Equity of Access: A case study investigation of the provision of Guidance Counselling in one rural post primary school in the West of Ireland

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Submitted to the University of Limerick, October 2018.
Declaration

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

Signature: Maeve McDermott

Maeve McDermott.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my parents, John and Ann who emphasised the importance of education from an early age. I am grateful to both of you for your continued support and encouragement, helping me get to where I am today. Without you, this would have been impossible. To my sister Áine, just for being you. You provide endless laughs. To Niall, thanks for your support throughout the years. You have always encouraged me to follow my dreams. I truly appreciate it.

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor Dr. Joanne O’Flaherty who has been encouraging, supportive, enlightening and enjoyable to work alongside throughout this research study. You were a fantastic help.

I would like to thank Dr. Lucy Hearne for her support over the past two years. I would also like to acknowledge all lecturers involved in delivering different elements of the course.

I wish to thank the University of Limerick for granting permission to complete the research study.

Finally, I would like to thank the case study school for participating in this research study.
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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the provision of the guidance counselling service in a rural post primary school in west Ireland.

Similar studies have been completed pertaining the delivery of Guidance from a Whole School Approach post removal of the ex-quota guidance counsellor in the 2012 Budget by Hearne et al. (2016, 2017) and Hearne and Galvin (2014). This study focuses on a gap in research pertaining the accessibility of guidance counselling services in smaller rural schools.

The research design employed a case study and a mixed methods approach. Students in the case study school completed an online survey capturing their perception of accessibility of the guidance counselling service. Secondly, teaching staff, school management and the guidance counsellor were interviewed which captured data on the delivery of the guidance counselling service in the school.

The key findings from this research study relate to the accessibility of the guidance counselling services in the case study school and the delivery of a Whole School Approach. Barriers were also identified which prevent students’ access to the guidance counselling services.

This research study can contribute to policy and practice for guidance counselling. It emphasises that the removal of the ex-quota guidance counsellor in the 2012 budget has reduced smaller rural post primary schools’ ability to provide an accessible service for all students. It stresses the reasons why students in rural Ireland need greater access to guidance counselling services.

This research study concludes recognising that students benefit greatly from accessing guidance counselling services, yet barriers exist, especially a lack of time, hindering student access. While the Department of Education and Skills (2012) promote working from a Whole School Approach, there is no formal structure representing this in the case study school. Guidance counselling services in the case study school are not accessible for all students and primarily focussed at the Leaving Certificate student’s needs.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This chapter intends to introduce the reader to the topic under investigation. The researcher intends to justify their reason for choosing this research study, as well as their selection of aim, objectives and methodology. The chapter will conclude outlining the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Context and Justification of the Research Study

This research study aims to examine the accessibility of guidance counselling services offered in a rural post primary school. The research study is set in rural Ireland, where younger generations are lacking (Duggan, 2008). Traditionally employment in rural Ireland lay in the primary industry and those employed in such jobs did not require third level qualifications. Rural areas in Ireland possess a lower profile of third level graduates compared with urban areas (CSO, 2016). Due to changes in employment opportunities and increased technology reducing employment in the primary industry the researcher is interested in exploring the accessibility of guidance counselling services available in rural areas. Consequently, students living in rural Ireland may need additional support in comparison with their urban counterparts as parents may not have accessed higher / further education (Chenoweth and Galliher, 2004).

The 2012 Budget resulted in the removal of the ex-quota guidance counsellor available in post primary schools. Since then and currently, guidance counselling is included in school’s teacher allocation. Education, like all state services is examined based on its economic performance. There is a rigid, points driven, examinable education system in operation in Ireland (Hearne and Galvin, 2014), yet guidance counselling does not have a state exam, measuring its success. Guidance counselling is essential for student’s holistic development (Watts and Kidd, 2000; Grove, 2004; Hearne et al., 2016).

The DES (2005) recognise that guidance counselling is valuable in the Irish education setting, encouraging student transition into further and higher education as well as preparing for the world of work. However, with resources lacking, it was suggested that a Whole school approach be implemented to deliver an appropriate guidance service as stipulated in the 1998 Education Act. The DES (2012) released circular (009/2012) suggesting how schools could ensure students receive access to appropriate guidance, despite guidance counselling hours being reduced. It was proposed that there should be more class/group-based work, ICT should
be used more, and a pastoral care team established to support students’ personal needs. Guidance Counsellors should remain available for crisis 1:1 meeting with students (DES, 2012).

In rural settings where population is low, it is expected that guidance counselling hours are limited, especially since the removal of the ex-quota Guidance Counsellor. This whole school approach to guidance is a collaborative process requiring teaching staff, school management, parents and students take responsibility in meeting students’ needs surrounding guidance related issues. Collaboration is especially invaluable in rural Ireland where communities are fighting to keep services. Post primary schools linking with higher education institutes can be very beneficial to students promoting progression. Students prefer to study further in their local community (Bakke, 2018). Recognising rural students are at a disadvantage Jan O’Sullivan, reduced the threshold levels of student teacher ratios which prevented the loss of teaching posts in rural Ireland (O’Connor, 2015).

Undoubtedly, guidance counselling benefits students attending rural post primary schools. Schools attempt to operate from a whole school approach since the reduction in guidance counselling allocation in 2012. Collaboration between all parties in the school community is necessary in delivering this whole school approach especially in rural areas where services are lacking.

1.2 Positionality of Researcher

It’s essential that researchers state their position when an interpretivist approach is employed in research (Thomas, 2013). Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2011) states the importance of researchers stating their role within a research study. Since graduating the researcher has experienced working in both urban and rural post primary schools, both enjoyable and rewarding yet contrasting experiences, despite the standardised education system. The researcher identified that urban students seemed to have greater access to services compared to rural students, primarily because of their location.

The researcher has been working as a mainstream teacher in the case study school for the previous three years. The researcher has witnessed students facing challenges in accessing guidance counselling services. As a future Guidance Counsellor working in such environments, the researcher intends to gain both student and staff perspectives surrounding the accessibility of the guidance counselling service.
As the researcher is involved in teaching students in the case study school, only students who the researcher did not teach were invited to take part in the study. Throughout this study the researcher took time to acknowledge their own bias, through reflexivity, ensuring the validity of the research piece (Thomas, 2013). As the researcher is familiar with the staff involved in the semi-structured interviews, ‘member checking’ was employed, allowing interviewees to view their transcribed interview for accuracy to exclude researcher bias (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011).

1.3 Research Methodology

This research study fosters a mixed methods approach, encompassing both positivism and interpretivism. A single case study was the chosen research design. Students, who the researcher was not involved in teaching, completed online surveys providing quantitative data (Stead et al., 2012). Six staff volunteered to participate in semi structured interviews providing their detailed perception of the identified research study.

1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

The primary aim informing this study is:

“Equity of Access: A case study investigation of the provision of Guidance Counselling in one rural post primary school in the West of Ireland.”

Based on the aim, the following three objectives were identified:

1. Is the Guidance Counselling service accessible to all?

2. Has the service been impacted by the removal of ex-quota hours since 2012?

3. Is a whole school approach to Guidance Counselling enacted in this school setting?

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduces the research study and provides a justification for it. It introduces the aim, objectives and methodology. The researcher’s position is stated. It also provides an overview of each of the six-chapters included in the research study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter two critically examines research already conducted surrounding this research study. This begins with the structure of the Irish education system. This chapter continues reviewing a whole school approach to guidance in meeting student’s needs. Chapter two also addresses rural Ireland, the setting behind the research study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology and design underpinning the research study. The aim and objectives are identified in this chapter. Suitable methods of data collection and analysis are discussed. This chapter discussed research design considerations, these include reliability, validity, reflexivity and ethical research.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

Chapter four provides an analysis of the findings which emerged in the research study. The findings are categorised into themes and sub themes.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings from the primary research and connects it with the secondary research from chapter two, the literature review.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The final chapter draws a conclusion to the research study. The key emerging themes are summarised. This chapter suggests recommendations which may benefit future research, policy and practice.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter introduced the research study and its context. The researcher identified their position. Theory, policy and practice contextualising the aim was outlined. The research aim and objectives underpinning the research study were identified. The structure of the thesis was described. Chapter two will provide a critical, detailed examination of literature surrounding the research study.
Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Guidance counselling is a facilitative process (National Guidance Forum, 2007) which supports students’ holistic development. Recognising the value of guidance counselling, literature advocating its value and delivery in rural post primary education will be explored with a focus on delivering from a whole school approach as advocated by DES (2012) since the removal of ex-quota Guidance Counsellors in the 2012 Budget. Literature reviewed consisted of research journal articles and reports, educational documents, and guidance counselling policy documents, online articles and publications from guidance counselling organisations. This chapter will be divided according to the three main sections of the literature review. The first section explores the Irish education system and the place of guidance counselling. Following this, the second section focuses on the concept of ‘A Whole school approach’ to guidance counselling in the Irish post primary education system. The third section focuses specifically on the role of the Guidance Counsellor in supporting student’s holistic development. Finally, the fourth section is devoted to rural Ireland, the equity of accessible services in education and employment for post primary students.

2.1 Education in Ireland

The second level education system in Ireland consists of a three-year junior cycle programme followed by a two to three-year senior cycle. The junior cycle programme has recently been reviewed with the introduction of the new Junior Cycle Student Award. The Established Leaving Certificate is taken in senior cycle with subjects available at higher and ordinary level. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme is a modified version of the traditional Leaving Certificate with a vocational focus especially on technical subjects. The Leaving Certificate Applied Programme is a person-centred programme which focuses on preparing individuals for working life (DES, 2004). Irish secondary schools are dominated by the states Leaving Certificate system (Leahy et al., 2017) and there is a very strong emphasis on the points students obtain in their exams (Hearne and Galvin, 2014). However, it is essential that the holistic development of students in the post primary system is catered for (Watts and Kidd, 2000; Grove, 2004; Hearne et al., 2016) to prepare them for life outside of school.
2.1.1 Purpose and Value of Guidance in Irish post primary education

Guidance counselling is a process which helps individuals discover and develop their abilities and potential (National Development Plan, 2000-2006). The National Guidance Forum (2007) recognises guidance counselling as a facilitative process, with individuals taking ownership in managing their personal, educational, social and career related decisions. The Education Act (1998 Section 9c) stipulates that second level students in Ireland receive access to appropriate guidance counselling services throughout their time in education.

2.1.2 Delivery of Guidance in the Irish post primary context

The NGF (2007) and NDP (2000-2006) definitions suggests how guidance counselling encompasses the importance of individuals academic and personal development, proposing the importance of the individual’s holistic development while in post primary education (Watts and Kidd, 2000). Therefore, the guidance counselling services offered in Irish post primary education are delivered in two separate entities, namely, guidance and counselling.

The phrase guidance is normally associated with the Irish education system (Ryan, 2000. p.11). It is often classroom based and collectively delivered to year groups. Class based guidance involves providing information on educational and vocational issues, developing students use of information and communications technology skills and enhancing students personal, academic, vocational, and occupational skills, preparing them for life after post-primary education.

Counselling on the other hand is much more personal and confidential. It is a two-way process, led by the client, which helps students recognise and explore their thoughts and feelings. Counselling encourages students to develop skills which will help overcome personal challenges they may face presently or in later life (DES, 2005; NCGE, 2011). Counselling can be more time consuming but the benefits to the client are invaluable (OECD, 2004; NCGE, 2011). Students will not focus on academic goals if there are underlying personal or social issues affecting them (McCoy et al., 2014).

Students often consider their personal and social background when making vocational or occupational decisions. Parents who are “affectionate, stimulating and performance orientated often get more involved in children’s vocational choices” (Palos and Drobot, 2010, p.5.). Similarly, student’s socio-economic status may be considered when making career choices, influencing the college they attend (Crosnoe and Muller, 2015). Some students, financially,
may not be able to study in areas where rent is higher than average. Donoghue (2015) suggests, that even with financial assistance, some students are not able to attend college, due to the high living costs associated with some towns and cities.

2.1.3 Benefits of guidance counselling in Irish post primary education

The delivery of appropriate guidance maximises educational resources, benefiting students, school, and society. Effective guidance counselling results in several economic benefits, enhancing confidence and motivation in individuals, recognising the benefits of further education (Hughes et al., 2002). Guidance benefits students planning for the transition to higher education, reduces the number of early school leavers as well as preparing students for the world of work (OCED, 2004; DES, 2005; Barnes et al., 2011; Dietrich and Salmela-Aro, 2013; Hooley et al., 2016). School guidance supports and promotes the positive social, academic and career development of the student (Owen et al., 2015). Consequently, this strengthens the resilience of students, becoming more independent and adaptable in their problem solving (Basset et al., 2014). This helps improve career outcomes for individuals, making them more adaptable, reducing the chances of them becoming unemployed (CEDEFOP, 2018), benefiting society and the economy. This accentuates the benefits and necessity of guidance counselling services in Irish post primary education.

While the delivery of guidance and counselling requires contrasting approaches and methods, the two concepts may often be interlinked in student’s decision-making process. Counselling is a tentative process, supporting students’ personal issues, facilitating individual’s wellbeing (NCGE, 2011). The guidance component involves guiding students providing accurate information, supporting suitable career choices (Gerstein et al., 2009). When individuals are making career related decisions, their personal needs may influence. As a result, delivering the guidance counselling programme involves integrating the personal, social, educational and career component within the two key elements of the guidance and counselling (DES, 2005). This emphasises the need for a trained guidance counselling professional to take charge in leading the guidance counselling curriculum in the post primary education system.

2.2 A Whole School Approach to Guidance Counselling

Guidance Counselling began in 1966 in the post primary setting and in 1972 it was allocated on an ex-quota basis to schools (Hearne and Galvin., 2014). At this time, Guidance Counsellors were allocated to schools outside of the student teacher ratio (DES, 2009). This allocation remained unchanged until the 2012 budget which resulted in the removal of guidance
counselling hours on an ex quota basis. Since 2012 guidance counselling hours have been and are currently provided from within the school’s teacher allocation (IGC, 2014, 2016; DES, 2012). The removal of the ex-quotas guidance posts resulted in the elimination of over 600 guidance posts nationwide (Gallagher, 2018). Despite the reduction of guidance counselling hours, the DES (2012) maintains students must receive access to appropriate guidance counselling.

