Adolescents’ Views on the Provision of Guidance Counselling in an Irish Post Primary School

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MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development

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Declaration

“I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for any degree in the University of Limerick, or any other institution and is my own work.”

_________________________
Karen Healy
I would like to thank my parents, Patrick (diseased) and Kathleen who instilled the importance of education. To my sister Elaine and neighbour Aisling, for their continued support and encouragement. To my husband Shane, children Pearse and Áine for their reassurance and cheer throughout the last two years.

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<td>Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAMHS</td>
<td>Child &amp; Adolescent Mental Health Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAO</td>
<td>Central Applications Office</td>
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<td>CEDEFOP</td>
<td>European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training</td>
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<td>CEDRA</td>
<td>The Commission for the Development of Rural Areas</td>
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<td>CSO</td>
<td>Central Statistics Office</td>
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<td>DARE</td>
<td>Disability Access Route to Education</td>
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<td>DEIS</td>
<td>Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools</td>
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<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education and Science (up to 2010)</td>
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<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education and Skills (since 2010)</td>
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<td>ESL</td>
<td>Early School Leaving</td>
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<td>EUNICAS</td>
<td>European Universities Central Applications Support Service</td>
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<td>GP</td>
<td>General Practitioner</td>
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<td>HEAR</td>
<td>Higher Education Access Route</td>
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<td>HSCL</td>
<td>Home School Community Liaison</td>
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<td>HSE</td>
<td>Health Service Executive</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and Communications Technology</td>
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<td>IGC</td>
<td>Institute of Guidance Counsellors</td>
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<td>JC</td>
<td>Junior Certificate</td>
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<td>JCSP</td>
<td>Junior Cert Schools Programme</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
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<td>LC</td>
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<td>NGF</td>
<td>National Guidance Forum</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>SCP</td>
<td>School Completion Programme</td>
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<td>SUSI</td>
<td>Student Universal Support Ireland</td>
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<td>TY</td>
<td>Transition Year</td>
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<td>UCAS</td>
<td>Universities and Colleges Admission Service</td>
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<td>WSA</td>
<td>Whole School Approach</td>
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Abstract

The aim of this research study is to explore adolescents’ views on the provision of guidance counselling in an Irish rural post primary school. The Researcher will explore the students’ suggestions for improvements to the guidance counselling service (personal, educational or vocational) in the research school. The study will explore student’s experience of engaging with the guidance counselling service and their perceptions of the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Programme. The study will endeavour to answer the following questions. Is a Whole School Approach to guidance counselling implemented? Is the guidance service available and accessible to all students? Are there challenges for the guidance counselling service?

Similar studies have been completed in relation to the delivery of Guidance from a WSA, post removal of the ex-quota guidance counsellor hours in 2012 by Hearne et al. (2016, 2017) and Hearne and Galvin (2014). Substantial studies were conducted on the provision of guidance counselling, in the context of the Irish post primary sector (DES, 2019; McCoy et al, 2014; Morgan and Hayes, 2011), studies have also been carried out on the provision of personal/social counselling (Cooper, 2004). However, this study focuses on the experiences of adolescents engaging with the guidance counselling service in the context of an Irish rural post primary school.

Research into adolescent wellbeing has found that personal issues are affecting a number of young people (Martin et al., 2006; Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012; HSE, 2015; NEPS, 2015). Adolescence is a critical developmental period where wellbeing is essential for psychological functioning, maintenance of positive relationships, learning, physical health and the ability to function in society in later life (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012). The IGC report there has been a reduction in personal counselling by over 51.4% (IGC, 2013). Therefore, this research study is timely and pertinent.

A mixed method approach is used, encompassing interpretivism and positivism. Surveys were administered to TY students. The same cohort of students were then randomly selected and invited to participate in focus groups. Their opinions provided more in-depth qualitative data. This approach is intended to provide statistical and narrative data to allow the adolescents to tell ‘their’ story and explore the research topic.
Chapter 1 Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This chapter will introduce the reader to the research topic and outline the justification and background to the research study. A WSA to guidance counselling is researched and the positionality of the Researcher outlined. The objectives, aims and methodology used are identified.

1.1 Justification and context of the research study

The aim of the research study is to investigate adolescents’ views on guidance counselling provision in an Irish post primary school. In addition, to explore the students’ suggestions for any improvements to the guidance counselling service (personal, educational or vocational).

There is limited current Irish research into the provision of guidance counselling in a post primary setting, from student’s perspectives. The results of this study will provide insight and answer the research aim. It will give a voice to adolescents regarding the provision of guidance counselling (personal, educational and vocational) and give adolescents an opportunity to put forward suggestions for improving the guidance counselling service in their school. The study will explore student’s experience of engaging with the guidance service and their perceptions of the new Junior Cycle Wellbeing Programme. Therefore, this research study is appropriate and pertinent.

1.1.1 Background to the project

The researcher currently works as a Home School Community Liaison Officer in two schools in a rural setting in the West of Ireland. As part of the work, the researcher encourages children, (young and adolescents) to continue their education and fulfil their opportunities in life. The researcher encourages students to endeavour to overcome any challenges they encounter regarding participation, progression, attendance and wellbeing while at school.
From the researcher’s work with families, children and reviewing current literature, the researcher has observed that adolescent’s access to, delivery of and the quality of guidance counselling can in certain cases have an impact on student’s education. It may also impact attendance, participation, progression and their overall welling. The researcher therefore aims to investigate the levels of student guidance counselling and how it responds to young people’s needs, in the context of the Irish second level system, located in a rural post primary school. The research will be conducted in light of the new wellbeing programme and the partial restoration of guidance hours. With the removal of the ex-quota guidance counsellor hours in 2012, schools now have to provide guidance counselling hours from within their teacher allocation.

National and international research of adolescent wellbeing has found that personal issues are affecting a number of young people (Martin et al, 2006). Substantial research studies were conducted on the provision of guidance counselling, in the context of the Irish post primary sector (DES, 2019; Morgan and Hayes, 2011; Mc Coy et al, 2006), studies have also been carried out on the provision of personal/social counselling provision, Cooper (2004) carried out research in the context of the Scottish post primary sector however, this research is relevant and pertinent to this research study.

The research topic is of concern to the researcher on a personal and professional level. The potential insufficient access to adequate guidance counselling provision at second level may have a negative impact on student’s participation, progression to third level, further education/vocational training and employment. This may impact the student’s wellbeing, the school and wider local community (Coughlan et al., 2015; Mc Hugh, 2015; Cedefop 2014; Hooley and Dodd, 2015). The researcher has observed the growing need for adequate guidance counselling provision within the Irish post primary sector. Collaboration among all stakeholders in education is vital to the implementation of a WSA to guidance; this is of importance in the context of rural communities where service can be limited.
1.1.2 Whole School Approach to Guidance Counselling

Budget 2012 culminated in the removal of the ex-quota guidance counsellor in the post primary context. Guidance counselling is included in the school’s teacher allocation. The Irish second level education system is examinable, and points driven (Hearne and Galvin, 2014). The guidance counselling service is not examined, nor its success measured. Guidance Counselling incorporates the student’s holistic development (Watts and Kidd, 2000; Grove, 2004; Hearne et al., 2016). The DES (2005) acknowledges guidance counselling as a valuable resource in the Irish education system. The service supports student transition into higher, further education and the world of work. The DES advocate a WSA regarding the delivery of the service as outlined in the 1998 Education Act. Circulars (009/2012;) outlines how post primary schools may guarantee students obtain appropriate career guidance however, this happened at a time when guidance counselling hours were decreasing, post budget 2012.

