the building infrastructure. As discussed in the Trans Youth Survey (TENI et al 2016) this may lead to increases anxiety and concern for the student which as a result may require the student to access the Guidance Service. As a result it would be imperative that Guidance Counsellors would access in-service related to anxiety as a result of issues arising from gender identity. When discussing gender identity the Guidance Counsellor in the Roman Catholic ethos school laughed at the prospect of a transgender student entering the school and was clear in displaying her school community's need of additional supports before an inclusive tolerant atmosphere would be created. An acknowledgment that 'widespread ridicule' would take place by both staff and students is a clear statement to level of understanding of issues related to gender identity by the whole school community. This supports Neary et al (2016) statement that tensions exist between catholic ethos and sexuality and gender identity. However it is also possible that the participant's assumptions and uncertainties surrounding the catholic ethos may be creating a sense of reluctance and fear when considering the implications of a student identifying with a gender other than the one they were born to attending the school. Neary et al (2016) supports this argument. Although not representative of all Roman Catholic led schools, future studies may identify a similar pattern and if so it is clear that targeted in-service of both management and staff would be required

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has critically discussed the findings in relation to the existing literature reviewed in Chapter two. It found that there is an ad hoc delivery of education in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity within the education sector. The role an individual manager and the ethos of the school can influence the adoption of policy and the delivery of curriculum subjects that are utilized to deliver the RSE programme. All of this impacts on how sexual orientation and gender identity are understood and addressed by the school community. Guidance Counsellor's mainly positive perspectives of their client's relationships highlighted a somewhat optimistic view of how sexual orientation is understood by both the profession and the school community. Finally the presence of inequality and silence, particularly in relation to gender identity were outlined with particular emphasis on a negative perception by one Guidance Counsellor of her school's level of acceptance of issues arising as a result of gender

identity within her Roman Catholic school. The overall conclusions and recommendations from this study will be presented in Chapter six.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

### **6.0 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the main findings in relation to the aims and objectives of the study. The strengths and the limitations of the study will be outlined. A number of recommendations are provided in relation to policy and practice and areas for future research are highlighted. Finally personal learning will be examined to conclude the chapter.

### **6.1 Overview of findings in the context of the study's aims and objectives**

The main aim of the research study was to examine Guidance Counsellors' perspectives on how gender identity and sexual orientation are understood and addressed by the Guidance Counselling profession and in second-level schools in Ireland. A number of sub research questions sought to establish the ways in which issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity arise within Guidance Counsellor' everyday professional lives. I aimed to outline Guidance Counsellors' perspectives on their level of preparedness in approaching LGBT discourses and provide a view of the approaches, challenges and opportunities related to LGBT identities within post-primary schools. The objectives of the study included reviewing the relevant literature and conduct six semi-structured qualitative interviews. The final objective was to analyse the data to derive a number of themes and make recommendations for future policy, practice and research. The aim and objectives of the study were met with participants freely providing information in relation to their level of expertise in the area and the role of management, policy, ethos and curriculum.

This research has suggested that there are significant gaps in the knowledge of Guidance Counsellors in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity in their education as mainstream teachers and Guidance Counsellors. Some participants cited the context of society at them time of their education. Access to continuous professional development in the area of sexuality and gender identity was also on an ad hoc basis which depended on the participant interest in the area. Considerations related to managing a positive life/work balance were also made by the participants. The timetabling of Guidance Counsellors for classroom guidance and curriculum subjects also added to participants' difficulty in accessing CPD. This study highlighted how participants often chose areas of CPD that related to vocational and

educational guidance. All participants highlighted their reliance on counselling skills as a useful approach when issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity arose within their everyday practice.

The role of management, policy, ethos and curriculum play in how sexual orientation and gender identity is understood and addressed by the school community was outlined during this research study. The individual manager played an important role through the adoption of policy and programmes that incorporated sexuality and gender identity into the curriculum. However the level of engagement with policy and the delivery of these programmes depended on the individual view or expertise of the manager and the influence of the school ethos. In some cases there was a lack of integration of policy with practice. All participants acknowledged a supportive manager and appropriate policy would encourage them in their level of preparedness when working with students who identify as LGBT and also to embrace whole school LGBT friendly initiatives. In the absence of supportive management there was concerns of parental and community backlash.