2.2.1 Delivering Appropriate Guidance

The Education Act (1998) argues that students need access to appropriate guidance in school to assist their career decision making process. The statutory requirement to provide “appropriate guidance” is quite ambiguous. Irish post primary schools have been under immense pressure in providing adequate guidance in recent years (McCoy, 2006; IGC, 2016). The DES review of Guidance in Second Level Schools in (2006) highlighted that guidance provision in post primary was limited with over 80% of Guidance Counsellors reporting they often completed guidance related tasks in their own personal time.

Removing the ex-quotas Guidance Counsellor has put schools under more pressure, on tighter time scales trying to deliver an accessible service (IGC, 2012; IGC, 2016; Hearne et al., 2016). The DES (2012) Circular suggested that guidance counselling provision was to be “managed by schools from within their standard staffing schedule” (p.4). This left senior management in schools with full authority over the number of hours allocated to guidance counselling. With a very strong emphasis on academic performance in post primary education (Grove, 2004), guidance hours currently included in teacher allocation may have been assigned to academic subjects, rather than the intended guidance (O Leary, 2012). Over a decade has passed since the DES (2006) publicised their findings that Guidance Counsellors were under resourced, yet the narrative remains unchanged today. The DES (2006) study indicated that more guidance posts were needed to meet demands, yet in 2012 they were further reduced.

This suggests that education can sometimes be very academic driven with vocational orientated goals, forgetting student are vulnerable and need to develop socially and personally to face future obstacles in life (Gleeson and O Donnabhain, 2009). It is much easier to assess a student’s academic success than it is their personal development (Grove, 2004).
2.2.2 Delivering a Whole School Approach

To enhance student’s holistic development, schools must deliver the guidance services from a whole school approach (Grove, 2004). The concept of the whole school approach to guidance counselling is by no means new (Sheil and Lewis, 1993), recognising that there is a curricular element to guidance which can be delivered by teachers, encouraging collaboration amongst staff (IGC, 2008). The whole school approach emerged in the context of policy in 1992, followed by the Education Act, 1998 which advocated that all schools were required to develop a guidance plan, led by the Guidance Counsellor (Hearne and Galvin, 2014). Post budget cutbacks in 2012, the circular 0009/2012 emerged. This emphasised the importance of guidance as a whole school responsibility. This circular suggested how services could be enhanced within the school to include:

- delivering personal, educational, career and vocational in a class group setting,

- encourage students to use ICT career tools e.g. Qualifax, Careers Portal,

- mainstream class teachers could deliver curriculum elements of the guidance programme,

- pastoral care teams could support student’s personal needs,

- ensure Guidance Counsellor is available to meet crisis 1:1 student needs (DES, 2012).

To this day, this model of guidance continues as the proposed model to be delivered in Irish post primary schools. It is a collaborative process, with the Guidance Counsellor involved in planning and implementing the guidance curriculum, and all staff sharing responsibility for its delivery (Sheil and Lewis, 1993; NCGE, 2004; DES, 2009, 2012; Gysbers, 2013). It is advocated that schools make the best use of resources and staff in the delivery of an appropriate and accessible guidance counselling service (DES, 2012).

Mainstream class teachers are fundamental in delivering the whole school approach, helping prevent students’ issues from escalating and encouraging their personal development (Lam and Hui, 2010). Teachers delivering elements of the guidance programme, may find themselves supporting students surrounding sensitive issues i.e. sexual identity. It is however essential that the Guidance Counsellors work with students where personal, sensitive issues have escalated or are at crisis point for them. Guidance Counsellors are the only trained professionals in post primary schools to support these issues. The complex counselling element of guidance needs
to be delivered by an individual with the required training and competencies (NGF, 2007). Despite the whole school approach being recognised currently as best practice, there is a lack of understanding of the roles and outcomes of the whole school approach, with the role of the mainstream class teacher even more unclear (Hearne and Galvin, 2014).

Mainstream teachers may not feel comfortable in supporting students with personal issues as it is beyond their professional competence. Initial teacher education lacks suitable guidance training and mainstream class teachers do not have the skills required for working with pastoral care issues (Galvin, 2012). Challenging this Sampson et al. (2011) argues there is a lack of information suggesting that mainstream teachers need advanced training to be able to deliver valuable guidance. Not all school members wish to be involved in a Whole school approach, Hearne and Galvin (2014) indicates teachers did not feel involved in a Whole school approach, nor recognise the value of it.

2.2.3 Status of the Guidance Counsellor in the Whole School Approach

Despite arguments placing the Guidance Counsellor as central in the development and delivery of a whole school approach (O’Moore, 2014), the professional identity of the Guidance Counsellor may be losing its recognition and status in the post primary education system. Mainstream teachers and pastoral care teams are taking more active roles in delivering the guidance curriculum as part of the whole school approach, advocated by the DES (2012, 2013, 2014). However, over 10% of schools reported having unqualified staff working in guidance positions (IGC, 2014).

2.3 Role of Guidance Counsellor

“The role of the Guidance Counsellor is to engage in personal, educational, and vocational counselling with clients throughout the lifespan, in the particular circumstances of their life” (IGC, 2007. p3.; IGC, 2016a).

2.3.1 Role of the Guidance Counsellor in Supporting students’ personal needs

Students who require 1:1 personal counselling may not feel fully supported in the Irish post primary system. Despite the removal of the ex-quota Guidance Counsellor in the 2012 Budget, the DES (2012) argued that schools should ensure that there was adequate time available for 1:1 personal guidance counselling. However, there is a lack of clarity defining what adequate time is, or how it should be offered. With post primary principals holding the power in timetabling guidance counselling, research indicates that there is not enough personal/social
support available to students (ASTI, 2013; IGC, 2016b; NCGE, 2013). There has been a reduction of 51.4% in 1:1 personal counselling offered in post primary schools (IGC, 2013). The IGC (2008) argues the importance of guidance counselling in providing specific personal counselling to students. It’s disappointing to see the reduction in the availability of personal counselling offered to post primary students, despite the increased demand for it (Wayman, 2012). This reiterates that while policy set out by the DES supporting a whole school approach, facilitating student’s holistic development, resources are needed to support such. The emphasis placed on academic outcomes is still outweighing the holistic development of second level students (Hearne and Galvin, 2014).

2.3.2 Role of Guidance Counsellor in Supporting student’s education and training needs.

Guidance Counsellors play an important role in supporting student educational and training choices throughout their post primary education (IGC, 2007). This often begins with the assessment of incoming first year students. These students are assessed to help identify learning difficulties and to support their education and career choices (DES, 2009). Guidance Counsellors administer psychometric tests to determine students “abilities, aptitudes, life roles, interests, personal values, attitudes, educational achievements, skills and other relevant information” (IGC, 2007, p.12). Guidance Counsellors receive specialist training to administer such tests and in doing so act in an ethical and professional manner in accordance with IGC, The Psychological Society of Ireland, Teaching Council and wider legislation regulating the profession.

Guidance Counsellors play a major role in encouraging students foster a sense of career readiness (Gysbers, 2013). To develop this ‘career readiness’ students should work with the Guidance Counsellor to develop skills surrounding vocational and educational choices based on education, training, and occupation (OECD, 2004). The DES (2012) recommend mainstream teachers deliver information surrounding further/ higher education and career information, it is the Guidance Counsellor who is equipped with the career counselling skills necessary to help students explore fully their career choices. Guidance Counsellors are fundamental in supporting students career decision making (Savickas, 2008). In order facilitate students career decision making process the Guidance Counsellor is essential, especially surrounding CAO, UCAS, EUNICAS, PLC’s OR Apprenticeship applications. Working
alongside the Guidance Counsellor encourages student’s development of skills as managers of their own future careers (Savickas, 2011; Reid, 2016).

2.4 Rural Ireland

The Commission for the Economic Development on Rural Ireland (CEDRA, 2014) recognises that rural Ireland includes areas which are outside the boundaries of Ireland’s five largest cities. Hann-Morrison (2011) suggests that it is the characteristics possessed by the united rural Irish community which highlights their distinct culture. “Rural Ireland is diverse in both its landscape and its people” (CEDRA, 2014. p.11). Associating the word diverse with rural generates a vision of a varying population. This however is not the case, the population in rural Ireland is that of an older age profile (Nolan and Maitre, 2008). Boland (2017) depicts an image of rural Ireland is one associated with a dying population. The population decline is evident in rural Ireland where young people between the ages of 18-40 are lacking (Duggan, 2018). This suggests that the main stakeholders in rural Ireland are a deeply rooted and ageing. The absence of a younger age profile in rural Ireland can be attributed with the lack of educational resources and limited employment opportunities (Philipson and Scharf, 2004; Scharf et al., 2005). The economic recession has driven the youth from rural Ireland (Finn, 2017).

2.4.1 Education and employment in rural Ireland

A parallel relationship exists between poverty and rural communities, who lack resources enjoyed by their urban counterparts (Hann-Morrison, 2014). While urban disadvantage may be associated with unemployment in certain disadvantaged areas, rural disadvantage differs. Rural disadvantage is attributed to the lack of employment opportunities, lack of educational services and feelings of isolation (Nolan and Maitre, 2008). The economic struggles experienced in rural Ireland may be attributed to poorer infrastructure, lack of employment and decline in the primary industry. As the economy strengthens once again in Ireland, it seems it is only urban areas who are benefiting from it (O’Grada, 2014).

Traditionally employment in the agricultural industry did not require attending third level education. Consequently, students from rural families are less likely to have parents who attended higher education institutions (Chenoweth and Galliher, 2004). The Central Statistics Office (2016) identifies that rural areas had the lowest profile of third level, children from agricultural families had the lowest participation in education at 25.9%.
Rural areas lack career opportunities, therefore rural youth are suffering economic hardship (Marshall, 2002). Evidently, it’s essential that rural post primary students continue with further or higher education post second level, breaking the academic profile of rural areas highlighted by CSO (2016). Educational attainment is essential in ensuring success in the labour market (Nolan and Maitre, 2008). Establishing a collaborative relationship between home and school is essential in fostering this academic progression. Rural parents place a strong emphasis on education within the home. Weir and McAvinue (2013) maintain rural homes have greater access to educational materials and rural students actively participate in educational activities. Rural parents attend school events and contribute in a volunteer capacity unlike their similar urban counterparts (Provconik et al., 2007). This reiterates that it is the close-knit community of rural Ireland who fight to keep the services in the local areas.

2.4.2 Guidance Counselling in rural Ireland.

Guidance Counsellors practicing in rural areas encounter a certain uniqueness in the profession unexperienced by their urban colleagues in less than ideal conditions (Hann Morrison, 2011). Noted previously, the use of ICT is advocated in the delivery of the guidance curriculum. Rural students considering further or higher education, interested in researching an apprenticeship often do so online. Websites such as Qualifax and Careers Portal benefit students and Guidance Counsellors in the delivery of the guidance programme. Students can complete for the Central Applications Office form online for a discounted fee. Students can complete their Higher Education Access Route, Disability Access Route to Education and their Student Universal Support Ireland application online. The strengths of using ICT in the guidance are evident, yet the lack of broadband of broadband in rural Ireland is a challenge, with some areas not even able to send an email (Weckler, 2016).

Poor connection and slow speeds are resulting in students loosing valuable class time compared with those who have access to quicker and more reliable services in urban areas. Weckler (2016) describes the lack of broadband provision in rural Ireland as at crisis point. The inferior internet connection is also having a negative effect on employment prospects in rural Ireland (Calnan, 2017). Consequently, services are being developed in central urban areas which are diminishing rural Ireland’s existence a little further (O’Grada, 2014).

2.4.3 The importance of collaboration in rural Ireland

Mentioned previously, collaboration is important in facilitating and promoting an effective whole school approach to guidance. A collaborative relationship should exist between
educators, parents, and students (Hann Morrison, 2011). Collaboration is central in tackling educational challenges in rural areas (Harmon, 2017). With the decline in the primary industry, it is essential that schools need to prepare rural youths to compete for available employment. Miller (1991) argues that preparing the rural youths for such work requires additional resources, and there needs to be collaboration between school, leaders, and the community to promote student survival. Many rural communities are struggling with the decrease in available job opportunities. The young, educated youth are leaving rural areas, businesses are closing, state services relocating (Miller, 1991). Consequently, rural communities are finding that they must work harder to ensure the survival of such rural areas. Recognising this in 2015, Minister for Education at the time Jan O’Sullivan, reduced the threshold levels of student teacher ratios which prevented the loss of teaching posts in rural Ireland (O’Connor, 2015).

Rural advocates argue if communities are to survive in rural areas, there needs to be a collaborative partnership established with schools (Adsit, 2011) as schools are often central in rural areas. Muller (2014) encourages collaboration between schools and third level educators important in promoting progression to further and higher education. Supporting the collaborative relationship and advocating a whole school approach, teachers in post primary schools may build links with local higher education institutions. However, third level institutions in certain rural areas may experience economic difficulties with regards their sustainability. The National Strategy for Higher Education (2030) which focuses on Higher Education in a changing society, suggests that over the next twenty years, a framework should be established to support institutional mergers within the Higher Education system (DES, 2011). This may affect rural areas, with smaller institutes merging with larger ones. This may be a limiting factor affecting students from rural backgrounds, where parents may not have previously attended third level. Individuals from families with no tradition of Higher Education prefer studying in local universities, considering distant universities as alienating (OECD, 2005). Bakke (2018) stated that it’s crucial that rural students can study in their home community.

2.4.4 Career Decision making in rural Ireland.

Guidance Counsellors play a key role in supporting students career decision making process (DES, 2009). However, Guidance Counsellors employed in rural areas were reported as students least accessed source of career information (Griffin et al., 2011). Parents are the main stakeholders in children’s future career choices (Sheil and Lewis., 1993.; Sovet and Metz,
2014) followed by friends and teachers (Griffin et al., 2011). Ryan (2004) argues when students do not have access to career guidance in secondary school, parents play the primary role in facilitating their child’s career decision. Identifying parents as the most significant influence on rural student’s career choices, despite some not having attended third level intensifies the need for increased guidance provision in rural Ireland.

Theorists of human development recognise that parents play a role in influencing their children. Urie Bronfenbrenner, a revolutionary theorist, focussed on the relationship between people and their environments (Boyd et al., 2012). Bronfenbrenner’s theory recognised that different environmental factors which are interconnected, can influence students’ lives (Boyd et al., 2010). The microsystem, the immediate and most influential system in which the individual is developing, is inclusive of their home background. This validates the importance of parents in their children’s lives and career decision making process, echoing the importance of building positive relationships between home and school in rural Ireland, encouraging students to achieve their potential. Establishing these positive relationships with students and parents requires time, a resource currently lacking for Guidance Counsellors.