The DES (2012) put forward proposals that pastoral care teams be created to support students’ personal needs, ICT and increased group work be used. Guidance counsellors were to remain accessible for crisis counselling. A WSA involves the sharing of information of student needs ensuring solutions can be more readily identified within the team framework.

The findings of the 2013 Review of Guidance Counselling Provision in Second Level Schools 2012-2013 carried out by NCGE, and a later National Audit conducted by the IGC, revealed that overall weekly practice hours for guidance were reduced by over 25%, with the reduction particularly experienced in one-to-one guidance counselling hours. This implies that on average, schools maintained just under 75% of practice hours. This was achieved through a reduction subjects provided by schools and/or increasing class sizes. However, it is encouraging that the Minister for Education committed to the restoration of 600 guidance posts, when addressing the IGC conference last year (Mitchell, 2018).

On average the loss for guidance provision is indicated at over 25%, schools have differing deficits to address to bring provision back to its original level. Schools that sustained a high percentage of provision for guidance throughout recent years are in a better position to complete restoration earlier than schools that had to make reductions on foot of Budget 2012.
The research school maintained a high percentage of provision and therefore fails within the former category of schools.

The DES (2012) put forward post budget 2012 a WSA to guidance counselling as a solution to delivering ‘appropriate guidance’ at second level. The WSA to guidance is a collaborative process where teachers, management, students and parents take responsibility to meet students’ needs regarding their guidance counselling requirements. It involves the sharing of information regarding student needs. Schools must collaboratively develop a whole-school guidance plan as a means of supporting student needs. All staff must recognise and ensure that guidance permeates every aspect of school life. Guidance plans should outline the school’s approach to guidance and how students can be supported in making choices and successful transitions in the personal and social, educational and career areas. The guidance plan should distinguish between the competencies available within the school to support a student in situations where referral to the Health services or advising parents on the need to consider individual referral to a medical professional is warranted (Circular 0008/2018).

The challenge for effective guidance counselling within this approach appears to involve the need for effective systems, processes and resources to minimize duplication and ensure the escalation of counselling priorities (DES, 2019).

The collaborative approach is even more essential in the context of rural communities, where crucial services may be diminished. Post primary schools networking with their local third level institutions and colleges of further education and training is most advantageous. Students regularly wish to continue their studies in their local communities (Bakke, 2018).

1.2 Positionality of the Researcher

Cohen et al., (2011) postulate the importance of researchers stipulating their role within the context of a research study. The researcher has worked as a mainstream teacher and Home School Community Liaison Officer in rural and urban post primary and primary schools for fifteen years. The researcher worked as a trainee Career Guidance teacher in the research school and has been appointed as a shared Guidance Counsellor in the school, commencing September 2019. Thomas (2013) highlights the importance of stating researchers’ position,
when an interpretivist approach is adopted. The researcher recognizes their own bias, through reflexivity, thereby assuring the validity of the study (Thomas, 2013).

1.3 Research Methodology

The research study employs a mixed methods approach. Thereby, encompassing interpretivism and positivism. The surveys were administered to Transition Year students whom the researcher was not teaching. These questionnaires produced quantitative information (Stead et al., 2012). Transition year students were randomly selected to participate in two focus groups, from within the cohort of students who completed the questionnaires. Their opinions and perceptions provided more qualitative data regarding the research topic.

1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of this research project is:

To explore adolescents’ views on the provision of guidance counselling in an Irish post-primary school.

Based on the aim, these two subsequent objectives were identified:

1. To explore the participant’s experience of engaging with the guidance counselling service.

2. To explore the participants’ suggestions for any improvements to the guidance counselling service (personal, educational or vocational) within the research school.
The following sub questions were also identified:

- Is the guidance counselling service available and accessible to all students?
- Is a Whole School Approach to guidance counselling implemented in the school?
- Are there challenges for the guidance counselling service?

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1 – Introduction

This chapter sets out the research study and the justification for it. It introduces the aim, objectives and methodology. It provides an overview of the six chapters and details the researcher’s positionality.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Chapter two takes a critical look at existing research relevant to the research topic. It looks at the historical context of guidance counselling in Ireland and the Irish education system. It explores the ‘Whole School Approach’ to guidance counselling. It highlights DEIS and rural Ireland the context for the research study.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

This chapter details the methodology and design that underpins the study. Methods of data collection and analysis are discussed. Research design considerations are discussed including reliability, validity, reflexivity and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 – Data Analysis and Findings

Chapter four provides an analysis of the findings. The themes are categorised into main themes and sub-themes.
Chapter 5 – Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings from the primary research and links it to the literature in chapter two.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

The key emergent themes are summarised and recommendations made that may be beneficial for future policy and practice.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the research topic and its context. Theory, policy and practice are examined. The research aim and objectives are identified. The structure of the research study is outlined. Chapter two will review the literature surrounding the research topic.
Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Given that guidance counselling is a facilitative process (National Guidance Forum, 2007) that promotes students’ holistic growth and development literature promoting the delivery and value of a quality guidance counselling service will be examined where by a whole school approach is central as recommended by the DES (2012). The literature review will include educational reports, guidance counselling policies, research and media articles, reports and publications from guidance counselling organisations. This chapter will be divided into three main areas. The first area explores the historical and current Irish education system and where guidance counselling fits within this system. The second area looks at the role of the guidance counsellor and a ‘Whole school approach’ to guidance counselling in the context of the Irish post-primary education sector. The third area investigates social justice, DEIS, educational disadvantage, availability and accessibility to guidance counselling in a rural setting.