The findings outlined Guidance Counsellors' perceptions of positive progress in relation to how sexual orientation and gender identity were understood and addressed by them and the school community. Participants were keen to highlight that there are fewer clients disclosing their sexuality to them in a one to one counselling session with some participants outlining a very supportive and inclusive school environment. Participants acknowledged an increase in the level of support shown by parents and peers and cited positive role models and the Marriage Equality Act (Government of Ireland 2015). Only one participant acknowledged homophobic bullying occurring within her school yet all participants recognised the use of negative language referring to sexuality. The findings of this study are in stark contrast to recent research on homophobic and transphobic bullying and the challenges faced by adolescents when disclosing their identity to their parents and as a result highlights a hidden element to this discourse. One may question if this is as a result of a lack of opportunity for Guidance Counsellors to develop meaningful relationships with the majority of students due to the demands and time commitment of the role. The findings of this study showed that there was a belief that the inclusion of youth, who identify with a gender other than the one they were born with, was a future concern for the school community with management and Guidance

Counsellors embracing a reactive approach if the case should arise. Some participants reported discussion around the issue at student support meetings. However this study showed there was no evidence that policy that supports gender identity had been enforced.

## **6.2 Strengths and Limitations of this study**

### 6.2.1 Strengths

There are a number of strengths in this research study including the adoption of an interpretivist qualitative approach. The qualitative approach employed created an opportunity for me to explore participants' inner experiences and to see the world from their perspective providing new data and information into the field of Irish educational research. Considering the main aim of the study was to gain insight and perspectives from Guidance Counsellors this approach was most suitable. In light of limitations of qualitative research a rigorous data analysis phase took place with data transcribed by the researcher to aid in the confidentiality considerations of the project. Data was coded thematically and emerging themes were recorded. Discussions related to the interpretation of data and the thematic coding processes took place between my research project supervisor and I in order to enhance the validity of these findings. A volume of research has been conducted on the experiences of post-primary school students who identify as LGBT yet there is a dearth of Irish research outlining the perspectives of Guidance Counsellors on issues that arise in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity. This study created an opportunity to highlight and learn from the perspectives of six Guidance Counsellors when issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity arose within their practice.

### 6.3.2 Limitations

There are some limitations to consider in this study. This study reflects the participants' perspectives on a particular date and time. A small sample size was chosen due to convenience sampling. However, participants engaged in a semi-structured interview which allowed participants to provide an in-depth account of their experiences and the opportunity to clarify their statements in the case of any misunderstandings. As a result the findings of this study cannot be generalized. However the findings of the study are transferrable and allows the reader of this research to make a connection between their own experiences and elements of the study. Another limitation of the research is the issue of personal bias when engaging in qualitative

research. In order to address this limitation the use of a reflective journal was employed to acknowledge any assumptions made and my position within the research. The journal allowed for the documenting of personal thoughts and opinions as a result of the interactions with participants (Thomas 2009).

#### **6.4 Implications for the Guidance Counselling Profession**

This study highlighted a number of implications for the Guidance Counselling Profession.

Firstly, there has been inadequate input on topics related to sexuality and gender identity in initial training programmes, particularly in the Postgraduate Diploma in Guidance, due to the societal context of the time. The findings also raise a concern that some Guidance Counsellors may never have received training via continuous professional development as a result of the ad hoc nature of accessing training in the areas related to sexual orientation and gender identity due to a demanding work schedule and balancing the demands of the role with the demands of personal lives.

Guidance Counsellors should be aware of the complicated interactions between the Catholic Church and education and how this may impact on the creation of a heteronormative environment within the school. Although participants reported few and in some cases no instances of homophobic bullying within the school environment this is in stark contrast to a recent report stating 67% of participants witnessed homophobic bullying in schools (Higgins et al. 2016).

There is a concern from this study that the Guidance Counsellor's role is being viewed by students as engaging with the areas of vocational and educational guidance as opposed to social and personal guidance. Due to the nature of one to one personal guidance it is clear that the majority of students do not engage with the Guidance Counsellor in this manner. However, this lack of knowledge may be influencing a student's level of comfort to the point of a lack of disclosure of personal sensitive information that may be causing them anxiety or stress.

## **6.5 Recommendations for policy, practice and research**

### ***6.5.1 Recommendations for policy***

This research has underlined the need for management to acknowledge the connection between policy and implementation in all aspects of the school community. In particular, policies related to students who identify with a gender other than the one they are born with, should become active within the school environment.