2.4.5 Supporting personal issues in rural Ireland

The 2012 reduction in guidance counselling allocation means that Guidance Counsellors have less time to meet with students. Therefore, Guidance Counsellors are finding it more challenging to establish safe and secure relationships with students. Guidance Counsellors working in rural areas should be aware that they may not be meeting the personal needs of their students (Sheil and Lewis, 1993). If a student presents to the Guidance Counsellor seeking help and is not accepted immediately the opportunity to help may have passed (Bradley et al., 2012). Second level students in rural areas tend to rely solely on the Guidance Counsellor for personal support as external resources, paid or free, may not be available in the local area. There is a lack of community resources available to support students from rural areas with the local General Practitioner (G.P.) identified as the most accessible source of assistance (Cleary et al., 2012). However, like many services available in rural Ireland, G.P. services in some rural areas are scarce, with demand greatly outweighing supply (Morrissey, 2008).

Similarly, depending on socio economic status families from rural areas may not, financially be able to access, external, privately paid counselling. Research highlights that a low socioeconomic status encountered by rural students is a key factor which prevents further attainment in the education system (Byun et al., 2012). The 2016 national survey on income
and living conditions indicated that people living in rural areas are at higher risk of poverty compared to those in urban areas (CSO, 2016). This is a challenge for students and the Guidance Counsellor, who may, due to cutbacks, not be available or present in the school daily. This is worrying as mentioned previously with over 50% reduction in 1:1 counselling (IGC, 2013). The reduction increased further to 58.8% (IGC, 2014). Rural second level students, especially in very remote areas who do not have access to external services (DES, 2006) are really suffering the brunt of the 2012 budget cutbacks. The DES (2006) argues schools should help provide what the community lacks.

Guidance Counsellors in rural Ireland are operating in time limiting environments, making it impracticable to provide appropriate guidance. Reduction in the provision of personal counselling has resulted in Guidance Counsellors operating in an environment focusing on crisis counselling rather than crisis prevention (DES, 2012; Hayes and Morgan, 2011; Hearne et al., 2015). This is a challenge for the guidance counselling profession, recognising the provision of services is not adequate in meeting the demands of students.

Like students, there are personal limitations for Guidance Counsellors working in rural areas. Bradley et al. (2012) argues feelings of isolation are intensified for Guidance Counsellors working in rural areas. Guidance Counsellors should ensure that they receive appropriate supervision, advocating best practice and protecting their own personal wellbeing. In rural areas there tends to be a lack of appropriate supervision despite the increased workload, which can result in professional burnout of the Guidance Counsellor (Hann-Morrison, 2011). This is a serious challenge for Guidance Counsellors and the wider school community, trying to provide accessible services for post primary students.

2.4.6 Development of educational opportunities for rural students

Phillips et al. (2006) recognised that students were making restrictive subject choices at junior cycle, which was limiting their education / career options in senior cycle. To avoid making such restricting decisions in junior cycle, students from rural backgrounds where resources and opportunities are lacking need appropriate guidance throughout their second level education promoting progression.

Recognising this Michael Ring, Minister for Rural and Community Development acknowledges the challenges faced by those living in rural Ireland. In 2017 he announced that he aimed to take a pro-active approach to rural Ireland and the challenges faced by those living there. Acknowledging the lack of opportunities taken up by rural students, further opportunities
are being developed for school leavers to study further through their local Education and Training Boards. The Further Education and Training Services Plan 2016 recognises improvements in this sector will enhance educational opportunities in rural areas, increasing accessibility of education for rural students. Further Education and Training enables young people to stay in their local areas, as well as further their education and training in their chosen career domain, retaining the young presence especially in rural Ireland (Solas, 2016). A new action plan for Education in Ireland, launched in September 2016 aims for Ireland to become the best education system in Europe. Furthermore, within the next decade a new ambitious DEIS plan aims to meet the national average for school retention levels (DES, 2016). Currently up to 4500 learners exit school early before going into 5th year (Murray, 2013).

Setting goals and devising action plans does not necessarily mean that results will yield by themselves. Guidance counselling services in rural Ireland need to be increased and more accessible to junior cycle students, especially in combating early school leaving. This is by no means new information. It is essentially reiterating findings from DES (2006) who suggest the specific need for guidance at junior cycle. Effective, adequate, and accessible guidance counselling is essential in rural Ireland to support students, inform them of educational and employment opportunities regardless of their background, encouraging social equity for all (McCarthy, 2012).

2.4.7 Equity of Access in Education

The 1998 Education Act (Section 9c) proposes that post primary schools must “ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices” (Government of Ireland, 1998). Mentioned previously, a whole school approach is advocated to ensure students receive this statutory requirement. However, research indicates that evidence is lacking to support the effectiveness of the delivery of a whole school approach (Hearne et al., 2016, Hearne and Galvin, 2014). The inaccessibility of essential guidance counselling services evokes issues surrounding social justice.

Social justice is frequently discussed when advocating for services in marginalised areas. In its broadest sense, social justice involves all people living in equal relationships free from oppression (Irving, 2015). Social justice should be promoted in all areas of life. The need for emphasising social justice in the rural educational setting is fundamental, where services are limited and will continue to reduce as population declines.
Educational justice does not involve ensuring that all students receive the same level of education. It instead focuses on a model of social distribution of opportunities (Muller, 2014). For example, the distributive model states a person’s value is linked to their economic potential (Irving, 2010). Theories of social justice suggest that rural communities are being challenged by distribution of population, industry and as a result resource allocation (Cuervo, 2016). This shift works to strengthening the divisions further between the rich and the poor, and those with higher levels of education, resulting in inequality (Irving, 2010), especially for rural Ireland (White, 2016). There needs to be a greater investment in rural Ireland in providing accessible educational services for students, such as that of guidance counselling. Currently, rural education is under resourced and the redistribution of resources has not created an equitable environment (Cuervo, 2016).

Social justice and guidance counselling are both heavily rooted within policy (Watts, 1996; NCGE, 2007). Policy makers operate within the remit of a political agenda. It can sometimes be very difficult to recognise the value of investing money and resources into services where population is lacking. Investment in rural educational services may not yield the results and statistics like that of urban services, which policy makers are looking for. As a result, rural schools are often overlooked within policy (Sipple and Brent, 2009).

Noted earlier, rural Ireland’s population is of an older age profile, with a diminishing youth profile (Boland, 2017). Consequently, student enrolment in rural post primary schools is lacking compared with similar urban schools. As a result, guidance counselling services will be less accessible in rural areas as services are now based on teacher allocation and not on an ex-quota basis. This makes the role of the Guidance Counsellor working in a rural post primary school more difficult especially when advocating for social justice, trying to ensure students are supported and equipped with skills and knowledge needed for success in their future educational, occupational, personal, and social lives.

2.5 Conclusion

It is a statutory requirement that Irish post primary schools provide appropriate guidance for all students (Education Act, 1998. Section 9c). Since the removal of the ex-quota Guidance Counsellor in the 2012 Budget, it is advocated that schools meet this statutory requirement by operating from a whole school approach (DES, 2012). Guidance Counsellors are key in the delivery of the whole school approach, ensuring a plan is in place and instructing the delivery of the curriculum. Guidance Counsellors are the only trained professionals in Irish post primary
schools to facilitate career counselling and or crisis counselling (DES, 2012; Savickas, 2008). However, where numbers are lacking in rural Ireland, this is more challenging as guidance counselling allocation is currently a numbers game. This research piece aims to explore the accessibility of guidance counselling services in one rural post primary school. Chapter three explains the methodology and chosen methods to address the aim.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter explores the methodology underpinning this research piece. It begins by identifying the aim and research questions framing the study. This chapter justifies the chosen paradigm and examines data collection and analysis methods. Validity, reliability, reflexivity, and ethical issues will also be addressed in this chapter.

3.1 Research Question

The primary aim surrounding this study is “Equity of Access: A case study investigation of the provision of Guidance Counselling in one rural post primary school in the West of Ireland.” This research involves exploring the provision of guidance counselling in one rural post primary school and the accessibility of the service for students. To address the depth of the primary research question, the following three research questions were identified:

1. Is the Guidance Counselling service accessible to all?
2. Has the service been impacted by the removal of ex-quota hours since 2012?
3. Is a whole School approach to Guidance Counselling enacted in this school setting?

3.2 Research Paradigm

Thomas (2013) recognises a research paradigm as a technical phase used to describe the ways in which humans think about things. In simple terms, a paradigm refers to an individual’s worldview. A paradigm is rather an ontological or epistemological view and should foreground any discussion of research paradigms, depending on how to view the world, how one believes knowledge is created, they will align with a research paradigm. As not everyone’s worldview is the same, an individual’s paradigm will influence their approach to conducting research. Paradigms influence the questions researchers ask and simultaneously the methods researchers choose to use in finding the answers to research questions (Punch, 2009).

Positivist and interpretivist are the two main research paradigms associated with guidance counselling research. Researchers chosen paradigm can be attributed to their:

1. Ontology – what the researcher is looking at,
2. Epistemology – how the researchers looks at it,
3. Methodology – how the researcher plans to find things out. (Thomas, 2013).

There is a need for methodological pluralism in guidance counselling research (Kidd, 2006). This would involve encompassing both positivism and interpretivism. Due to the vast quantity of rich and relevant information which needs to be collected within this piece of research, the researcher will implement a mixed methods approach. This research piece aims to gather perceptions from staff and students surrounding the accessibility and provision of guidance counselling in the case study school.

3.2.1 Positivist Paradigm

Positivism derives from the French philosopher Auguste Conte, who recognised it as the most advanced form of thinking (Thomas, 2013). Traditionally career research has predominantly been based on a positivist paradigm (Savickas, 2011). There has been an overemphasis of positivism in guidance policy (Brimrose and Hearne, 2012). The positivist paradigm is a deductive and scientific method (Thomas, 2013). It focuses on testing hypothesis and examines if they are in-fact true. Positivism has an objective ontology and epistemology (Stead et al., 2012). Positivist researchers tend to use methods of data collection which produce general and quantifiable results. Therefore, positivist research tends to be quantitative, producing figures representative of the target population from the selected sample. For this reason, positivism can be criticised for being mechanical in its data collection methods, not recognising human nature as complex (Cohen et al., 2011). Career development research has been predominantly based on quantitative statistics (Stead et al., 2012). Consequently, focusing solely on the positivist paradigm would not benefit educational research as human beings are central. Relying on the scientific method alone in answering research questions is unjustifiable (Thomas, 2013), qualitative research gives participants the chance to voice their opinions (Stead et al., 2012), highlighting the necessity of interpretivist research.

3.2.2 Interpretivist Paradigm

Interpretivism, an alternative approach to positivism originated with the American sociologist George Herbert Mead (Thomas, 2013). While positivist-based research is quantifiable interpretivist research is qualitative, often measured through words (Punch, 2009). Interpretivism involves examining individual’s interests, how they form ideas, considerate of their outlook on life (Thomas, 2013). Hoy and Adams (2015) argue qualitative research delves deeply, understanding the reason for one’s behaviour. When examining such human behaviour,
it is essential that careful consideration is given to individuals environments. The interpretivist research methods support variables which the positivist approach ignores (Vine, 2009).

Consequently, the qualitative, interpretivist approach needs to be employed in this research piece, where the researcher intends to depict the accessibility and provision of guidance counselling in a rural post primary school. Advocators of qualitative research argue that human behaviour is only examined when the researcher is approaching it from a subjective stance (Cohen et al., 2011). This involves allowing one’s values and emotions influence their interpretation. This identifies a limitation of the interpretivist paradigm, suggesting that researcher bias can shape it. A second main limitation associated with the interpretivist paradigm is that the results which yield from the study may be considered as general (Denscombe, 2007), as they are written from the perspective of the researcher.

3.3 Research Methodology

The chosen research methodology demonstrates the underlying approach adopted by the researcher. The research methodology doesn’t just present the method but instead discusses the chosen methods and justifies their selection (Thomas, 2013). For this research piece a mixed method approach has been selected. Yin (2018) argues researchers have been giving greater premise to a mixed methods approach, merging quantitative and qualitative in one study. Positivist methods should provide quantifiable results supported by interpretivist methods delivering more descriptive perspectives. Punch (2009) advocates that case studies should include multiple data methods recognising that they are not completely qualitative. Mixed method data collection allows for stronger and richer data (Yin, 2018) very fitting in the field of vocational guidance research (Perry, 2009).

3.3.1 Case Study

Case studies equip the researcher to captivate the complexity of a situation in its natural environment (Hearne et al., 2016; McLeod, 2010). Case studies when conducted appropriately, where previous research is lacking, contributes valuably to education (Punch, 2009). Bell (2005) recognises that case studies benefit researchers due to its ability to explore the depth of a specific issue. Punch (2009) argues case studies benefit research as it is conducted in the natural research environment, considerate of complicated settings, supporting the comprehensiveness of the case. Single case studies can however provide strong and relevant information which may be overlooked in larger scale case studies. Challenging the strength of
single case studies Yin (2018) argues the uniqueness attributed with them can result in artefactual conditions.

Stake (1994) describes three different types of case studies:

1. The intrinsic case study – this type of case study is conducted because the researcher wants to deepen their own understanding of this case,
2. the instrumental case study – this case study is completed to provide a deeper insight into an issue and
3. the collective case study – the previous instrumental case study is expanded to cover many cases to learn more about the case.

The researcher recognises that this case study is based on the instrumental model where the specific case, a rural post primary school, is examined, to provide awareness surrounding the accessibility and provision of the guidance counselling services in rural Ireland. The instrumental model focusses solely on the case in question (Punch, 2009), making it suitable for this research piece as it is a single case study school.

Noted earlier, a limitation of qualitative research is that the results are general. They can be influenced by researcher bias and are not always representative of all cases. However, case studies by their nature are based on one single case, therefore results are very specific to the case, and difficult to generalise. Research is not always completed to generalise information, contexts need to be considered. Single case studies can be quite complex and reliable (Stake, 1994). Descriptive case studies are considered to lack validity (Punch, 2009). This emphasises the importance of the researcher using suitable instruments to collect accurate data and carefully record it, providing useful results. Thorough consideration was given when identifying the case, establishing concrete research questions, and choosing a suitable data collection and analysis strategy (Punch, 2009).