2.1 Guidance at second level: The Historical background

Guidance counselling services were created in Irish post primary schools by the Department of Education in 1966. The service was initiated in response to the needs of industrialization in Ireland in the 1960s, a deceleration of emigration and the availability of a selection of careers for younger people (Shield and Lewis, 1993). This research reported the provision was of a high level, by international standards up to 1993. A full-time ex-quota Guidance Counsellor was assigned to post primary schools with more than 250 students. This limit was increased to 500 by 1993. Research carried out by the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC, 1990) show a variation in the provision of guidance across different school types. Whereby 5% of community/comprehensive schools, 18% of post primary schools, 34% of vocational schools having no guidance provision. Equally, (McCarthy, 1993) highlighted the need for an increased provision of a guidance service in vocational schools and post primary schools in rural areas, where there were less than 350 students.
Various policy reports and government documents have pointed out the importance of guidance counselling in Irish post primary schools. Indeed, the Green Paper on Education 1992 stipulates guidance in schools as “. . . all the services, programmes and activities within a school which are aimed at helping students to achieve an understanding of themselves and their potential”. It goes on to highlight “. . . the school works with parents to help their children develop positive attitudes and behaviour and to make satisfying and fulfilling educational and career choices” (1992, p. 8). Interestingly as well as emphasising parents in the process the Green Paper also highlights the process as “on-going and developmental” which address the following areas:

1. Appraisal and assessment – in order to “. . . enable the school to understand the needs of the student as well as helping students and their parents to understand themselves better”

2. Information – in order to “enable students to make informed decision about educational, vocational and career choices”; and

3. Counselling, a service “. . . which would be available to all students, but particularly to those experiencing learning or personal difficulties and those in special situations in the school, such as those from disadvantaged communities or those with disabilities, potential early-school leavers and students at significant transitional points within their school careers” (1992, p. 107).

The Report of the National Education Convention emphasises a number of key areas regarding guidance provision in post primary schools. It emphasises the importance of educational guidance at junior and senior cycle, the importance of increased access to psychological service and greater integration of services for teachers and psychologists (Coolahan, 1994). Guidance issues were also detailed in the White Paper on Education (1995) mainly in reference back to the Report of the National Convention (Coolahan, 1994).

Personal development, vocational preparation, educational/academic development and options have remained the primary themes of guidance counselling since its introduction in the 1960s (Jeffers, 2002). This broad, elective curriculum and role within the school context remains a feature of the guidance policy.
2.1.1. Education in Ireland

The Irish post-primary education is made up of a three-year junior cycle programme and a two or three-year senior cycle programme. The junior cycle curriculum and marking system has been reformed with the introduction of the new Junior Cycle programme. The Leaving Certificate programme is taken in senior cycle, subjects are available at both higher and ordinary levels. The Leaving Certificate Applied is a programme focusing on preparing students for the world of work, emphasising work placement and projects. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme is a version of the traditional Leaving Certificate focusing on technical subjects (DES, 2004). The Transition Year Programme is a one-year programme that promotes the personal, social, vocational and educational development of students and preparation for their role as participative and responsible members of society (DES, 1994). Students proceed into fifth year and pursue one of the Leaving Certificate programmes.

The Irish second level education system has a huge emphasis on the points students obtain by sitting the State Examinations (Hearne and Galvin, 2014). Schools are dominated by the States Leaving Certificate system (Leahy et al., 2017). It is crucial that the holistic development of students is safeguarded (Grove, 2004; Hearne et al., 2016).

2.1.2. Current Policy and Provision

The Department of Education and Science sets guidelines for post-primary schools regarding the provision of guidance services and allocation of resources. It is still up to the school’s discretion how the guidance service is resourced, allocated and rolled out to students. Having stated that the provision of guidance is on a statutory footing, under the Education Act (1998). The Department of Education and Science guidelines (2005) stipulates the school guidance programme should reflect the needs of both junior and senior cycle students and should provide a balance between the personal, social, educational and career guidance offered. It determines the aim of guidance as an ongoing process involving a wide range of activities, including information giving, counselling and assessment. Post-primary schools are required to provide students with:
Clear information regarding subject choices;
Awareness of the subject content, skills and competencies acquired, and the study demands of the subject.
Opportunity to explore their interests, subject choices and how they are linked to career areas.
Assistance choosing educational programmes offered by the school (JSP, TY, LCVP, LCA, regular LC);
Assistance identifying their own effective learning styles and in the development of effective study and note-taking, exam techniques and time management skills;
Guidance on educational, vocational and career options available;
Encouragement to explore a wide range of educational and career choices including non-traditional careers

(DES, 2005).

The Department of Education and Science also proposes guidelines for schools in the area of personal and social education. They determine the contribution guidance offers to personal and social education to allow students to:

Recognise their achievements and talents, and describe their strengths and weaknesses;
Establish coping strategies to deal with stress, personal and social issues and the challenges of adolescents and adulthood;
Develop interpersonal skills and the needs of others;
Develop decision making skills and how to make informed choices;
Make successful transitions from primary to post-primary and from post-primary to further/higher education, training and into the world of work

(DES, 2005).

To conclude the Department (2005) point out the importance of developing strategies to establish and enhance motivation and self-esteem among students. They go on to suggest guidance programmes may support an inclusive and dedicated school policy through the early identification of students at risk of early school leaving and the development of school
supports for these students through school attendance strategies, development of awareness among the students of the consequences of ESL.

The Department acknowledges guidance as central to the transition of students from primary to post-primary, progression through junior cycle and senior cycle and the progression from senior cycle to further education, training or entry into employment (DES, 2005).

Research of members of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors was carried out in 2003. This report looked at activities of Guidance Counsellors in post primary schools. Other historical studies have detailed specific areas of the role of the Guidance Counsellor (Hannan et al., 1983; Shield and Lewis, 1993; McCoy et al., 2006). This research highlighted a gap in the understanding of the role of the Guidance Counsellor, in the Irish context. In addition, it discovered a lack of information regarding the roll out of guidance services in Irish post primary schools. The research also emphasized the gap in the information available on the content of guidance programmes and how Guidance Counsellors deliver the information to students.

The overall policy framework for guidance in schools is provided for in Section 9(c) of the Education Act requiring a school to “ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choice” and “promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students….in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school” (DES, 1998 p. 4). Within the post-primary sector, the guidance policy framework is based on a whole-school approach. A school guidance plan provides a framework for the delivery of the school guidance programme. This is designed to guarantee a structured response to the education, vocational and the personal needs of the student. The Department of Education and Skills indicated that a whole-school approach involves schools implementing guidance plans which “should outline the school’s approach to guidance generally and how students can be supported and assisted in making choices and successful transitions in the personal, social, education and career areas.” (DES, 2019 p.9)

In an Irish context, guidance counselling is “holistic and integrationist, placing the client at the centre of the process in a very immediate and relevant way. It encompasses the three areas of social/personal counselling, vocational guidance counselling and educational guidance counselling.” (DES, 2019 p. 26). Research shows guidance counsellors spend about
half of their time on career guidance, however, a significant amount of time is also spent on other areas of counselling.

The DES (2019) recognises the value of these integrated roles and supports a holistic approach given the importance of personal skills and attributes as well as qualifications. However, it is important that there is also a “sufficient focus on career guidance and advice” (DES, 2019 p. 26).

2.2 Guidance Counselling

Guidance in schools “refers to a range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence, that assist students to develop self-management skills which will lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives. It encompasses the three separate, but interlinked, areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance” (DES; 2005, pg. 4).