The findings of this study has pointed to the important of high quality education within the area of counselling skills. Participants recalled that this was the foundation of their strategies when working with clients. As a result counselling skills should be seen as a solid base in which to ground interventions related to gender identity and sexuality within the guidance service.

The negative consequences of Guidance Counsellors in this study being timetabled for curriculum delivery amid their demanding role alerts to the need for management to reflect on timetabling practice.

### ***6.5.2 Recommendations for Practice***

All Guidance Counsellors should be afforded the opportunity to up skill and embrace training the areas of sexuality and gender identity. Whole school education and support should be made available for all staff so as to counteract the possibility of a heteronormative environment.

The establishment of Stand Up weeks and LGBT initiatives should become part of the school anti-bullying policy. Similar to the establishment of Student Councils that is protected by legislation (Section 27 Education Act 1998) (Government of Ireland 1998) LGBT friendly groups should be established in school communities

It is also necessary for Guidance Counsellors to engage in professional reflexivity to become aware of their thought process and reflect on their everyday professional practice. This will allow the Guidance Counsellor to reflect on how the influencing factors on their delivery of the guidance service.

### 6.5.3 Recommendations for Research

Although not representative of every catholic ethos school, the ethos of one school in this research had an influence on the visibility of issues related to sexuality and gender identity within the school community. Possible future research could determine if this is also the case in other schools that embrace a catholic ethos.

The lack of acknowledgement of homophobic and transphobic bullying within the Guidance Counsellor's office raises the question of transferability to all forms of bullying. Due to the challenges brought by cuts to the allocation of hours to Guidance in Budget 2012 it may be possible that Junior Cycle students view the Guidance Counsellor to be responsible for vocational and educational guidance and not personal and social guidance. Participants acknowledgement in this study that training surrounding vocational and educational guidance e.g. Central Applications Office (CAO), Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) were deemed most important to attend may also add to this perception. This may be a topic for future study.

## **6.5 Reflexivity in Relation to Personal Learning**

Initially, I was concerned about undertaking qualitative research due to my inexperience of interviewing participants. However the process of interviewing has taught me valuable insights into qualitative research as I learned the value of listening to people tell their stories. The use of a research diary in reflecting on the data proved most beneficial as I gained a greater understanding to the meaning of the spoken word. Their experiences and insights acted as a catalyst for me to reflect on my practice as a mainstream teacher and a trainee Guidance Counsellor.

At the initial stage of research I had a number of preconceptions about the topics of sexuality and gender identity within the school environment. Through qualitative research I was surprised to learn of the factors that can lead to a heteronormative environment and reflecting on my experience I now acknowledge that I lacked initial training and knowledge around this. As a result of engaging a critical eye over the literature and data this research project has improved my ability to recognise how an individual has a role to play in creating a supportive and inclusive environment for all students.



## **6.6. Conclusion**

This chapter concludes the research investigation by presenting a summary of the findings in the context of the original research aims and objectives. Strengths and limitations of the study were outlined and the implications for the Guidance Counselling profession discussed. Recommendations were provided on the topics that emerged during the processes of the research. To conclude the chapter my personal learning during the process was discussed.

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## Appendix 1.1: Recruitment Letter



**UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK**  
**OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH**

My name is Marian Roche and I am currently studying for a MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development in the University of Limerick. As part of my MA I am required to complete a research project on the topic of my choice. The research project will explore Guidance Counsellors' perspectives on how sexual orientation and gender identity are understood and addressed by the Guidance Counselling profession and in second-level schools in Ireland. The study will also examine the level of education and professional development available to Guidance Counsellors and will provide insight into the role of the Guidance Counsellor when working with LGBT students in post-primary schools. I aim to conduct my research via a one-hour face to face semi structured interview at an agreed location suitable to the participant. Interviews will be audio- recorded and all identifying information will be provided with pseudonyms. Participants will also be required to consent to a potential post interview recorded telephone call. The telephone call will be used to clarify participant response in the case of ambiguity arising.