3.3.2 Access to and Sampling of Participants

Following ethical approval from the University of Limerick in March 2018, one rural post primary school in the West of Ireland was invited to participate in this single case study, via the gate keeper. The gate keeper, i.e. the school principal was first provided with an information letter including all relevant information surrounding the research piece. Presenting to the gate keeper with clear research questions, in a professional manner promoted access, establishing a positive relationship from the outset (Robson, 2002). Information letters and consent forms
were administered to school management, Guidance Counsellor, teaching staff, parents/guardians and students seeking voluntary participation.

All research requires sampling. The quality of research is not only justified by the methodology and instrumentation but is also connected to appropriate sampling (Cohen et al., 2011). The sample population are teaching staff and students within the case study school. Basing this case study in one single post primary school in a certain area will require purposive sampling. Purposive sampling requires the researcher selecting individuals in whom they are interested in (Thomas, 2013). Cohen et al. (2011) argue that purposive sampling is biased. Purposive sampling is biased however, purposive sampling necessary in this research piece as opening it to participants outside of the case study school will not yield accurate information. Purposive sampling is acceptable once justified why it has been selected (Robson, 2007).

As the case study is focusing on one rural post primary school in the West of Ireland, it does not necessarily represent all rural Ireland. Punch (2009) maintains that representativeness is not always applicable to case studies and sampling does not always lead to general results (Thomas, 2013).

3.3.3 Data Collection

Research is only as good as the data it is based on. Thomas (2013) maintains that a researcher should consider the best fit data collection model after setting their research questions. The researcher chose to use two data collection methods within this case study, an online survey, and semi-structured interviews.

3.3.4 Survey

The quantitative component of this research study involves the administration of an online survey to ~50 students who the researcher was not directly involved in teaching or assessing, in accordance with ethical guidelines advocated by the University of Limerick. Surveys are a useful, widely used instrument in research. They gather factual and quantifiable information from numerous respondents (Thomas, 2013). They provide structured, numerical data which is straightforward to analyse. While beneficial and reliable in collecting quantitative data, surveys lack the ability to gather information surrounding the context of environments (Yin, 2018). Prior to completion of the online survey students, and their parents/guardians received an information letter introducing them to and informing them about the research piece. Consent forms were signed by participating students and their parents/guardians. Bell (2005) argues
that surveys can only be distributed once clearance has been received from all relevant personnel.

Sufficient time was invested into constructing the survey using the online platform Google Docs. Administering online surveys has become increasingly popular as they are user friendly for participants (Cohen et al., 2011). The Google Docs platform is password protected with the researcher being the only individual with access to it. Surveys need to be conscience and to the point, exploring crucial issues relevant to the objectives, avoiding non-essential information (Denscombe, 2007). Consequently, questions were planned around the research questions. The questions were presented in an aesthetically pleasing manner encouraging participation and completion. Guidelines were implemented as advocated by Bell (2005) in constructing the survey:

1. Questions should be word processed with clear instructions.
2. Adequate space should be left between questions,
3. Space should be left on the right-hand side of the survey questions to allow for coding
4. Include easier, straightforward questions at the beginning of the survey.

The survey included a variety of closed and open-ended questions. Closed questions were aimed at gathering certain information (Thomas, 2013), generating flexible frequencies for statistical analysis (Cohen et al., 2011). The closed questions were predominantly multiple choice.

Where it was anticipated that the multiple-choice options would not facilitate participant responses fully, open ended questions were included. These open-ended questions were included towards the latter half of the survey as they sometimes require more thought and detail which might deter respondents if included at the outset (Thomas, 2013).

A preface was included at the beginning of the survey with relevant information regarding the project and instructions for completion of the survey. The survey was piloted with the gate keeper and the Guidance Counsellor. Bell (2005) advocated piloting the survey to check clarity of instructions and questions. Cohen et al. (2011) maintains piloting the survey is essential to promote reliability and validity.

Once the survey was completed and closed, quantitative results were generated using the Google Docs platform also. Symonds (2011) recognises that there are limitations attributed with completing surveys online, which include:
- Participants need to be computer literate to complete the survey,
- where mandatory in-depth answers are required, participants may not be willing to provide such.
- Mandatory questions require participants to complete them before being able to submit the survey, the paper format does not involve the same challenge.

Addressing such limitations, the researcher following suggestions of Cohen et al. (2011):

- Did not make all questions mandatory, which provided some flexibility in relation to participants not needing to complete all questions.
- Interest based questions were placed at the beginning and questions which required more detail were included further down, easing participants into the process of completing the survey.
- The established questions were clear, concise and user friendly for the audience in which they were delivered to.

3.3.5 Semi - Structured Interviews

Interviews are an essential source of case study evidence (Yin. 2018), as most case studies involve people. Interviews benefit participants enabling them to discuss the context of the environment in which they are in (Cohen et al., 2011; Punch, 2009). Mentioned earlier, purposive sampling was employed for the interviews. The researcher wanted to gain perspectives from the Guidance Counsellor, a member of the school management team and five regular teaching staff. There are three main interview methods suitable for use in educational research: structured, semi – structured and unstructured (Cohen et al., 2011). The researcher chose semi-structured interviews as they are structured but also open. Open ended questions encourage detailed responses (Thomas, 2013) and allow interviewees contribute their own opinions and experiences (Meriam, 2009). While somewhat structured, semi structured interviews are flexible enough to expand and probe further, delving deeper into interesting topics as they emerge (Thomas, 2013). Contradicting this Cohen et al. (2011) argue semi-structured interviews lack the structure necessary for interviews and as result important topics are often overlooked.

While interviews are beneficial as they give premise to non-verbal questions such as facial responses and body language (Bell, 2005), the researcher was aware of the biases between interviewer and interviewee when conducting the interviews (Cohen et al., 2011). Prior to
conducted the interviews, a pilot interview was used to be aware of issues which may emerge in the interviewing process. Pilot interviews benefit researchers allowing them to finalise questions and enhance their interview skills.

Interviewees were advised that interviews would be audio recorded to record data for later transcription. Audio recording is essential in acquiring data from an interview as relying on handwritten notes will result in important information being missed (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012). Interviewees were advised that audio recording would be stored in a safe place for a set length of time and disposed of in a safe and ethical manner. Interviewees were advised that they had the option to opt out at any time.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

Validity is a complex concept (Bell, 2005) concerned with the credibility of research (Robson, 2007). Sapsford and Jupp (1996) provide a precise definition for validity as “the design of research to provide credible conclusions; whether the evidence which the research offers can bear the weight of the interpretations that is put on it” (p.1). Validity is essential, an invalid element of a research piece may result in the entire project being unusable (Cohen et al., 2011). Validity can be classified as:

1. Internal validity – where the research findings are fully representative of the study,
2. Conceptual validity – a phenomenon is measured, according to its theoretical explanation,
3. External validity – a phenomenon can be generalised to the conditions which are being explained. (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011)

The threats to this research firstly involved the researchers bias recognising the importance and accessibility of guidance counselling services in rural post primary schools. Secondly subjective interpretation of data, and best buddy syndrome (where the respondents answer to please the researcher) (Cohen et al., 2011) were also identified as threats to the validity of this research piece. Recognising the possible threats to validity, ‘member checking’ was used to review the internal validity. This involved the interviewees being allowed to view their transcribed interview for accuracy to identify any researcher bias (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011).

3.4.1 Reliability

Reliability refers to consistency. If the research was to be completed again in a similar setting, the results should be the same (Thomas, 2013). While reliability applies to quantitative
research, its relevance in qualitative research is questioned (Cohen et al., 2011). The test-retest method would support the reliability of the survey (Punch, 2005). This involves administering the survey at two different times. The results should be the same. Using a positivist paradigm should meet the ideal stance of validity and reliability, yielding the same results each time. It is more difficult to argue from an interpretivist approach. Ensuring the qualitative results are reliable, the researcher will engage in a process of constant comparison (Thomas, 2013). This involves repeatedly reading and analysing the interview transcripts while listening to the audio recordings. Creswell (2005) stipulates that researchers from the qualitative discipline do not decide on the outcome of the research piece, readers can derive their own conclusions from reading a research piece.

3.4.2 Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves examining the limitations of the researcher's professional role and the effects for ethical practice (Havercamp, 2005). Reflexivity acknowledges and understands the position of researchers within the environment they are researching. Researchers pre-conceived thoughts and opinions surrounding the research question can influence the research. To address this, researchers should recognise, acknowledge, and disclose such feelings (Cohen et al., 2011). Practicing reflexivity, a research diary should be kept, the researcher noting their position at different times within the case study. Research can often be understood more clearly by others if they can understand the position of the researcher (Etherington, 2004). In consultation with their supervisor, the researcher designed the instruments, recognised, and addressed researcher bias and analysed and interpreted data (McLeod, 2014).

Being aware of one’s subjective bias and adapting a more reflexive approach should help reduce any challenges pertinent to reliability and validity, strengthened further with thorough planning of data collection and analysis (Yin, 2009).

3.4.3 Triangulation

Using a mixed methods design facilitated implementing triangulation ensuring validity. Two prominent methods of triangulation include:

- data triangulation: which involves using a variety of different data sources (e.g. clients, practitioners, policy-makers, managers, principals)
- methodological triangulation: combining two or more research strategies

(Bryman, 2012).
Implementing methodological triangulation, using semi structured interviews and surveys, benefits the research piece, reducing researchers bias (Cohen et al., 2011) supporting the triangulation of results (Perry, 2009).

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis involves analysing and making sense of the data collected (Cohen et al., 2011). When reviewing and comparing emerging elements, constant comparative method should be used (Thomas, 2009). Theme mapping was used for analysing the data collected from the qualitative interview transcripts. Theme mapping involves using a theoretical lens to analyse data, establishing themes (Thomas, 2009). This involved reading and re-reading data, recognising and naming themes which emerged, before writing any findings. Google Forms was used in analysing the quantitative variables in the survey (Cohen et al., 2011). This assists with reading the frequency of responses and collating descriptive answers also.

3.6 Ethical Issues

Ethics emerges within the field of moral philosophy which addresses one’s beliefs, values, and morals in society (McLeod, 2010). Ethics governs ones conduct about what may be considered right versus wrong. Ethical principles, applicable to research involve decisions and dilemmas which balance actions, considerate of the parties involved (Thomas, 2013). In simple terms, ethics ensures the researcher follows best practice, considerate of participants needs. Research conducted in guidance counselling can be of a sensitive and personal manner, therefore ethical principles should be adhered to as advocated by (Institute of Guidance Counsellors, 2012) and the NCGE, (2008) which involve competence, conduct, confidentiality, and consent.

Supporting ethical behaviour, I implemented the following recommendations proposed by Cohen et al. (2011):

- Participants, through provision of information letters, were aware of the purpose and benefit of the research.
- Participants volunteered and had right to resign from the process at any stage up to data analysis.
- Anonymity was guaranteed.
- Survey data was password protected and interviews were transcribed by myself, providing participants with the opportunity to member check.
3.7 Conclusion

This chapter identified the methodology underpinning the research. The research design is a case study. A mixed method approach is used. Data collection involves an online survey on Google Forms which includes quantitative and qualitative questions. Semi structured interviews provide detailed data as part of this study. Data analysis and ethical considerations are identified. Chapter four presents data analysis and findings.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter intends to outline the main findings which emerged in the primary data collection. The first stage of data collection involved the administration of an online survey using Google Docs. A total of fifty-four students from the case study school participated in the survey.

Two main methods were used to analyse this data collected. The online survey was analysed using the Google Docs programme. It provided statistical, visual representation of data and descriptive data was categorised also based on similarities in student responses. The qualitative data from the online survey was further analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2013) Thematic Analysis framework.

The second stage of data collection involved interviewing six members of staff from the case study school. This included four teaching staff, one member of school management and the Guidance Counsellor. The qualitative data from the interviews was similarly analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2013) six phase framework.

4.1 Demographic Information of the survey participants

Findings from question one indicated that there was a higher percentage of junior cycle student participation in the survey, 68.5% junior cycle, 31.5% senior cycle, see Chart 4.1. This can be attributed to the researcher’s involvement in teaching senior cycle classes. Students whom the researcher was directly involved in teaching and assessing were not invited to participate in the study to avoid having a ‘captive audience’ sample, who may have felt obliged to answer in a certain way. There was an almost equal participation percentage of males and females, 50% females, 46.3% males and 3.7% students preferred not to say.
Chart 4.1 Student Year Group.

4.1.1 Catering for student’s needs.

Students were asked to describe how they felt the school catered for their personal and educational needs. In response to this, the highest proportion of students responded explaining how the school catered for their educational needs. Little reference was made to student’s personal needs. Many student responses (22%) stated that the school provides them with “books”, “after school classes” and “resource classes”. Five students responded detailing how the school caters for both their educational and personal needs; “teaching life skills” “I can socialise and learn new things that will help to become my best in the future.” Four students responded explaining how the school caters for their personal needs “there is a counsellor who you can talk to”, “if I have a problem I can talk to my teachers / year head”, “they ask do you need to talk about anything”. Two students responded, “it doesn’t”. One student responded stating “I don’t think there is enough done to cater for my personal needs, especially this year, I’ve had a tough time at home. I could have done with having someone to talk to.” Another student stated that they don’t tell the school when they have a personal issue.

4.1.2 Accessibility of the Guidance Counselling Service in the Case Study School.

Survey items aimed to explore student’s awareness of the Guidance Counsellor and depict their perception of the provision and accessibility of the Guidance Counselling service in the school. Findings from question four indicated that just under two thirds of students know who the Guidance Counsellor is, 35% of students do not know who the Guidance Counsellor is, see Chart 4.2.
Students were asked if they knew what the Guidance Counsellor’s role involved. Data collected indicated that there is some divergence surrounding student’s awareness of the Guidance Counsellor’s role. 14.8% of students were very sure what the Guidance Counsellor’s role involved, 20.4% of students have no idea what the Guidance Counsellor’s role involves. 27.8% of students indicated that they were on the mid-way point, partially understanding the role of the Guidance Counsellor, yet not fully sure.