The National Guidance Forum (2007) describes guidance counselling as a facilitative procedure, where individuals take control of managing their personal, educational, social and vocational choices. Guidance benefits students preparing for transition to 3rd level education, it helps reduce the number of ESL and prepares students for the world of work (OECD, 2004).

Guidance counselling is a process that helps individuals develop and discover their own potential and abilities (National Development Plan 2000-2006). Effective guidance counselling contributes to many economic benefits, including increased motivation, self-confidence, self-efficacy, greater recognition of the benefits of further education (Hughes et al, 2002).

Career guidance, at post-primary lays the foundations of positive social, educational and career development of students (Owen et al, 2015). As a result, the resilience of the student is enhanced. The students evolve into problem solvers, more self-reliant and independent (Basset et al. 2014). Therefore, this decreases the possibility of unemployment, contributing
positively to society, the economy through decreased numbers of young people claiming unemployment benefits

The guidance counselling services on offer in the context of Irish post primary setting are delivered in two different entities, guidance and counselling. The term ‘guidance’ is generally associated with the Irish education system (Ryan, 2000, p. 11). It is mainly classroom based and delivered to year groups. Classroom based guidance relates to educational and vocational choices, it aims to enhance the student’s information, communications and ICT skills and reinforce student’s personal, academic, vocational and occupational skills while preparing them for life after secondary education. It relates to adolescent’s personal and social development, in other words the Wellbeing Programme.

Counselling however, is more confidential and person. Counselling is collaborative, led by the client and facilitated by the counsellor. Students or clients are encouraged to name thoughts and explore feelings. Counselling aims to help students establish skills sets to help master challenges they may face further down life’s journey (DES, 2005; NCGE, 2011). Students will not be unable to concentrate on their educational, if they are dealing with personal and/or social issues impinging on their lives (McCoy et al., 2014).

2.2.1 Delivery of Guidance in an Irish Post Primary school

Guidance in post-primary schools is a whole school activity that is integrated into all school programmes. Guidance in schools “refers to a range of learning experiences provided in developmental sequence, that assist students to develop self-management skills which will lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives. It encompasses the three separate, but interlinked areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance.” (DES, 2005, pg. 4).

The National Guidance Forum (2007a) definition advocates that guidance counselling should encompass the importance of academic and personal development and recommends student holistic development while at second level (Watt and Kidd, 2000).

A guidance programme should be part of a school plan and identifies the central role of the Guidance Counsellor as well as the contribution of staff. The Whole School Guidance Plan
should take account of the needs of all Junior and Leaving Certificate students. Guidance also forms part of the curriculum in the Transition Year Programme (TYP), the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). (DES, 2005).

2.2.2 Influences on Learners’ Career Choice

Evidence on the influences on student career choices in Ireland highlights the importance of family and friends. There are however, other important influences, including work experience, guidance counsellors and other teachers. In evaluating career choice influences, DES (2019) believes there is a distinct role provided by guidance counsellors. In this context they support the view outlined in a submission (IGC submission to Indecon, 2019) which suggested that “the role of the guidance counsellor can be as mediator and intermediary between the known and the unknown and to help enlarge their world.” (DES, 2019 p.19). In examining the key influencers, the evidence shows that this varies by socio-economic group. Those from the lowest income groups are less likely to have consulted with their parents than those from higher incomes. Generally, individuals in lower income groupings tend to receive less advice from families and may therefore be in greatest need of access to Guidance Counsellors which draws attention to the potential significance of guidance in breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage (Cedefop, 2014).

While working as Home School Liaison Officer the researcher concurs with evidence showing individuals from lower socio-economic groups tend to rely more on the career guidance service for advice and information and rather to a lesser extent on advice and information from parents/guardians and extended family (McCoy et al, 2006).

The researcher has been working closely with students and families to access further education and training and assist with the applications for grants and access programmes to third level. The researcher has found that students and their families require assistance with the application process. From the practicalities of access to the internet, web-based tools, trust issues with confidential information/tax forms, deadlines and references.
Students’ socio-economic background may be considered when making vocational, educational or career choices and could impact on which college they attend (Crosnoe and Müller, 2015). With rising rental prices and housing shortages in Irish cities, it is difficult for students from rural settings to attend colleges, given the high living costs. Even with financial assistance some students are not able to attend colleges, due to the high costs (Donoghue, 2015).

Within the wide career guidance counselling service, education strengthens achievement and retention (Leahy et al, 2016). Student’s from lower income groupings are facilitated with personal counselling, at post primary level, within the resources available to their school.

2.2.3 Career guidance as an intervention to address Early School Leaving

Cedefop (2014) highlights that education and career guidance play vital roles in student engagement, retention and motivation. It provides students with information regarding further educational options as well as employment, it also assists identifying career interests. Guidance counsellors help students to develop skills to make informed decisions, manage choices and take responsibility for personal development. Consequently, quality guidance aids the decrease of ‘at risk’ students leaving education, without qualifications. Research shows that ‘career information and guidance have become increasingly important as ways of reducing uncertainty of making choices that lead to unfavourable results, such as unemployment and social exclusion’ (Lundahl and Nisson, 2009 p. 27).

The IGC (2016) makes reference to the status of guidance counselling in schools since the reallocation of the provision in 2012. The cuts to guidance hours have generated what the IGC call an “uneven and disjointed service provision” (IGC p. 8). They go onto state that disadvantaged students have been the most hurt by these cuts. Research shows guidance counsellors are experiencing increased pressure regarding resource and time constraints (ASTI, 2013; IGC, 2014, 2016).

Research also shows there is a rise in relation to youth mental health and the issues that affect them (ReachOut Ireland, 2017). Just one third of teenagers rate their mental health as good. 62% of teenagers surveyed said their mental health was poor. Children from disadvantaged
backgrounds in Ireland are more likely to have problems with their health, education and emotional wellbeing by the age of 13, compared with their more advantaged peers.

Dr. Murtagh (psychiatrist St. Patricks Mental Health Services) stated “Each year, we see young people with exam-related stress and anxiety. In recent years, we have noticed an increase in the run up to the mocks exams as well as the State exams. We see referrals from Junior as well as Leaving Cert students” (Irish Examiner, July 2019).

These issues currently experienced by students are not been addressed in an expedient manner, mainly due to the restricted resources which is affecting access services and referrals to CAMHs, Youth Mental Health Services, NEPs (statutory agencies). In some counties non statutory and charity organisations like Jigsaw and Crib are filling the gap left as a result of waiting lists and staffing shortages.