I would appreciate if members of the IGC would be willing to volunteer their time to aid in this research. I would be grateful if you could distribute the attached information and consent forms to guidance counsellors in the Munster area. Please find attached an information sheet for participants and a consent form. If you have any concerns or questions about the study, please feel free to contact my project supervisor or I at the details below.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

---

Marian Roche



### **Investigator Contact Details**

Marian Roche  
Postgraduate Student  
School of Education.  
University of Limerick.  
[15057216@studentmail.ul.ie](mailto:15057216@studentmail.ul.ie)

### **Principal Investigator Contact Details:**

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School of Education,  
  
University of Limerick,  
  
Tel (061) 202075  
  
Email: [aoife.neary@ul.ie](mailto:aoife.neary@ul.ie)

*This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (quote approval number).  
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 (061) 234101*

Appendix 1.2: Informed Consent Form



UNIVERSITY *of* LIMERICK  
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

**Consent Form**

**Study Title: An Examination of how Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity are Understood and Addresses by the Guidance Profession and Post-Primary Schools - The Guidance Counsellors Perspective**

- I confirm that I have been fully informed on the nature of the study and have been provided an opportunity to clarify any uncertainty regarding the study and my role in it.
- I understand the nature of my participation in the study and agree to the method chosen to collect data.
- I declare that my participation in the study is voluntary. At any time, my participation in the student may cease without providing any reason or explanation. I may also request all data provided by me will be deleted upon request.
- I am aware that my participation in this study may be recorded (audio). I am entitled to copies of all recordings made. I have been informed of how and for how long data will be stored once the study is completed.

**Participant Name (Print):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Investigator:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_



**UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK**  
**OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH**

**What is this study about?**

The study will explore Guidance Counsellors' perspectives on how gender identity and sexual orientation are understood and addressed by Guidance Counselling profession and in second-level schools in Ireland. The study will examine the level of education and professional development available to Guidance Counsellors and the issues related to gender identity and sexual orientation that arise within a guidance session with a post-primary student. The approaches, challenges and opportunities of the school community in relation to this topic will also be addressed.

**What are you being invited to do?**

You will be invited to partake in an hour long audio recorded interview. You will be asked to sign a consent form. You may also be asked to consent to further contact with the researcher via telephone call to a maximum of 30minutes if clarification is required.

**Where will the research take place?**

The research will take place at a location suitable to you and the researcher.

**What are the benefits of the research?**

This project will

- Provide insight into the role and experiences of the Guidance Counsellor when working with LGBT students in post-primary schools.
- Explore the level of education and professional development of Guidance Counsellors and their readiness to support LGBT students in post-primary school.
- Highlight the approaches, challenges and opportunities for the school community which will enlighten future practice.

### **Are there any risks?**

It is not expected that this study will pose risks to Guidance Counsellors/participants as the questions are related to their profession and school and are not of a personal nature. However, a participant may recall some personal experiences when discussing their work with LGBT students which may prove upsetting. Participants will be reminded of the option to take a break or cease the interview if this was to occur.

### **What happens to this information?**

You will be anonymous in the final report. All identifying information will be provided with pseudonyms. Guidance Counsellors are bound to the IGC Code of Ethics and their disclosure of experiences or cases will be anonymous. Audio-recordings of the interview will be transcribed and deleted following transcription. The transcribed files will be stored on a password protected computer. Data will be stored for seven years according to Data Protection Guidelines and will be destroyed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2024. All electronic files will be deleted.

### **What if I do not want to take part?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If, at any stage, you wish to withdraw your participation you may do so without providing any reason or explanation. If requested by you, all data collected will be destroyed.

### **What do I do if I'd like to participate or if I have any questions?**

If you would like to participate in this study or have further questions, please contact the investigator Marian Roche or alternatively the Primary Investigator Dr. Aoife Neary at the contact details below.

Dr. Aoife Neary.

Below the Bar Lecturer in the Sociology of Education

CM045

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Thank you for taking the time to read this. I would be grateful if you would consider participating in this study.

Yours sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_  
Faculty Member

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Name

***This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (quote approval number).***

***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 (061) 234101***

## Appendix 1.4: Interview Guide



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK  
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

### **Opening**

What type school do you work in?

What is the ethos of your school e.g. multi-denominational, religious etc?

How many students in your school?

Is the school single sex or mixed?

How many individuals are in the Guidance Department in your school?

### **Education, Training and Professional Development**

What are your qualifications? How many years have you been working as a Guidance Counsellor?

How well do you feel your initial training prepared you for working with LGBT students in a post-primary school?