Interestingly findings from questions six states that over 70% of students have never made an appointment to access the Guidance Counsellor in the school, see chart 4.3.
Students were asked how long they had to wait after making an appointment to meet with the Guidance Counsellor. Data collected suggested that most students who had made an appointment, reported that the Guidance Counsellor found them that day. The remaining students who had accessed the guidance counselling service stated that they would have to wait until the following week for an appointment. Students indicated that the Guidance Counsellor was “only in school on a Monday”, “until lunchtime”. “I can only see the Guidance Counsellor on a Monday when she’s in. I might have to wait two weeks depending on how busy she is.” One student responded, “the Guidance Counsellor isn’t always here when she’s needed”. Some interesting responses emerged such as “I’m not in Leaving Cert year yet, so I have no business with the Guidance Counsellor”, “I don’t know what guidance counselling is, so I never thought to make an appointment for myself”.

Students were asked if they had been referred to the Guidance Counsellor by a mainstream teacher. Findings indicated that a low number of students have been referred to the Guidance Counsellor by a teacher, see Chart 4.4. 55.6% of respondents reported that a teacher has never referred them to the guidance counselling service and a further 24.1% of students were unsure.

Chart 4.4. Number of students referred to the Guidance Counsellor by a teacher.

Students were invited to describe the process involved in making an appointment with the guidance counselling service in the school. One third of student responses indicated that they did not know how to make an appointment with the Guidance Counsellor. The remaining two thirds of students did not report that there was any formality involved in making an appointment
with the Guidance Counsellor. Students provided a diverse range of responses; “just ask her after class or when I see her around the school”, “ask them in private could you talk to them”, “ask a teacher if she could ask the Guidance Counsellor or directly ask her if you see her in the halls”. Three students responded that they would “ask their parents to arrange it” and eight students responded stating that they would ask the “principal or office to organise” a meeting with the Guidance Counsellor.

Students were asked if their meetings with the Guidance Counsellor were of a personal / social or educational / vocational nature, see Chart 4.5. Data indicated that there was a near equal balance of personal/ social, educational / vocational meetings, see Chart 4.5. Students were invited to explain their answers. Findings from over half of the responses were school or educational orientated with students suggesting they only need “help for education” issues, “you can find out a lot of information on courses you want to do after you finish secondary school”. The Guidance Counsellor was reported to help student approach their “school work” in an attempt “to get better grades”. A student who reported their meetings were of a personal nature suggested that they liked to “talk to someone about my personal and social issues who will not judge me”. One student felt that there was an “agenda” and only time to talk about college courses, “I had to pick a course, fill it out on the form and that was me sorted”. Interestingly three students answered the question stating, “it’s my business”, “I don’t like talking about personal stuff” and “it’s none of her business what goes on in my personal life”.

Chart 4.5. Nature of meeting with the Guidance Counsellor.
Students were asked if they would consider accessing external private guidance counselling. Over two thirds of students indicated that they would not consider accessing privately paid guidance counselling services. 16.7% of students would consider accessing a privately paid Guidance Counsellor, with 5.6% of students having already accessed a private Guidance Counsellor. 14.8% of students recognised that financially, accessing a privately paid Guidance Counsellor would not be affordable, see Chart 4.6.

![Chart 4.6. Accessing private guidance counselling.](chart)

4.1.3 Whole School Approach to Guidance.

Students were invited to select factors which influenced their subject choice. Parents / Guardians and Friends were equally influential in the student responses at 40.7% each. Teachers were the next greatest influencers of student’s subject choice at 14.8%, see Chart 4.7. Furthermore, in question fourteen, student responses indicated that the Guidance Counsellor was least influential in student’s subject choice 53.7%.
Four questions were included in the survey, gathering information on students access to support and information in the case study school. Such questions surrounded support available for student’s decision-making process in relation to their subjects, careers and personal issues. Findings showed that two thirds of students, 66.7% would approach their teacher if they had a career related question. 24.1% of students would ask the Guidance Counsellor, 11.1% would ask a friend and 3.7% would ask a member of school management. Students were invited to choose who they would approach if they had a personal issue and wanted to speak to someone in confidence. 55.6% of students reported that they would speak with a friend, the principal / vice principal was the second highest, the Guidance Counsellor was the third option at 16.7%. Teachers were reported as the least popular option for students when discussing personal issues, see chart 4.8.
Chart 4.8. People students felt comfortable speaking with confidentially.

Students highlighted the uncertainty felt by them in relation to school support structures catering for their personal needs. 38.9% of students were unsure, 37% believed there was enough with 24.1% suggesting there are not enough support structures in place. Interestingly in question eighteen, 51.9% of students said that they were comfortable in telling confidential information to one of their class teachers, see chart 4.9.

Chart 4.9. Students confident disclosing to teachers.

Students were asked to develop their answer based on the previous question pertaining their personal needs. Those who felt like they could share confidentially said that they “trust” their
teachers, teachers “listen and don’t judge”. Students remarked that it “depends on the teacher”, “I would consider speaking about my confidential issues with certain teachers that I feel comfortable talking to”. Students who did not feel comfortable sharing confidential information with teachers believed that “they could tell another teacher”, “they would tell a parent”, “all private information is exposed, and I feel judged.” One student reported that they “would feel awkward and not know when to approach them”.

4.1.4 Provision of Guidance.

Students were questioned about their timetabled guidance classes. Data obtained indicates that over two thirds of students are not timetabled for guidance / careers classes, see Chart 4.10. Students were asked if they felt they needed more timetabled guidance / careers classes. Over one third of students recognised they need additional guidance classes. Students were invited to express how they felt additional guidance should be timetabled. One student felt that they required a “careers class during fifth year”. Some students suggested having guidance “on the curriculum starting in first year”. One student suggested “they could meet with the Guidance Counsellor after school”. Finally, one student did not believe that they needed additional class time but believed that they would have benefited from more 1:1 work with the Guidance Counsellor “I definitely don’t feel ready to be going off to college now in September.”

Chart 4.10. Students timetabled for guidance / careers classes.

This concludes the responses from the online student survey. The data indicated that in general there are many students who are not accessing the guidance counselling services in the school, whether they are unaware of the Guidance Counsellor’s role, they are unsure how to approach
them, or they are not referred. Students who have met with the Guidance Counsellor reported that they equally presented with personal/social and educational/vocational issues. Students indicated that parents and friends were most influential in assisting their subject choice, the Guidance Counsellor was least influential. Students reported that they were most comfortable talking to their friends about a personal, confidential issue and least comfortable speaking with teaching staff. Respondents indicated that a low percentage of classes are timetabled for guidance/careers.

4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

The second phase of data collection and analysis involved six semi-structured interviews with teaching staff, Guidance Counsellor and a member of school management. The interview data was analysed using thematic mapping implementing Braun and Clarke (2013) Thematic Analysis Method. This section aims to provide a deeper understanding surrounding the accessibility of the guidance counselling service from the staff’s perspective. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the teaching staff. The following themes emerged in the qualitative findings:

- Whole School Approach to guidance counselling.
- Benefits of Accessing the Guidance Counselling Service.
- Barriers to Accessing the Guidance Counselling Service.

4.2.1 Whole School Approach to Guidance Counselling

A main theme which emerged in all interviews was the significance of the Whole school approach to guidance within the case study school. While teaching staff did not explicitly refer to the concept, their description and discussion surrounding the provision of guidance counselling within the school, identified with that of a whole school approach.

There was a consensus among staff that school management and the Guidance Counsellor was responsible for the provision and delivery of guidance counselling within the school, yet each teacher interviewed recognised that they played a part in supporting students with the decision-making processes, whether they be personal/social, educational/vocational. Sarah stated, “As teachers, we have a responsibility for supporting the students in our class.” Within the theme of a whole school approach, sub themes emerged surrounding supporting students personal/social and educational/vocational issues.
4.2.2 Personal/Social support

Supporting student welfare was a common narrative in all interviews. The case study school supports students personal and social development with the extra-curricular activities in the school as well as completing work experience in the local community, reflecting that of a Whole school approach. Students are also involved in organising activities throughout the school year (Josephine). The Guidance Counsellor stated that “there is a very strong emphasis and implementation of pastoral care with all staff included.” Mainstream class teachers recognised their role in supporting students and their needs in the classroom. Sarah stated that it is “very easy to spot when there is something amiss with students in relation to their personal lives. You can nearly tell by looking at them in class.” Sarah explains that she would ask a student whom she thought there was something ‘amiss’ with to “stay back for a minute at the end of class and ask them if something was wrong because I noticed them a little withdrawn”.

All mainstream teachers stated that they were comfortable with students approaching them with personal issues, reflecting a supportive pastoral caring environment, supporting student wellbeing. Elayne stated that “some come with personal issues and I have a role in supporting them.” John recognised that during his time as a class tutor “the males were more comfortable with me being a male teacher, the females were not too forthcoming, so I would have tried direct them towards a female teacher or member of management.”

Teaching staff were aware of boundaries within their competence when supporting students who presented with personal/social issues. Josephine stated that any issues which emerged “above and beyond my scope, will report to the office” The Guidance Counsellor reported that they would meet with student surrounding personal issues if the principal asked them to.

Teachers recognised that students are not always comfortable in speaking with their mainstream class teacher, not because the lack of rapport, but because of issues surrounding confidentiality. Sarah said her experience has shown that “teenagers find it hard to trust us as teacher, they immediately think we will go and discuss it with colleagues or the principal. I think that is why they may be more comfortable in sharing with the Guidance Counsellor.” Recognising that students experience personal/social issues which impact on school life, Sarah suggested that there is “scope to do more in relation to mentoring, but I think it’s something which we are planning to implement this year.” The school are planning to introduce a mentoring programme, where incoming first years are matched with a senior cycle student who will mentor them.
4.2.3 Class tutors

Each year group have an assigned class tutor. This class tutor is a mainstream teacher and remains that year groups tutor from first year through to Leaving Cert. Elayne suggested in situations where students had any personal issues they could “go to class tutors”. The school management interviewee stated that “the class tutor engages for ten minutes a day with their class group, in relation to anything going on around the school or checking in with them”. John described the class tutors role as working “with them from first to leaving cert, a ten-minute registration, looking after attendance, absenteeism, discuss how things are going, where their focus is.” The class tutor is also responsible for teaching the S.P.H.E. class to their tutor group.

4.2.4 Educational / Vocational Support

Mainstream class teachers recognised that they had a role in supporting students with their educational / vocational choices. Sarah stated that she “discusses subject options with students, especially in relation to my own subject and the levels which may suit their abilities.” Elayne explained how she plays a role as students would approach her and ask for help “filling in forms, especially in relation to the grant application.” The school aims to ensure that the students are best supported with educational related decisions, demonstrating how mainstream teachers are involved in delivering elements of the guidance curriculum.

The school management interviewee reported that they communicate with parents and students in relation to the subjects that can be offered based on teacher allocation. The Guidance Counsellor recognised that “the range of subjects offered restricts subject choices” due to small numbers. John noted that he would have encouraged “students to have structures in place in relation to study and setting goals for the future.” The Guidance Counsellor stated that it can be quite difficult to “motivate students”. John recognised the importance of teachers “linking in with the seniors preparing and motivating them” for the state exams.

4.3 Benefits of Accessing the Guidance Counselling Services

All interviewees believed that students benefitted greatly from engaging with the guidance counselling service in the school. Staff identified that much of the Guidance Counsellors time and work was invested in senior cycle students. Sarah described the guidance counselling service as ‘invaluable’. Further capturing this the school management interviewee stated that “guidance counselling is an important part of the school”. They recognise that it helps pupils
prepare for life after school and “trying to guide them down the right path in life in general” (School Management.)

The Leaving Certs and Leaving Cert Applied Two’s are timetabled for one class period per week. Staff also recognised that the Guidance Counsellor works on a one to one basis with these students surrounding future career decision making choices. Elayne stated that students benefit from the Guidance Counsellor “organising open days and inviting guest speakers from the different colleges and universities”. Sarah stated that they have discussed the “benefits of bringing back past pupils to speak to the students about their career experiences to date and how they got to where they are.” The Guidance Counsellor stated that the guidance curriculum offered “is very much directed to their needs and Leaving Certificate results.”

Sarah highlighted the importance of student engagement with the guidance service as “many of our student’s parents would not have attended third level and therefore do not have knowledge to help their children in the application process.” Similarly, Josephine recognised that the Guidance Counsellor can “give them direction, especially in this school where they mightn’t have any from home in terms of college courses.” “Support at home isn’t great in some situations, and I think that the support and reassurance which they get from the guidance counselling service is great” (Elayne). “They get good support with the CAO forms here.” (Josephine). The Guidance Counsellor stated that they are “not only aware of college options but also P.L.C’s, Apprenticeships, Garda Recruitment, E.S.B., etc.”

Only one teacher referred to the students accessing the guidance counselling services for personal issues. Many interviewees believed that much of work in the guidance counselling service in the school was educational/vocational dominated. The school management interviewee did note that the Guidance Counsellor supports students “getting to talk about options, life in general and picking the right subjects, or it could be something to do with life issues from home or school” encompassing the complexity of diverse issues which affect student wellbeing. Josephine recognised that students benefit greatly as “if they have any wee problems they can verbalise them and it might feel like a weight is lifted off their shoulders.”

4.3.1 Preparation for Work

Psychometric testing which is carried out by the Guidance Counsellor was described as of great benefit to the students, when considering future careers. “It identifies areas which suits them best and they can discuss it with the Guidance Counsellor then” (School Management). The senior students in the school, both LCVP and LCA engage in some form of work
experience which the Guidance Counsellor is involved in helping organise. This work experience was described as of great benefit, especially for the LCA’s who often “gain load from it like apprenticeships or summer jobs,” (John). He did recognise that “traditional Leaving Certs don’t gain the same, especially if from a disadvantaged background where parents aren’t working. There can be a challenge linking in with employers.” Supporting this the Guidance Counsellor noted “getting work experience in an area like this for students is hard, because the work isn’t there.”

4.4 Barriers to Accessing the Guidance Counselling Services

4.4.1 Time

A dominating theme which emerged in the data analysis was the lack of time available for guidance counselling in the school. All staff agreed that the current three hours allocated to guidance counselling, which takes place on a Monday, is not enough. School management stated that “it’s not adequate.” They further maintained that “being a DEIS school we need way more, especially with the clientele of students which we have.” John described the lack of time attributed to guidance counselling as “a big limitation at the minute.” It is further noted by Elayne that Monday “isn’t a great day for attendance. I think something should be more available and they should be able to just drop in if they need to.” The Guidance Counsellor reiterated the limited time available was a significant challenge for them. Despite restrictive time challenges, the Guidance Counsellor did recognise the support offered within the school stating, “management or teachers do not create any barriers, all are very accommodating.”