Within the European context the growing importance of career guidance in preventing ESL and assisting adolescents who already show signs of disengagement from education is clear to educational authorities. Indeed, the European Commission recommends affording special attention to career guidance education as a means of tackling ESL and suggests countries require well-developed guidance systems (Cedefop, 2014)

2.3.4 ‘Hope’ and student career attainment

According to the literature stimulating hope can have a positive effect on students. Hope is a reflection of student’s own faith in their abilities to reach their goals (Snyder et al, 2003). Snyder et al (2003) findings show students see hope as being offered by a supportive person. It is helping students achieve goals, engendering self-belief and not belittling their goals. The researcher observed the Guidance Counsellor help and support students to break down their goals into achievable steps and engender hope. The researcher observed the guidance service rolled out in an equitable manner to all students, where importance was placed on helping to expand student’s minds. Thereby, increasing student expectations and self-belief. This theme emerges later in data collection, where students identify encouragement from Class Tutors as motivational at senior cycle.
This approach to guidance counselling illustrates counsellors are more in tune with the policies of the NCGE (2004) and IGC (2008) than the International perspective (OECD, 2004).

Evidence from the My World Survey (Dooley & Fitzpatrick, 2012), highlights the positive influence that ‘One Good Adult’ can have in the lives of young people. We know that the presence of OGA in a young person’s life has a positive influence on their mental health. Be it a parent, teacher, football coach, we all have a role in supporting the young people around us. 70% of young people growing up in Ireland today said they receive high or very high support from OGA. These young people are more connected to others, more confident, future looking and better able to cope with difficulties than those young people who reported that they did not have the support of OGA (One Good Adult).

2.2.5 Parental influence

An OECD study, ‘Parents as Partners in Schooling’ (1987) cites the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme as ‘a good example of innovative central government initiatives based in schools can raise the educational level of adults involved and result in a general sense of empowerment in the local community. Parental involvement, especially in areas of socio-economic deprivation does not just benefit the children and the school, it is a crucial aspect of lifelong learning”

(OECD, 1997 p 49.)

This collaborative family, student and community support is unique to the Irish Education System (DES, 2006; Conaty, 2002; Cullen 2000; Conaty 1999).

The researcher’s observations demonstrate the array of ways student’s progression is being enhanced by the Guidance Counsellor in collaboration with parents/guardians, teachers, Pastoral Care Team, Year Heads/Class Tutor, HSCL/SCP and management.

Parents are singled out as being influential regarding the career decision making process (NCGE, 2004; McCoy et al., 2014) and being “integral partners in the education of their
child” (NCGE, 2004 p. 149). McCoy et al. (2014) note that parents are the primary authority for students regarding education and career choices at second level, they are rarely a decisive influence.

It has been argued that students themselves should be more involved in the development of the guidance plan in their school and the guidance curriculum through exerting their influence via mechanism as the Student Council. They can make known their views on aspects of the guidance programme (NCGE, 2004).

The role and influence of the wider external community is important to guidance counselling and especially in the context of a whole school approach to the guidance counselling (NCGE, 2004). External agencies such as referral for personal counselling and support, work placements, employment that inspire or strengthen students’ career learning, developmental competencies, information on third level education, training and further education (Basset et al., 2014; NCGE, 2004).

2.2.6 Influence of Career Guidance

When looking at what mechanisms have the greatest impact, it is useful to examine the evidence on what impact, if any, career guidance has on student outcomes as reported by students. An analysis of the evidence on how important individual appointments with guidance counsellors are in helping students decide what to do after school (where students accessed the guidance service) shows that 83% of learners recognized such appointments as important or very important in helping learners’ decisions. Of greater significance is that such appointments were more important for learners from lower income groups (DES, 2019).

As part of the research, Indecon developed econometric modelling to predict the marginal outcomes of the impact of guidance counselling. While caution is exercised in interpreting, what economists refer to as ‘self-selection bias’, the data indicates potential impacts across income types and gender. For example, among males in the lowest income group, the predicted probability of advancing to higher/further education increases from about 60% to 81% for those who received one-to-one counselling, relative to those who received no guidance counselling. This percentage difference is significant.
From the researcher’s professional experience, it has been observed students from lower socio-economic groups tend to rely on the guidance service for information, advice, advocacy and direction. During the focus groups data collection, students discussed the need for greater access to career guidance and 1-to-1 meetings to address the four key areas of guidance.

The results suggest that guidance counselling is an effective mechanism to provide career information and impartial advice. This is consistent with research completed in other countries which suggested that guidance counselling was one of the most effective modalities for providing career intervention (Whiston et al., 2003). Also, of note is to be effective, guidance counselling should be structured. There is extensive international research on the best ways to organise guidance counselling interviews (Ali and Graham, 1996; Bimrose et al., 2005; Brown et al., 2000).

Guidance Counsellors can act as agents of change, showing students possibilities different from familial or societal expectations. Therefore, empowering students to overcome challenges, students begin to comprehend they do not work in a ‘social vacuum’ (Law, 2010 p. 15).

2.3 A Whole School Approach to Guidance Counselling

As stated earlier, guidance counselling began in Ireland in 1966 at post primary level and hours were allocated to school on an ex-quota basis in 1972 (Hearne and Galvin, 2014). Guidance counsellors were allocated outside of their student teacher ratio (DES, 2009). This has remained in place until the budget of 2012 when guidance counselling hours were removed from an ex-quota basis. Guidance hours are allocated from within the school’s teacher allocation (DES, 2012; IGC, 2014, 2016). Research indicates guidance counsellors are experiencing huge pressure in terms of resources and time constraints (ASTI, 2013; IGC, 2014, 2016).

The notion of a Whole School Approach to guidance counselling is not new (Sheil and Lewis, 1993). The IGC (2008) acknowledged there is a curricular component which could be
delivered by mainstream teachers. Originally the Whole School Approach developed into policy following the Education Act (1998), promoting schools to develop a guidance plan, stirred by the guidance counsellor (Hearne and Galvin, 2014).

Following on from the cutbacks in 2012 the circular 0009/2012 was released, highlighting the importance of a WSA to guidance counselling. The circular recommended services to strengthen within post primary schools:

1. Encourage students use of ICT career tools (Careers Portal, Qualifax),
2. Teachers may deliver curriculum elements of the guidance programme,
3. Delivery of personal, educational, career and vocational in a class room setting,
4. Pastoral care teams to support personal needs of students,
5. Guidance counsellor to be available for 1-to-1 counselling with students as required (DES, 2012).

The Whole School Approach is collaborative with the Guidance Counsellor central to the process, instrumental in planning and delivering the programme. Staff too share a responsibility for its implementation (Sheil and Lewis, 1993; NCGE, 2004; DES, 2009, 2012; 2019; Gysbers 2013).

Mainstream teachers who assist in delivering the Whole School Approach may find themselves dealing with students who may be experiencing personal issues (anxiety, identity, bereavement, depression…). Therefore, it is vital the Guidance Counsellor is available to assist students with personal problems. Guidance Counsellors or Chaplains are the only trained staff members in the context of post primary schools, adequately trained to deal with complex issues. The counselling aspect of guidance must be administered by trained personnel with the appropriate competencies and professionalism (NGF, 2007).