Do you feel there are adequate opportunities for Guidance Counsellors to engage with CPD in relation to LGBT students in Post-Primary Schools?

Have you any suggestions as to how to improve training and professional development for Guidance Counsellors to aid in their work with LGBT students?

### **Guidance Provision**

When students disclose their sexuality to you what are the main concerns of students?  
What are your concerns?

How would you summarise your approach when working with students who disclose their sexuality? What strategies do you use?

What challenges do you face in this situation? What opportunities do you face?

How are you supported after counselling sessions? e.g. by management, colleagues, supervision?

**Approaches by school community – Strengths and Challenges for the school community**

Would you consider the school environment to be supportive of students' sexuality?

What are the main challenges for school management in relation to same sex relationships in post-primary schools?

What are the ways in which sexuality is addressed in school curriculum and policy?

**Summary**

What would you like to see arising out of a study such as this?

Is there anything you wish to add or expand on?

## **Reflection on First Interview**

Upon gaining ethics approval I am now find myself entering the data collection stage. As a novice researcher I am nervous about conducting the interview process and combat this by re reading and becoming familiar with the interview guide I have created. Initial nerves disappear upon meeting the first participant who is open and forthcoming and provides a large amount of information to the questions asked. The participant provides a large amount of detail around the establishment of a LGBT support group in her school. On reflection I feel that this drove the interview a little off topic. This was due to my interest in the processes of establishing a LGBT support group in a post-primary school as it was the first time I had learned of one in practice. In hindsight, if this interview was to take place at a later date I would have directed the interview a little more to keep it on topic and not discuss the support group in as much detail. However the discussion around the support group did provide an insight into how issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity are understood within that particular school environment and in particular how the participant cited a supportive management in her school. This makes me wonder if the level of management support influences the work of the Guidance Counsellor.

The interview also brought the topic of social media into the discussion which is something I had not previously thought about. I was surprised to see social media was used as means for youth who identify as LGBT to disclose their identity often before an adult had been approached. In this participant's experience those who used social media were in Junior Cycle. This made me wonder if failure to approach an adult or guidance counsellor in the school was a result of lack of access to the guidance service. During my studies I was aware of the effects of cuts to allocation as a result of Budget 2012 and wondered if the lack of a Guidance Counsellor within the school, and particularly within the Junior Cycle of the school would impact on a student's decision to disclose via social media.

Overall I was happy with how the interview progressed and left the interview more confident in my ability to conduct an interview. This interview provided, what one would say, food for thought and immersed me into the work of Guidance Counsellors who work with students in the areas of sexuality and gender identity.



### **Reflection of Interview 5: Denise**

My confidence has grown a lot during the interview processes and by today's interview with Denise I was happy and confident in my ability to follow the narrative and use the questions I had devised at an appropriate time. I was also comfortable to follow the narrative and interject with questions that I would not have prepared. This interview today was the first case of a non ETB school and the participant worked in a single sex Roman Catholic School. I was unaware of this beforehand which was good as in hindsight I think I could have brought researcher bias to the interview due to my education and teaching experience in single sex Roman Catholic Schools. I found the information provided very much reflected my experience of attending and working in a single sex catholic school. I know I will have to be careful when analysing this data that I would not bring my personal bias to the coding process.

The participant was very honest in her responses, which I appreciated and brought up a number of interesting topics that I had previously not considered. She brought perspectives on the resources used by BeLonGTo and believed that many targeted urban youth. She highlighted a sense of inequality between urban and rural youth with many rural youth having to take buses or trains to reach support groups. Perhaps this could be a theme in the research. Homophobic bullying was very much evident in this participant's school and it was difficult not to combine how this could be tied to the catholic ethos and unsupportive management.

### **Reflection on Data Analysis**

I have begun the data analysis phase and find myself with a lot of data and attempting and organising this data into suitable themes. Identifying key words and themes come easily to me due to my background as an English teacher and using different coloured highlighters is proving to be beneficial. This is the difficult phase as I find there was such a wide breath of topics within the data that it is difficult to choose which themes to go with and which topics do not fit into the research. Reading through the data I am surprised at how much information I have gained and in some cases topics that I never considered before. I am being careful to reflect over the themes and intend on discussing these with my supervisor at the next meeting. Overall I am happy with the themes I have uncovered and although they require some editing I am happy with the direction the research project is taking.