4.4.2 Not accessible for all students

Due to restrictive time allocation, the Guidance Counsellor must prioritise their work based on students and school’s needs. Interviewees suggested that the lack of allocation for guidance counselling has resulted in younger year groups not being able to access services. Interviewees believed that the junior cycle years needed access to guidance counselling services. Elayne stated that “we have cases where students have picked the wrong subjects and there was nothing they could do later on.” John also noticed something similar stating that “there is room for more guidance at junior cycle, it’s a challenge with students lacking focus at this stage.” Similarly, Sarah stated that she was aware the pre-leaving certs felt under pressure that they did not have any form of careers class. “I often hear the fifth years giving out that they have no guidance classes and it will be too difficult to make all career decisions in their leaving cert year” (Sarah).
4.5 Personal Challenges

Mentioned earlier, the Guidance Counsellor must prioritise the work they can effectively complete within the timetabled three hours. Josephine noted that the lack of time was also impacting on the Guidance Counsellor, recognising that she has seen the Guidance Counsellor meet with students in the school corridor “I think that it actually eats into her own time too”. The Guidance Counsellor stated that they believed their work is not valued, “they don’t appreciate what is done, but I’m not in the business for appreciation.” There is a consensus amongst staff interviewed that the lack of allocated hours has resulted in students not recognising “the Guidance Counsellor as someone they can go to with personal issues” (Elayne). “It’s hard to build the rapport at the minute with the lack of hours and as a result student don’t establish a close relationship with the Guidance Counsellor because of the small numbers compared to other schools” (John). School management noted that some pupils may not wish to engage with the guidance counselling service, asking for help may be identified as a weakness, which can often “come from home.” John further noted that there may be a lack of motivation from home and with the social background of the students there is a “greater need for the service to be provided.” Reiterating this, the Guidance Counsellor recognised that “role models are scarce for students.”

4.6 Conclusion

This concludes the data analysis gathered from the semi-structured interviews. The school attempts to operates from a whole school approach to guidance counselling to support student’s holistic development. Mainstream teachers are taking on supportive roles as class tutors and recognise they assist students with education and career decisions. Students do not identify mainstream teachers as a main source of personal support to them. All staff recognised the benefits of students engaging with the guidance counselling service in the school, preparing them for life after second level. Unfortunately, barriers emerge which prevent students from accessing the guidance counselling service. The lack of time available for guidance counselling is proving to challenge both Guidance Counsellor and students. All staff believe there is a need for additional guidance hours to accommodate the needs of the students in the case study school. Chapter five discusses the findings in accordance with relevant literature.
Chapter 5: Discussion.

5.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the emerging themes within this research piece which evolved during the case study. The research aimed to explore “Equity of Access: A case study investigation of the provision of Guidance Counselling in one rural post primary school in the West of Ireland.”

The main findings which emerged in this case study indicated the importance of student’s holistic development in the Irish post primary setting. Guidance Counsellors are involved in facilitating students personal/social and educational/vocational development, encompassing their holistic development. The reduction of the ex-quota Guidance Counsellor in the 2012 budget has put the case study school under pressure in delivering an accessible service for all students. To meet both students and school’s needs, a Whole school approach should be implemented demonstrating best practice.

The key findings will be discussed through the following themed subheadings:

1. Access to Guidance Counselling Services in the case study school and
2. A Whole School Approach to Guidance in the case study school.

Throughout these two subheadings the researcher will include how the removal of the ex-quota Guidance Counsellor may have impacted on delivering the guidance counselling service in the case study school.

5.1 Access to Guidance Counselling Services in the Case Study School

5.1.1 Supporting Students Holistic Development

Guidance counselling is beneficial in the Irish post primary education system as it facilitates the holistic development of students (Watts and Kidd, 2000). Holistic education is essential as it does not just focus on enhancing the student’s educational development, but in fact recognises the importance of encouraging student’s personal development also. The NGF (2007) defines guidance as a facilitative process, which encourages students to take ownership in controlling their personal, educational, social and career related decisions. This highlights the inclusion of the educational element of the individual but also the personal, demonstrating guidance as a holistic developmental process. Effective guidance benefits students,
empowering them with the skills to take ownership in the decision-making process which impacts on their lives. Recognising the benefits of student’s holistic development, the Junior Cycle Wellbeing programme, introduced in September 2017 states the requirement of a minimum of 300 timetabled hours. This will increase to 400 hours by 2020. The aim of wellbeing is to encourage student flourishing, assisting them to become the best person they can be (NCCA, 2017).

Students surveyed, were invited to describe how they felt their educational and personal needs were supported in the case study school. Results indicated that over half of the students surveyed articulated quite clearly how the school enhanced their educational development. Students recognised that the school provided them with “books”, “extra classes”, “resource”, it offers “subjects that are not offered in the other school in my town such as metalwork”. However, students found it difficult to express how the school catered for their personal development.

Students who recognised that the school catered for their personal development stated that there was a counsellor who they could speak to or students could speak with their teachers or class tutors if they had a problem. While some students recognised that they received personal support from the school, statistics indicated that this was not something felt by the majority. This supports research finding that Irish secondary schools are often dominated by the states Leaving Certificate (Leahy et al., 2017), with schools focusing on encouraging students to obtain maximum points in their exams (Hearne and Galvin, 2014). Marshall (2002) argues the importance of enhancing educational attainment, especially in rural areas, where career opportunities are lacking. This is reiterated by the Guidance Counsellor when they stated that the guidance programme in the school is “directed to their needs and Leaving Cert results”. This highlights a challenge in the case study school. There is scope for an increased investment into the student’s holistic development in preparing them for non-educational/career related issues which may present throughout their lifespan.

The case study school should continue to develop and deliver educational resources available to students. Additional planning is needed to ensure students personal needs are catered for in the case study school. The 300 hours of Wellbeing hours may be used in allocating additional guidance, accommodating students’ personal needs.
5.1.2 How to Access the Guidance Counsellor

Students surveyed indicated that over one third of them did not know who the Guidance Counsellor was in the case study school. Secondly, students seemed unclear as to what the role of the Guidance Counsellor involved. Additionally, over one fifth of students stated that they had no idea what the Guidance Counsellor did. Furthermore, most students surveyed reported that they had never made an appointment to meet with the Guidance Counsellor in the case study school. Research suggests that engaging with guidance counselling services offered in post primary setting has enormous benefits for second level students. Guidance counselling enhances confidence and motivation (Hughes et al., 2002), prepares students for the transition from post primary to higher education, reduces the number of early school leavers and encourages student’s success in the world of work (OECD, 2004; DES, 2005; Barnes et al., 2011; Dietrich and Salmela-Aro, 2013; Hooley and Sultana, 2016, Pullen et al., 2013). Students in the case study school may be at a disadvantage as they do not seem to be aware of the benefits gained from accessing the guidance counselling service in their school. Students reluctance to access the Guidance Counsellor may be linked with their uncertainty surrounding the Guidance Counsellor’s role. This indicates that the case study school needs to promote the role of the Guidance Counsellor to the students. To inform students about their role, the Guidance Counsellor could address the student cohort during a Monday morning assembly or alternatively approach each year group during their class tutor meetings. All students would then know who the Guidance Counsellor is. Secondly a guidance section could be added to the school website. Guidance related information could be uploaded and accessed by all students.

Students additionally reported that they were unaware of the process involved in making an appointment with the Guidance Counsellor. If students wanted to make an appointment they reported that they would “ask her after class”, “when I see her round the school” a few students indicated that they would “ask their parents” to make the appointment with some students responding that they would “ask the principal” to make the appointment for them. Hughes et al. (2002) argues the benefits gained from effective guidance, yet the lack of clarity surrounding accessing the guidance counselling service is worrying. In the case study school, both students and the Guidance Counsellor would benefit from having a formal procedure for making an appointment in place.
5.1.3 Student engagement with the Guidance Counsellor

Students who had previously engaged with the guidance counselling service in the case study school reported that there was an equal balance between personal/social and educational/vocational based meetings. This highlights that students require as much personal support as they do educational/career support in the case study school. Students who were willing to describe the nature of their meeting clearly captured the benefits from engaging with the guidance counselling service in the school. Students reported they benefitted by “finding out a lot of information on courses you want to do after secondary school”, helped encourage students to “get better grades”. Students felt comfortable being able to speak with someone about personal issues “who would not judge them”. All teachers interviewed recognised that students benefited from engaging with the Guidance Counsellor in the case study school. Sarah, one of the teachers interviewed, described the benefits to the students as “invaluable”. The school management representative believed that the Guidance Counsellor supports the students “trying to guide them down the right path in life”.

As mentioned previously students recognised the guidance counsellor as an active agent, furnishing them with information surrounding third level courses. This suggests that the guidance counsellor plays an important role in students career decision making process. The guidance counsellor was the students second most popular option when researching career related information. Guidance counsellors are fundamental in facilitating rural student’s decision-making process as often their parents may not have attended third level (Chenoweth and Galliher, 2004). The CSO (2016) reported that rural Ireland had the lowest profile of students in third level. The Guidance Counsellor stated that much of their work was with the Leaving Certs and LCA’s “trying to get them focussed around career decisions”. This emphasises the invaluable service provided by the Guidance Counsellor to rural students, which Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) argue is lacking in rural homes.

Recognising that educational attainment is necessary in promoting success in the labour market (Nolan and Maitre, 2008) the Guidance Counsellor stated how they enlightened students to the variety of options available to them on completion of post primary. This ranged from inviting guest speakers from local colleges and further education centres, organising visits to college open days, informing students and preparing them for Post Leaving Certificate Courses (PLC’s) and explaining apprenticeships on offer. This further reiterates that the Guidance Counsellor encourages further and higher academic progression within the case study school.
This supports research which states that school guidance promotes students career development, fostering a sense of career readiness (Owen et al., 2015; Gysbers, 2013). Once again, a guidance section on the school website could benefit students with accessible and up to date information for students.

Guidance Counsellors administer psychometric tests to determine students “abilities, aptitudes, life roles, interests, personal values, attitudes, educational achievements, skills and other relevant information” (IGC, 2007, p.12). The school management representative recognised the administration of psychometric testing as a key strength of Guidance Counsellors work in the school. The school management representative stated that it benefits the students as they can “discuss it with the Guidance Counsellor”.

5.1.4 Support to Parents

The DES (2005, 2012) and the NCGE (2004) recognises guidance as a collaborative process. There should be collaboration with all members of the school community. This involves school, parents and students (Hann-Morrison, 2011). Harmon (2017) argues that collaboration is central when tackling educational challenges in rural areas. Findings from the case study school highlighted that the guidance counselling service recognised the value of collaborating with parents. The Guidance Counsellor reports that they liaise with first year parents on the parent’s information evening. This promotes building a positive rapport with parents from the outset. Secondly, the Guidance Counsellor reported that they deliver information to parents on senior cycle options available in the case study school. Parents are identified as the main stake holders in their children’s future career choices (Shiel and Lewis, 1993; Sovet and Metz, 2014). Recognising this, it is fundamental that a positive relationship continues between home and school.

5.2 Whole School Approach to Guidance Counselling in the Case Study School

Guidance counselling plays a significant role in facilitating student’s holistic development in the Irish post primary education system. Presently, in the case study school, the Guidance Counsellor is timetabled for just over three hours on a Monday. The 2012 budget resulted in the removal of the ex-quota Guidance Counsellor. Consequently, guidance counselling hours are provided from within the school teacher allocation (IGC, 2017, 2015; DES, 2012). This reduction in allocation has had a significant impact on the guidance counselling service in the case study school. All staff interviewed stated that there was not enough time attributed to guidance counselling services in the case study school. The DES (2012) advocated that best
practice involves schools delivering the guidance counselling curriculum from a Whole school approach. This Whole school approach to guidance counselling involves all members of the school community taking on a role in delivering the guidance programme, led by the Guidance Counsellor (Hearne et al., 2014). Teaching staff interviewed recognised that the Guidance Counsellor devised the plan and all staff were responsible for delivering elements of the guidance curriculum. This supports best practice stated by (Shiel and Lewis, 1993; NCGE, 1999; DES, 2009, 2012; Gysbers, 2013).

While teaching staff in the case study school believed that they had a supportive role in delivering guidance counselling, resources supporting the Whole school approach are lacking. Sarah, a member of teaching staff interviewed, stated that pre-Leaving Certificate students had complained they had no access “to guidance classes and they will find it difficult to make all career decisions in their leaving cert year.” This suggests that students have expressed they do not feel they are receiving appropriate guidance, the statutory requirement. To overcome such challenges in the case study school, senior cycle students, i.e. 5th and 6th years could be merged for careers classes. This would mirror the delivery of choice subjects at senior cycle in the school. Merging 5th and 6th years would help overcome issues around students in Pre-Leaving Cert feeling anxious about having to make all decisions in their Leaving Cert year. Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) argue that there is a need to offer increased support to senior cycle students in rural Ireland where parents are not familiar with the higher education system.

5.2.1 Whole School Approach to student’s personal development

With most of the Guidance Counsellors time being invested in Leaving Cert. educational / vocational issues, there is a struggle in supporting students’ personal issues. The Guidance Counsellor reported that on occasion, the principal may ask them to speak with a student regarding a personal issue. The lack of the availability of the Guidance Counsellor to support students personal / social needs explain student survey findings, indicating the Guidance Counsellor as the students second least accessed source of support for a personal issue. Students in the Irish post primary education system are lacking personal support, with over 51% reduction in personal counselling on offer in post primary schools post 2012 (IGC, 2012).

Students looking for personal support from the Guidance Counsellor may be further restricted as the Guidance Counsellor is only available on a Monday. Elayne, a teacher interviewed, recognised Monday is not always a great day for student attendance. Essentially, there is no guidance counselling support available from Tuesdays to Fridays. If a student requires help,
which is not immediately acknowledged, the window of opportunity to help may have lapsed (Bradley et al., 2012). This is worrying, especially in rural Ireland, where services are lacking. The Guidance Counsellor may be the only source of personal support available to students. The NGF (2007) and the DES (2012) state that the Guidance Counsellor is the only trained professional equipped with a skillset for dealing with crisis counselling. This highlights the whole school community are at a disadvantage, not having a Guidance Counsellor present daily. Moving forward the case study school should aim to have a Guidance Counsellor present more than one day per week.