The guidance plan in the research school emphasises the key role teachers play in delivering the guidance programme. They have roles in the following areas:

- Providing students with information and expertise on both the content and demands of their subjects
- Providing students with guidelines on study skills and techniques in their particular subjects
- Developing awareness in their students of the skills and competences acquired by studying their subject
- Supporting students in relation to subject choice and levels for both Junior Cert and Leaving Cert
- Indicating to senior cycle students the content and study commitments of particular subjects in further and higher education courses.

Teachers have a role, as part of the WSA in relation to exam techniques and coping with exam nerves. The pre-Leaving Certificate guidance curriculum is comprehensive, covering relating abilities and interests, self-management skills, study habits, research and ICT skills, information on further study, career options, preparation for the world of work, career investigations, CV preparation, job applications, planning visits to colleges and in-school visits from ITs, Universities and Colleges of Further Education. ESL is explored and the consequences of leaving school early, job search skills and entry to higher and further education. Information evenings for parents/guardians are provided on senior cycle options. The research school provides two guidance classes per week to senior cycle students on a rotation basis (four weeks).

Hearne and Galvin (2014) report mainstream teachers did not acknowledge the value of a WSA or feel part of it. Sampson et al., (2011) suggest information is lacking regarding teachers training needs, in order to support the delivery of guidance. A high percentage of students named teachers as a source of advice and information regarding subject choice, career related queries and study techniques during data collection for this research study.

Pastoral care staff and teachers are getting more involved in the delivery of the guidance curriculum, as put forward by the DES (2012, 2014, 2019) however, more than 10% of schools indicated they had unqualified personnel working as Guidance Counsellors (IGC, 2014).

Guidance Counsellors are essential in supporting students with career decision making (Savickas, 2008). This is particularly evident surrounding student’s decisions in relation to
CAO, EUNICAS, PLCs, UCAS, SUSI, apprenticeships and job-based training and education. The DES (2012, 2014, 2019) promotes teachers help deliver information pertaining to further and higher education and career choices. However, it is the Guidance Counsellor who is best equipped with the required skill set and qualifications to explore career choices.

Guidance counsellors are significantly involved in aiding students explore their educational and training needs and choices (IGC, 2007). This process usually starts with assessing students in first year. Theses assessments help identify learning difficulties (DES, 2009). Guidance Counsellors are educated to administer psychometric tests to identify “abilities, aptitudes, life roles, interests, personal values, attitudes, educational achievements, skills and other relevant information (IGC, 2007, p. 12). Guidance Counsellors act in a professional and an ethical manner when carrying out these tests and comply with the IGC, The Psychological Society of Ireland, The Teaching Council and legislation, which regulate the profession.

2.3.1 Quality and Impact of Career Information

A key issue in evaluating the sources of career information is the quality of the information. Research shows that only a minority of Counsellors are satisfied with the quality of available information on self-employment, apprenticeships, and employment trends (DES, 2019). This suggests a gap in access to this area of career information. Despite the labour market information which is available from the SOLAS Skills and Labour Market Research Unit, Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, and from Regional Skills Fora. The perceived gaps in access to labour market information have been confirmed by the research carried out by the Department of Education and Science (DES, 2019). While most learners were satisfied with the quality of information in relation to the range of courses, as well as how to apply for such courses, the fact that only a minority were satisfied with some other aspects of career information is noteworthy. Access to wider career information, other than on continuation to higher education options, is vital to ensure an awareness of the multiple pathways into the labour market. This lack of information regarding apprenticeships and self-employment is highlighted by students in later chapters.
In terms of the impact of specific career guidance mechanisms, Guidance Counsellors were surveyed as to their views on these mechanisms. Results suggest that as well as access to Guidance Counsellors, access to opportunities for relevant work experience was perceived as being significant. Highlighting the importance of ensuring there are structures to enable employers effectively engage (DES, 2019).

2.3.2 The role of Online Tools

The use of online resources in the provision of career guidance tools is recognised as significant (DES, 2019). The OECD’s Career Guidance Policy Review (2004) outlined the role which can be played by ICT in delivery and the accessibility benefits of online guidance resources. Such tools (Careers Portal, Qualifax) can offer an important role in the delivery of career guidance. There are, however, some limitations to the use of online tools on their own. For example, lack of skills and training in the use of online tools may negatively impact accessibility, particularly for disadvantaged learners. Online tools should be seen as complementary, rather than substitutes for career guidance. Therefore, while “quality online tools in themselves do not guarantee quality career guidance” they have a potentially important role to play (DES, 2019 p.40).

2.3.3 Role of Guidance in Supporting Student Personal Needs

“The role of the guidance counsellor is to engage in personal, educational and vocational counselling with clients throughout the lifespan” (IGC, 2007, p.3; IGC, 2016a). The DES (2012) argued at the time of the removal of the ex-quota guidance hours that schools should make available adequate time for one-to-one guidance counselling. With second level Principals having control of timetabling, research shows that there is insufficient support and time for personal/social counselling for students (ASTI, 2013; IGC, 2016b; NCGE, 2013). According to the IGC (2013), a reduction of 51.4% in one-to-one personal counselling has taken place in the interim. The IGC highlighted how vital the availability of personal/social counselling was and is to students, as far back as 2008. Wayman (2012) indicates how discouraging it is to witness the reduction in personal counselling at second level even
though, there is increasing demand amongst adolescents. However, as stated it is encouraging the Minister has committed to the restoration of guidance counselling hours.

### 2.3.4 Guidance Counselling in rural post primary schools

The demand on limited resources is keenly felt in rural post primary schools. The reduction to the provision of personal counselling has led to the situation where guidance counsellors are dealing with crisis counselling (DES, 2012; Hays and Morgan, 2011; Hearne et al., 2015). Griffin et al., (2011) reported that Guidance Counsellor employed in rural communities were reported to have students under their care who accessed the guidance service the least in particular, for career information.

The Central Statistics Office (2016) reported that rural areas have the lowest profile of third level education. Children from agricultural backgrounds have the lowest rate of participation in education (25.9%). Rural adolescents are looking at economic hardship, as a result of low levels of career potential in their communities (Marshall, 2002).

Nolan and Maitre (2008) highlight the importance of educational attainment to succeed in the labour market. Access programmes to third level such as the HEAR and DARE schemes and DEIS initiatives at second level have helped to some degree to break the cycle of intergenerational education disadvantage. These programmes indicate the importance of collaboration between schools, home and the community to engender educational attainment and progression.

ICT is recommended in the provision of the post primary guidance programme. Websites such as Careers Portal, Qualifax support students and counsellors in the rolling out of the guidance curriculum. Students can assess the CAO, HEAR, DARE and SUSI applications via the internet. However, the unreliability of broadband and lack of coverage in rural areas is hindering student access to online resources and applications. Weckler (2016) highlights the fact that in some rural areas one is not able to send or receive emails. Information booklets are made available to post primary schools. However, the researcher has observed parents overwhelmed with the amount of information given at parent information evenings. Parents have suggested increased scaffolding by the school to assist students and parents with
the application process. Some parents communicated they accessed confidential, impartial advice from the Citizens Advice Bureau and HSCL service in relation to college applications.

2.4 DEIS

The aim of the DEIS Action Plan (DES, 2005) is to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities are prioritised and effectively addressed. At its core the plan is comprised of:

- A standardised system for identifying and regularly reviewing levels of disadvantage.
- An integrated School Support (SSP) which will bring together and build upon existing interventions for schools and school clusters with a concentrated level of educational disadvantage. The differences between urban and rural disadvantage will be taken into account in targeting actions.

A new DEIS plan, due within the decade aims to achieve the national average targets for school retention (DES, 2016). Approximately 4,500 students leave school before going into 5th Year at post primary (Murray, 2013).

The research school is a DEIS second level school and receives supports and funding commensurate with its categorisation.

2.4.1 Guidance Counselling Service in the context of a DEIS rural school.

Guidance counselling service in economic disadvantaged and rural areas need to be supported. This is underlining the findings of the DES (2006; 2019) which highlight the requirement of guidance education at junior cycle level. Guidance is now a requirement of the new Junior Cycle reform. Guidelines are given by the NCCA for wellbeing at Junior cycle. The new programme aims to support schools in planning and developing a coherent Wellbeing programme. The Framework for Junior Cycle (DES, 2015) states that guidance
provision may be included in the hours available for wellbeing in recognition of the unique contribution that guidance can make to the promotion of student’s wellbeing. The Circular letter 0015/2017 entitled ‘Arrangements for the Implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle’ states the school’s Junior cycle programme ‘must include guidance education’. In light of these guidelines the research school introduced a wellbeing programme for first and third years in 2017/2018 under the guidance provision.

The Home School Community Liaison and School Completion Project workers are crucial in providing supports and creating links with parents and the wider community. The contribution of DEIS within the context of the holistic model of career guidance cannot be underestimated. DEIS provides extra funding and supports for disadvantaged students, such as breakfast and reading clubs, exam tuition, trips, classes, books, clothing, referrals to external agencies. These supports help to assist students fulfil their potential and offer possibilities to students that may not be otherwise available. DEIS endeavours to break down the barriers and challenges faced by students. It’s supports offer a whole school student support framework (DEIS, 2017).

Regarding the provision of guidance counselling the researcher observed the Guidance Counsellor work collaboratively and receive support from staff and management in relation to student needs, including targeted students under the DEIS programme. Staff and management illustrated sensitivity, confidentiality and understanding towards students.

2.4.2 Equity of Access In Education

As stated previously, under the 1998 Education Act (Section 9c) post primary schools must ‘ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices’. A Whole School Approach is recommended to achieve this goal and ensure students secure their statutory entitlement. Research shows that there is evidence to support that the delivery of a WSA is lacking in some instances (Hearne et al., 2016; Hearne and Galvin, 2014).

Social Justice is often brought into discussions of services in disadvantaged areas. Social justice involves people living in equal relationships and free from oppression (Irving, 2015).
The requirement of highlighting social justice in the context of rural education systems is important where youth population are in decline (CSO, 2016). Broadband and other vital services are limited. Social justice theories indicate rural areas are challenged by the distribution, industry and consequently resource allocation (Cuervo, 2016).

There is an argument for greater investment in rural Ireland allowing accessibility to education and guidance counselling. Rural education is not sufficiently resourced and consequently resources are allocated equitably (Cuervo, 2016). However, DEIS initiatives and funding are assisting some post primary school to address this imbalance (DEIS, 2016).

The population in rural Ireland is mainly made up of the elderly, with a decreasing youth profile (Boland, 2017). Therefore, enrolment in rural post primary schools is decreasing. A direct effect of this is guidance counselling may be less resourced and accessible in rural, due to the fact that it is based on teacher allocation.

### 2.5 Conclusion

Under the Education Act, 1998, Section 9c it is a statutory requirement that second level schools in Ireland offer appropriate guidance to all students. It is advocated that second level schools provide this service from within its teacher allocated hours and delivery the service from a WSA (DES, 2012). Research shows Guidance Counsellors view insufficient hours allocated to guidance and in particular available time for personal counselling. This issue of insufficient guidance hours is discussed later in the data analysis (McCoy et al., 2006).

Delivering the guidance counselling programme entails integration of personal, social, educational and the career elements within the two crucial elements of guidance and counselling (DES, 2005b). Therefore, the trained Guidance Counsellor is required to take the lead regarding the guidance counselling curriculum at second level (Grove, 2004). The Guidance Counsellor is vital to the delivery of the service and ensuring it is delivered from a WSA, making sure an adequate up-to-date plan is in place to deliver the programme. The WSA with support from management and staff is viewed as a strength in the research school. There is a structured guidance plan in operation, which is periodically reviewed.
The Irish model of quality holistic guidance counselling must be continued. In recent years there has been influence from European and International policy to sway the provision of this holistic counselling. Research findings recently released reference the growing number of adolescents suffering from mental health issues (HSE, 2019).

The DES Action Plan for Education (2016) and the Review of Guidance Counselling (DES 2019) report looks for increased emphasis on the labour market however, the DES should retain the current good practice which balances understanding personal counselling, the labour market and educational/vocational development.

From discussions with the one full-time Guidance Counsellor in the research school. There is concern regarding resources available for the guidance provision. Enrolment numbers are growing. The Guidance Counsellor expressed concern regarding capacity to deliver a comprehensive guidance service to all students. It was acknowledged that the presence of a full-time Chaplain in the school and the pastoral care system (Class Tutors, Year Heads, Care Team, Home Community Liaison Officer, Mentoring) assist the guidance service. Implementing the school’s guidance plan is viewed as a challenge by the Guidance Counsellor, in light of the new Junior Wellbeing Programme. The Counsellor expressed her view that she spends a large portion of time on third level applications and meeting senior students. In recent years the Guidance Counsellor has been obliged to meet students in groups to discuss testing feedback, subject choice and senior cycle programmes.

These concerns are born out later in the data analysis chapter when students voice their concerns regarding time constraints and the day to day demands on the guidance service.

Guidance Counsellors are the only trained professionals, at second level who can conduct career counselling and, in some cases, crisis counselling (DES, 2012; Savickas, 2008). This research study aims to explore adolescent views on the provision of guidance counselling in the research school and adolescent suggestions for possible improvements. The next chapter will explain the research methodology used.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to outline the primary and secondary research questions underpinning this research study. The chapter will outline the methodology and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the methods employed for the purpose of the research. This chapter will explore analysis methods, data collection and outline the paradigm. Furthermore, it will address access to participants, validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethical issues.

3.1 Research Question

The primary aim of this research study is:

“To explore adolescents’ views on the provision of guidance counselling in an Irish post primary school.”

Based on the primary aim, the following two secondary aims were identified:

1. To explore the participants’ experiences of engaging with the guidance counselling service within the research school.