To offer personal support to students in the case study school, a class tutor programme is implemented. Each year group have an assigned mainstream teacher as their class tutor from first year to Leaving Certificate. The class tutor meets with the year group for ten minutes at the beginning of break each day. During this time, the class tutor monitors attendance, checks for communication notes between home and school and checks in with students, supporting their wellbeing. This class tutor time provides students with an opportunity to verbalise any issues which may be emerging for them. A strength of the class tutor is the supportive relationship, working alongside students consistently which helps establish trust between both students and teachers (Bradley et al., 2012). The fact that mainstream teachers take on the class tutor role on a voluntary basis, emphasises the caring nature of the teachers in the case study school. They are adding on an extra 50 minutes unpaid to their timetable weekly. Unfortunately, most students in the case study school, do not recognise their class tutor as a source of personal support. Teachers who are class tutors may need to emphasise their supportive role to the students. Sometimes mainstream teachers do not feel comfortable or competent supporting students’ personal issues.

Lam and Hui (2012) recognise mainstream class teachers play a prime role in preventing students’ personal issues from escalating into a crisis. Staff interviewed recognised that they have a role in supporting students personal needs. One member of staff interviewed stated “It’s very easy to spot where there is something amiss with students” (Sarah). While teachers interviewed recognised that students had previously approached them seeking personal help, it was noted that students are not always comfortable approaching teachers with personal issues. “Teenagers find it hard to trust us as teachers, they immediately think we will go and discuss it with our colleagues” (Sarah, Teacher). Most students surveyed indicated that school did not cater for their personal needs. The student survey highlighted that mainstream teachers were students least accessed option when looking for someone to discuss a personal issue with. Just
over half of the students surveyed felt they were not comfortable in sharing confidential information with mainstream teachers. Students reported that sharing with mainstream teachers made them feel “awkward”, “judged” and “exposed”.

It is evident that students in the case study school need to feel there is an element of confidentiality when they share personal information. It would benefit the school if a pastoral care team was established and students felt there were teachers they could confide in. The school could organise additional training for mainstream teachers supporting students’ personal needs. As initial teacher training lacks guidance training, mainstream teachers lack the skills necessary for working with pastoral care issues (Galvin, 2012). This emphasises that the guidance counselling allocation needs to be increased to support students’ personal issues. A formal Whole school approach to guidance counselling needs to be planned and implemented in the case study school. The school could use policy development meeting time to devise this Whole school approach plan.

5.2.2 Whole School Approach to Educational / Vocational Development

Mainstream teachers in the case study school are involved in facilitating students educational and career related decisions. Teachers recognised that they are involved in discussing subject options with both students are parents. This highlights that collaboration exists between home and school. In rural areas, collaboration is necessary in overcoming educational challenges (Harmon, 2017). John, a teacher interviewed, described his work alongside students, encouraging them to have “structures in place in relation to study and setting goals for the future”. Teachers in the case study school are active agents encouraging and motivating students educational and vocational development as supported by a Whole school approach. Students in the case study school recognise teachers as a source of support for their educational and vocational development. Findings from the student survey indicated that most students would ask their teachers about career related decisions. This suggests that the case study school are implementing best practice, providing career related information to students (DES, 2012). Elayne, a mainstream teacher interviewed, described her involvement in helping students with their third level “grant application” process. Both students and parents benefit from mainstream teachers helping them complete such application forms. While the case study school has access to broadband, some students living in more remote areas may not have access. The lack of broadband services in rural Ireland is at crisis point (Weckler, 2016). Mainstream teachers in
the case study school should continue to support students educational and vocational needs, encouraging their progression in education.

5.2.3 Junior Cycle Access to Guidance Counselling

As stated previously, the Guidance Counsellor suggested that they offered a guidance service “directed to the needs of the Leaving Cert. results”. Findings from staff interviewed suggested that they believed students in junior cycle required more access to the Guidance Counsellor. Elayne, a teacher interviewed, highlighted how students had picked subjects in junior cycle, without any guidance, which restricted them later in senior cycle. This reflects findings from Philips et al. (2006) who identified students, in rural areas, were making restrictive career choices at young ages, based on junior cycle subject choice. Findings from the student survey indicated that the guidance counsellor was the least accessed influencer on their subject choice.

The inaccessibility of junior cycle guidance counselling services in Irish post primary schools is by no means new. Dating back over a decade, the DES (2006) maintained that there was a need “for increased and more accessible guidance counselling services for junior cycle students”. Evidently, findings from this case study reflects the DES (2006) recommendations. To overcome the issue of inaccessible Junior Cycle guidance counselling in the case study school, the Guidance Counsellor could allocate two Mondays to junior year groups, before subject choice is made. The Guidance Counsellor could deliver a class to the junior cycle groups when picking subject options. Students could then have the option of making an appointment with the Guidance Counsellor, if necessary, to discuss subject choices further. Students would then be encouraged to follow up if necessary with subject teachers, parents/guardians and the Guidance Counsellor, implementing a Whole school approach. Secondly, the Guidance Counsellor could be timetabled for a class with junior cycle groups under the additional 300 hours of Wellbeing.

Guidance practitioners may be considered advocates for social justice but problematic policy and the focus on finances are resulting in a deficiency in resources. Education aims to ensure adequate and accessible guidance for all, however government spending is lacking, and the service is becoming limited, strengthening the socio-economic division. Educational policy aiming to equalise opportunities needs to focus on measures which are preventing rural student’s progression (Muller, 2014). The DES (2006) proposed that schools provide services which are lacking in the community, yet current allocation is preventing this. Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds can afford to avail of private guidance services, leaving
the rest behind, a social inequality (Leahy et al., 2016). Unfortunately, rural Ireland lacks resources as well as career opportunities, despite the strengthening economy (O’Grada, 2014).

As an alternative option to the distributive model, Irving (2005) supports a re-cognitive dimension of social justice. This model emphasises equality of all groups, aiming to eliminate the structures leading to oppression, supporting an inclusive society. Currently, there is a division of education services offered in rural Ireland, compared with their urban counterparts (White, 2016). The proposed model of distributive justice is ineffective in the educational setting, despite political policy being embedded in it (Irving, 2005). Guidance Counsellors working in rural settings advocating for social justice need to promote inclusion rather than becoming weighed down with barriers preventing progression (Schraad – Tischler, 2011). There is a need for an increased investment in guidance counselling services in rural post primary schools.

5.3 Challenges for the Guidance Counsellor

The lack of guidance counselling in the case study school has resulted in the Guidance Counsellor finding it difficult trying to provide an accessible service to students. Josephine, a teacher interviewed, stated that she would see the Guidance Counsellor meeting with students in the school corridor. This is reiterated by students who reported that they would approach the Guidance Counsellor in the school corridor when trying to make an appointment. It would benefit the Guidance Counsellor if they established boundaries with students approaching and asking them questions in the school corridors. The Guidance Counsellor also believed that their work was not valued by students. “They don’t appreciate what is done, but I’m not in the business for appreciation” (Guidance Counsellor). The Guidance Counsellor may not feel valued as a large percentage of students do not know what their role involves or how it may benefit them. Spreading the guidance counselling timetable over five days of the week may help establish more positive relationships with students and the Guidance Counsellor in the case study school. It seems that the value of the Guidance Counsellor in post primary schools may have been damaged by the 2012 budget cutbacks, with over 10% of schools employing unqualified staff in a guidance counselling position (IGC, 2014). However, the DES (2012) recognise the invaluable service provided by Guidance Counsellors, as they are the only people equipped with the career counselling skillset required to facilitate students career decision making process. The Guidance Counsellor should engage in appropriate supervision, minding their own wellbeing (Hann-Morrison, 2011).
5.4 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the significant themes which emerged reflecting the accessibility of the guidance counselling service in a single post primary school in rural, west Ireland. Linking literature with findings, it was noted that guidance counselling has numerous benefits to students in supporting their holistic development. Due to restrictive cutbacks in the 2012 budget and the removal of the ex-quota Guidance Counsellor, this school, like others, attempts to operate from a Whole school approach. Teachers in the case study school are invested in supporting students throughout their education. Findings indicated that students are not necessarily comfortable in exploring personal issues with their mainstream class teachers but feel supported with their career related issues. However, a more structured Whole school approach needs to be established. Placed in rural Ireland, where numbers are small, but demands are high, the Guidance Counsellor is working in a challenging environment trying to provide an accessible service. The reduction of guidance counselling hours, and removal of the ex-quota Guidance Counsellor has increased the challenge of providing an accessible service for all students.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

This is the final concluding chapter of the research study. This chapter summarises the main themes and objectives which emerged in the case study. This chapter proposes suggestions for policy and practice. The strengths and limitations of the research are discussed in line with recommendations for future policy and practice.

6.1 Summary of findings

The aim of the research study was to explore “Equity of Access: A case study investigation of the provision of Guidance Counselling in one rural post primary school in the West of Ireland.” Three objectives were devised to achieve the research aim. A case study was the chosen research method based on Stake’s (1995) instrumental model. This type of case study helps provide a deeper insight into the issue of accessibility and provision of guidance counselling in rural Ireland. In the case study, a mixed methods approach was employed. Two forms of data collection were involved as part of this study. Firstly, students in the case study school completed an online survey on Google Forms. Secondly, six staff within the case study school were interviewed to gather additional and more detailed information.

The main themes which emerged from the study were:

1. Access to Guidance Counselling Services in the case study School,
2. A Whole School Approach to Guidance in the case study school and
3. Barriers in accessing the guidance counselling service

6.1.1 Access to Guidance Counselling Services in the case study school

Holistic development is essential for students in managing challenges which they will face throughout life. Students easily identified how the school catered for their educational needs, yet students did not recognise the school as a form of support for their personal needs. There are numerous benefits of guidance counselling, which include, encouraging the transition and progression in education which helps reduce early school leaving and prepares students for the world of work (Hughes et al., 2002; OECD, 2004; DES, 2005; Barnes et al., 2011; Dietrich and Salmela-Aro, 2013; Hooley et al., 2016, Pullen et al., 2013). Despite identifying the benefits of student engagement with guidance counselling services, over one third of students did not
know the Guidance Counsellor and 70% had never made an appointment to meet with the Guidance Counsellor. There are a lack of rural students attending third level (CSO, 2016). Attempting to address such educational challenges in rural areas requires collaboration is essential (Harmon, 2017). The Guidance Counsellor in the case study school recognises this and links in with both junior and senior cycle parents.

6.1.2 Whole School Approach to Guidance Counselling in the Case Study School

A Whole school approach has been supported by the DES (2012) since the removal of the ex-quota Guidance Counsellor in that year. No member of the staff interviewed referred to the concept of a whole school approach, highlighting the need for establishing a formal plan supporting a whole school approach. There is a strong sense of pastoral care in the school, with all staff being willing in supporting students’ personal needs as well as facilitating a class tutor programme in the school. However, less than 50% of the student population felt comfortable confiding in a teacher about a personal issue. Teaching staff in the case study school recognised that they facilitated and supported student’s educational and vocational related decisions. Over 66% of students reported that they would ask a teacher if they had a career related question. The DES (2012) state mainstream teachers should be involved in providing students with information surrounding career choice.

6.1.3 Barriers to Accessing the Guidance Counselling Service

The removal of the ex-quota Guidance Counsellor in the 2012 budget resulted in the decline of guidance counselling hours available in post primary schools. All staff recognised time as a predominant barrier in accessing the guidance counselling service in the case study school. The Guidance Counsellor has 3.1 timetabled hours on a Monday. The guidance counselling service in the case study school is aimed at the educational and vocational needs of the Leaving Certificate students. This is linked with the lack of guidance counselling hours available in the school. Supporting research conducted by Phillips et al. (2006) staff in the case study school suggested that there is a lack of guidance counselling available for junior cycle students. Students recognise this with over 66% of them reporting that they feel they need greater access to guidance counselling services. Interestingly this is not a new issue in Irish post primary schools. The DES (2006) reported that junior cycle students need greater access to guidance counselling services in Irish post primary schools. The lack of accessible guidance counselling services available for junior cycle students is attributed with issues surrounding social justice.
White (2016) suggest that urban students have greater access to educational services compared to rural students.

The lack of personal support available to students in the case study school can also be linked back to the Guidance Counsellor working in time limiting environments. This is reflective of findings from IGC (2015) reporting that there has been over 51% reduction in personal counselling available to students in post primary education (IGC, 2015). The Guidance Counsellor is the second least popular option for students to seek personal support from.

6.2 Strengths and Limitations of the study

6.2.1 Strengths of the Study

Choosing a case study as the most suitable method may be recognised as a strength of the research study. Case studies enables the researcher to capture the intricacy of a situation in its natural environment (Hearne et al., 2016; McLeod, 2010). Research in education tends to be conducted in larger schools where findings can be generalised. Single case studies are lacking in smaller, rural schools, therefore provides valuably to education (Punch, 2009).

The researcher had worked in the case study school for the previous three years and maintained a positive rapport with both students and staff. This may be attributed with both students and staff’s willingness to participate in the case study.

There was a near equal gender balance of students participating in the online survey. Similarly, there was a good spread in gender and professional roles possessed by staff participating in the interview.

There was a mix of quantitative and qualitative data collected. This benefits the study providing both statistical and detailed facts.

6.2.2 Limitations of the Study

This single case study, despite being quite a unique setting i.e. one small rural school in West Ireland, may be criticised for researcher bias, especially with the researcher working as a mainstream teacher in the school. A research diary was kept during the research study, practicing reflexivity.

The researcher invited students who they were not involved in teaching to participate in the survey. Consequently, not all students had the option to participate. This restricted student
voices who may have added valuable information to support the study. Therefore, there is not a whole school in this research piece.

As this is a single case study, in a specific setting the researcher recognises that it is not applicable to all schools. This is identified as a limitation of the study.

6.3 Recommendations

The following recommendations are identified for policy, practice and research:

1. Time needs to be invested into advertising the role of the Guidance Counsellor in post primary schools especially in rural areas where third level applications are lacking.
2. It is advocated that this case study school continues to build a collaborative relationship with all members of the school community, benefiting students attending the school.
3. There is a need for increased investment in guidance, additional wellbeing hours should be used to offer more guidance to junior cycle students.
4. A formal appointment making process needs to be established for students with the Guidance Counsellor.
5. 5th and 6th Years should be merged for careers class, making the service more accessible for Pre-Leaving Certificates.
6. A guidance section should be added to the school website where up to date information could be accessed by all students.
7. The case study school should introduce and implement a formal plan aimed at delivering guidance from a ‘Whole school approach’.
8. The ex-quota Guidance Counsellor should be reinstated in post primary schools to ensure students receive access to ‘appropriate guidance’.
9. Schools, especially in rural areas should establish supportive pastoral care structures encouraging students trust and confidence in mainstream teachers.
10. Mainstream teachers involved in offering personal support to students should receive further training to support students’ personal needs.

6.4 Personal Learning and Reflexivity

Havercamp (2005) argues that reflexivity is needed to recognise how a researcher’s professional role may affect ethical practice. As the researcher was a mainstream teacher in the case study school, a reflexive approach was adopted to prevent any researcher bias. To overcome such researcher bias, (Cohen et al., 2011) proposes that researchers acknowledge
their feeling, preventing bias. Consequently, the researcher kept notes in their research diary throughout the case study.

Professionally, the researcher ensured they communicated with parents/guardians, students and the gate keeper before conducting research. Students participated in a voluntary capacity and had the option to withdraw from the research if they wished to do so. Completing the online survey may have evoked feelings or issues for the students participating. Recognising this, the researcher ensured to advise students of supports available to them in school if they wished to discuss any such emerging issues.

Staff participating in the interviews received information letters before participating in the research study. The researcher used ‘member checking’ which involved interviewees being able to view their transcribed interviews, reducing researcher bias also, supported by (Lindolf and Taylor, 2011).

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter concludes the single case study. The core emerging themes were summarised, and strengths and limitations were acknowledged. The researcher provided recommendations for future policy, practice and research in the guidance counselling domain. The researcher closes this chapter acknowledging reflexivity inclusive of their personal learning conducting research.


Department of Education and Skills. (2012) Staffing arrangements in post primary schools for the 2012-2013 school year, Circular 0009/2012. available:


National Centre for Guidance in Education. (2011) ‘Counselling Competencies for Guidance Counselling Education Programmes’ : Interim Guidelines’, available:


Appendices

Appendix A: Subject Information Letter and Consent Form (Principal)

Subject Information Letter (Principal)

Date:

EHS REC no.:

Research title: Equity of Access: A case study investigation of the provision of Guidance Counselling in one rural post primary school in the West of Ireland.

Dear Principal,

I am a student of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr Joanne O’ Flaherty. I am undertaking a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling as part of my studies.

By completing this thesis, I aim to explore the accessibility of the Guidance Counselling service in a rural post primary school. In order to gather this information, I would appreciate if you would give me consent to carry out the research study in your school. This would involve me conducting interviews with some school personnel. All students would also be invited to complete an online survey. As I plan to include participants under the age of 18, I will follow UL’s Child Protection Guidelines.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Interviews will be audio recorded and the data will be destroyed after analysis in accordance with University of Limerick guidelines. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to data analysis.
phase. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. It is important to note that the school’s name and individual participants will not be used in the research and the school will not be identifiable to anyone other than those directly involved. If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Student Name: Maeve McDermott
School Tel. No: 071 9183285
Email: 16092767@studentmail.ul.ie

Supervisor: Dr Joanne O ‘Flaherty
Tel. No. 061 234 841
Email: joanne.oflaherty@ul.ie

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (need to insert EHSREC no. here when approved). 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
ehsresearchethics@ul.ie
Consent Form (Principal)

Date:

EHS REC no.:

Research Title: Equity of Access: A case study investigation of the provision of Guidance Counselling in one rural post primary school in the West of Ireland. I have read the Subject Information Letter and understand in detail the particulars of the research project. I understand that the identity of the participants and the school will not be revealed at any stage in the reporting of the research study. The conditions involved in the research which are designed to protect the privacy of participants and respect their contributions are:

i. Participation is entirely voluntary

ii. Participants are free to withdraw at any time prior to the data analysis stage and any contribution made will be subsequently destroyed.

AND

iii. The surveys and interview material will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the researcher and the research supervisor. Excerpts from the survey and interviews may be made part of the final research dissertation, but under no circumstances will names or any identifying characteristics be included in the report.

I hereby give my consent for Maeve McDermott to carry out this research in the school.

Signature: __________________________ (Principal Investigator)

Printed Name: _______________________              Date:  _________________________

Signature: ___________________________ (Researcher)

Printed Name: _______________________              Date:  _________________________
Appendix B: Subject Information Letter and Consent form (Parent / Guardian)

Subject Information Letter (Parent or Carer or Guardian)

Date:
EHS Rec. No:
Research Title: Equity of Access: A case study investigation of the provision of Guidance Counselling in one rural post primary school in the West of Ireland.

Dear Parent (or Carer or Guardian),

I am a student of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr Joanne O’Flaherty. I am undertaking a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling as part of my studies.

In my research I aim to explore the accessibility of guidance counselling services in a rural post primary school. I am writing to you to enquire whether you would be willing to consent to your son/daughter taking part in this research project. Volunteer participants will be asked to complete an online survey. The survey will take approximately 15-20 minutes of your child’s time and needs to be completed by 11th May 2018. As I plan to include participants under the age of 18, I will follow UL’s Child Protection Guidelines.

All information gathered in the questionnaire data will be held in the strictest of confidence. Participation in this study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis phase. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through professional publication. The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick.

If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please contact me or my Supervisor:
This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (need to insert EHSREC no. here when approved). 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
ehsresearchethics@ul.ie
Consent Form (Parent or Carer or Guardian)

Date

EHS Rec. No:

Research title: Equity of Access: A case study investigation of the provision of Guidance Counselling in one rural post primary school in the West of Ireland.

I have read the Subject Information Letter and understand in detail the particulars of the research study. I understand that the following conditions are designed to protect the privacy of all participants and to respect their contributions.

i. Participation is entirely voluntary. Even if I consent to my child taking part, he/she still has the right to refuse to take part.

ii. The survey data will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the research team.

iii. While excerpts from survey data may be made part of the final research report, under no circumstances will any names of students or the school, nor any identifying characteristics be included in this report.

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

I hereby consent to my son/daughter taking part in this research study in the form of an online survey.

Parent/Guardian Name: ____________________________________

Students Name and School Year ______________________________________

Parent/Guardian Signature____________________________________
Researcher’s Signature____________________________________
Date______________________
Appendix C: Subject Information Letter and Consent Form (Interview)

Subject Information Letter (Interview Participant)

Date:
EHS REC no.

Research title: Equity of Access: A case study investigation of the provision of Guidance Counselling in one rural post primary school in the West of Ireland.

Dear Participant,

I am a student of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr Joanne O’ Flaherty. I am undertaking a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling as part of my studies.

This thesis, a single case study, will explore the accessibility of Guidance Counselling for second level students in a rural post primary school. To gather information on the topic I would appreciate if you would agree to participate in a face-to-face audiotaped semi-structured interview. The interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes and be held in a confidential location agreeable to you.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Interviews will be audio tape recorded and the data will be destroyed after the analysis process. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis phase. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.
The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. It is important to note that the school’s name and individual participants will not be used in the research and the school will not be identifiable to anyone other than those directly involved. If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please contact me or my Supervisor:

Student Name: Maeve McDermott
School Tel. No: 071 9183285
Email: 16092767@studentmail.ul.ie

Supervisor: Dr Joanne O’ Flaherty
Tel. No. 061 234 841
Email: joanne.oflaherty@ul.ie

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (need to insert EHSREC no. here when approved). 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
ehsresearchethics@ul.ie
Consent Form (Interview Participant)

Date:

EHS REC no.:

**Research title:** Equity of Access: A case study investigation of the provision of Guidance Counselling in one rural post primary school in the West of Ireland.

I have read the Subject Information Letter and understand in detail the particulars of the research project. I understand that the identity of the participants and the school will not be revealed at any stage in the reporting to the research study. The conditions involved in the research which are designed to protect the privacy of participants and respect their contributions are:

i. Participation is entirely voluntary

ii. Participants are free to withdraw at any time in the process prior to data analysis and any contributions made will be subsequently destroyed.

iii. The interview material be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the researcher and the research supervisor. Excerpts from the interview may be made part of the final research dissertation, but under no circumstances will names or any identifying characteristics be included.

I hereby agree to take part in Maeve McDermott’s research study.

Signature of Participant: ____________________________

Printed Name: ____________________________ Date: ________________

Signature of Researcher: ____________________________

Printed Name: ____________________________ Date: ________________
Online Survey Information Email Students
(to be frontloaded onto survey going to participants)

Date: 

EHS Rec No: 

Research title: Equity of Access: A single case study investigation into the provision of Guidance Counselling in a rural post primary school in the West of Ireland.

Dear Student,

I am a student of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr Joanne O’Flaherty. In my research, I aim to examine the accessibility of guidance counselling services in a rural post primary school.

I would like to invite you to volunteer as a participant for my research study through completion of an online survey. The survey will take approximately 15-20 minutes of your time and needs to be completed by 11th May 2018.

All information gathered in the questionnaire data will be held in the strictest of confidence. Participation in this study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis phase. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through professional publication. The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick.
If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor:

Student Name: Maeve McDermott
School Tel. No: 071 9183285
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University of Limerick
Tel (061) 234101
ehresearchethics@ul.ie

 Emails:

joanne.oflaherty@ul.ie

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Consent Form (Student Survey)

Date:

EHS REC no.:

Research title: Equity of Access: A single case study investigation into the provision of Guidance Counselling in a rural post primary school in the West of Ireland.

I have read the Subject Information Letter and understand in detail the particulars of the research project. I understand that the identity of the participants and the school will not be revealed at any stage in the reporting to the research study. The conditions involved in the research which are designed to protect the privacy of participants and respect their contributions are:

i. Participation is entirely voluntary
ii. Participants are free to withdraw at any time in the process prior to data analysis and any contributions made will be subsequently destroyed.
iii. The survey material be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the researcher and the research supervisor. Excerpts from the survey may be made part of the final research dissertation, but under no circumstances will names or any identifying characteristics be included.

I hereby agree to take part in Maeve McDermott’s research study.

Signature of Student: ______________________________
Printed Name: _______________________________ Date: ______________

Signature of Researcher: _____________________________
Printed Name: _____________________________________ Date: ______________
Appendix E: Interview Guide.

Date:
EHS Rec No:

Research title: Equity of Access: A case study investigation of the provision of Guidance Counselling in one rural post primary school in the West of Ireland.

Interviewer's welcome: Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research study. As you are aware this research is being conducted as part of my Masters in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development. I aim to explore the accessibility of the Guidance Counselling service in a rural post primary school. I wish to hear about all your experiences, your ideas and your opinions, whether they are positive or negative. Your real names will not be used in the project. To allow me to listen carefully to you, with your consent, I will be recording this interview on a Dictaphone. It should take no longer than forty minutes and you are free to withdraw at any time.

Section A – Guidance Counselling Provision – Specific to the case study school.

1. Can you explain your understanding surrounding the provision/delivery of Guidance Counselling in this school?

2. Who is responsible for the provision of the Guidance Counselling in the school and how is it delivered?

3. Are you involved in delivering any element of the guidance curriculum (i.e. providing information to parents, discussing subject options with students, providing career related information, assisting students with personal issues)?
4. Do you feel students benefit from engaging with the guidance counselling service in the school?

5. In your opinion, are there any challenges / barriers for students trying to engage with the guidance counselling services in the school?

Section B - Personal Guidance Counselling Services – Specific to the case study school.

6. Can you explain your understanding of how students are supported with their personal and social development in the school?

7. How comfortable are you with students approaching you with their personal / social issues?

8. Research suggests that while many Irish students are educationally prepared to leave school, issues emerge around their personal and social skillset which challenge their resilience. How do you feel about this?

Section C - Educational Guidance Counselling – Specific to the case study school.

9. Can you describe how the students are supported with their education guidance counselling?

10. Research indicates that students often receive educational guidance in senior cycle, despite making restrictive subject choices in junior cycle. Do you feel that students need guidance counselling in junior cycle?

Section D - Career Guidance Counselling – Specific to the case study school.

11. Can you describe how students are supported with their career guidance counselling?

Section E - Further Comments and Closure.

12. Have you anything further you wish to add?

• Thank the interviewee for their attendance and time

• The audio recording will be stopped.
Appendix F: Student Survey Questions.

Q1: What year are you in?
   - First Year
   - Second Year
   - Third Year
   - Fifth Year
   - Sixth Year

Q2: What is your sex?
   - Male
   - Female
   - Prefer not to say

Q3: Explain how this school caters for your educational and or personal needs.

Q4: Do you know what the guidance counsellor’s role in school involves?

Q5: Have you ever made an appointment to meet with the guidance counsellor?
   - Yes
   - No

Q6: How long do you generally wait after making an appointment to meet the guidance counsellor?
   - The guidance counsellor will find me that day
   - 2-3 days
Q7: Please explain your answer.

Q8: Have you ever being referred to the guidance counsellor by a teacher?
   - Yes
   - No
   - I don’t know

Q9: Explain how you would make an appointment with the guidance counsellor.

Q10: If you have met with the guidance counsellor, would you consider your meetings as personal/social, educational/vocational?
   - Persona / Social
   - Educational / Vocational
   - This question does not apply to me

Q11: Please explain your answer.

Q12: Have you accessed, or would you consider accessing external private counselling?
   - Yes, I have attended a privately paid guidance counsellor
   - I would consider attending a privately paid guidance counsellor
   - No, I would not access a privately paid guidance counsellor
   - Financially I can’t afford the option of accessing a privately paid guidance counsellor

Q13: Who was the main influence of your subject choice?
   - Friends
   - Parents / Guardians
   - Teachers
o Guidance Counsellor

Q14: Who in school would you ask if you had a career related question?

o Teacher

o Friends

o Principal / Vice Principal

o Guidance Counsellor

Q15: If you had a personal problem and wanted to talk to someone confidentially, who would you approach?

o Teacher

o Guidance Counsellor

o Principal / Vice Principal

o Friend

Q16: Do you feel that there are adequate support structures in the school to cater for your personal needs.

o Yes

o No

o I don’t know

Q17: Are you comfortable in telling confidential information to one of your class teachers?

Yes

No

Q18: Please explain your answer.

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Q19: Do you have timetabled classes for guidance / careers class?
Q20: Do you feel that you need more timetabled guidance / careers class?

- Yes
- No
- This question does not apply to me

Q21: If you answered yes to the previous question, please explain how you would like additional guidance to be timetabled.

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Thank you for taking part in completing this survey.