2. To explore the participants’ suggestions for any improvement to the guidance counselling service (personal, educational or vocational) within the research school.

The following sub questions were identified:

- Is the guidance counselling service available and accessible to all students?
- Is a Whole School Approach to guidance counselling implemented in the school?
- Are there challenges for the guidance service?
Research can be undertaken for a wide variety of reasons, including an evaluation, an investigation or to progress professional practice. Research is not about proving something, instead it is about searching for a factual answer to a real question (Thomas, 2013).

“A piece of research is built around a question, it is not build around a method” (Thomas, 2013, p.43).

3.2 Methodology and Methods

Although quantitative research methods are dominant, qualitative research methods have gained attention recently (Stead et al., 2012). Research has shown that the majority of guidance counselling research are still carried out using the quantitative research paradigm (Sampson et al., 2014; Whiston et al., 2013). The researcher identified both quantitative and qualitative paradigms in a mixed method approach as the most appropriate to answer the primary and secondary research questions. There is a need for methodological pluralism in guidance counselling research (Kidd, 2006). Therefore, this will entail both positivism and interpretivism. Positivist and interpretivist are the two research paradigms most associated with guidance counselling research. These research paradigms are attributed to:

- Ontology – what the researcher is looking for,
- Epistemology – how the researcher looks for it,
- Methodology – how the researcher plans to find out things (Thomas, 2013).

3.2.1 Positivist Paradigm

The positivist paradigm can be described as “observable, controllable and measurable” (Basit, 2010, p.14). Historically, career guidance research has been based on a positivist paradigm (Savickas, 2011). There is too much emphasis on positivism in guidance policies (Brimrose and Hearne, 2012). The positivist approach has been questioned regarding its inadequacy in clarifying how people live and interpret the world (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013).
Positivism research is quantitative and produces figures that are representative of the population from the selected sample. Therefore, positivism can be critiqued for being mechanical in its data collection and not recognising human nature as being complex (Cohen et al., 2011). It is limited by not viewing reality as ‘multiple’ (Bryman, 2012). Consequently, only employing the positivist approach would not benefit the study, where student views are upfront and central.

Bryman (2012) states that qualitative research is influenced by interpretivism and allows researchers to observe events through the eyes of the participants. This study’s primary aim being to explore the views of adolescents in relation to the guidance counselling provision and secondly examine their experiences and perceptions of the service, the researcher thinks this research approach is suitable and warranted. A qualitative approach allows the participant’s freedom to voice their options and ideas regarding the research topic, rather than the researcher suggesting how they experienced engaging with the service. Qualitative research gives participants the opportunity to voice their opinions (Stead et al., 2012). However, relying solely on the more scientific method is unjustifiable (Thomas, 2013).

### 3.2.2 Interpretivist Paradigm

The interpretivism approach originated in America, the sociologists George Herbert Mead was an advocate (Thomas, 2013). Interpretivist based research is qualitative in nature and frequently consists of words (Punch, 2009).

Interpretivist research looks at individual’s ideas, interests and their take on life. It relies on thick description, richness and groundedness (Thomas, 2013).

Qualitative researchers purport human behaviour is examinable when the researcher is subjective in their stance (Cohen et al., 2011). This may entail your emotions and values influencing your interpretations. Therefore, researcher bias and subjectivity may creep in. Another limitation of the interpretivist approach is the results may be treated as general, as reported from the researcher’s point of view (Denscombe, 2007).
In order to portray a balanced approach to examining the participants’ views and ideas in relation to the research topic, the researcher decided both approaches be employed. Mixed method approaches allow for richer, stronger data (Yin, 2018).

3.3 Research Methodology

Research methodology demonstrates the researcher’s philosophical stance, paradigm choice and methodology underpinning the study (positivist/quantitative, interpretivist/qualitative).

Yin (2018) put forward that researchers have grounds for using a mixed method approach thereby merging quantitative with qualitative data in a single study. The research methodology does not just present the method but discusses the methods and a justification for using them. Methods are the practical tools used to collect and analyse the primary data. Informed by the methodological approached adopted (Thomas, 2013). Positivist methods should provide quantifiable data together with interpretivist methods yielding descriptive perspectives.

3.3.1 Access to and Sampling of Participants

Once ethical approval was granted from the University of Limerick in April 2019, the post primary school was asked to take part in the research study via the gatekeeper and the guidance counsellor. The researcher had been doing her practicum placement in the school at the time. The gate keeper (School Principal) was given a letter containing all the relevant information regarding the research topic (See appendix A). Providing the Principal with clear research questions, in a professional way promoted access and established a professional, positive relationship from the start (Robson, 2007).

Information letters and consent forms were distributed to parents and guardians of Transition Year students seeking their voluntary participation (Appendix C).

Research requires appropriate sampling. The quality of the research is not only justifiable by the methods used but it is also associated with appropriate sampling (Cohen et al., 2011).
In the case of this research study the population were Transition Year students. TY students were chosen due to their greater accessibility and the fact they are not an exam year. The researcher and Guidance Counsellor selected participants from across the six class groups (average number 30). Purposeful or criterion-based sampling was employed to arrive at a number of 30 participants (male and female). Purposeful sampling is when the researcher selects participants in whom they are interested in, a sample that have the characteristics relevant to the research question. In (Thomas, 2013) Cohen et al., argue that this form of sampling is biased. However, purposeful sampling was required in this study as the researcher had to exclude participants who were not available due to work placement and students the researcher was teaching. Purposeful sampling is acceptable once it is justified (Robson, 2007).

3.3.2 Data Collection

Thomas (2013) suggests the researcher should consider the best fit data collection model once the research questions are decided. The researcher decided to use a mixed method approach for the data collection. This comprised of questionnaires and two audio recorded focus groups. It was considered a more representative method, offering greater breadth and depth of data to answer the research questions.

Mertens, (2015) views mixed method design as a bridge between qualitative and quantitative research. Mixed method approach offers methodological eclecticism resulting in superior research compared with mono-method design. However, the challenges for a single researcher are it demands more time and method-related skills.

3.3.3 Research Design

The design of the study consisted of two phases, phase one entailed conducting student surveys. Phase two involved conducting two focus groups with TY students. This mixed method approach will give a balance of qualitative and quantitative data to the research study.
3.3.4. Phase One - Questionnaires

The quantitative part of the study comprised of administering questionnaires to TY students, whom the researcher was not teaching. Students and their parents/guardians received information letters explaining the research topic. Students and parents/guardians signed the consent forms. This is to comply with University of Limerick Ethical guidelines.

Surveys are a way of quantifying and measuring data from respondents. Questionnaires, paper or on-line format which participants can answer without the presence of the researcher (Brown, 2006). Surveys provide numerical data which is straightforward to analyse. Yin (2018) argues that although questionnaires are a reliable way of gathering numerical, quantifiable data they are unable to capture the contexts of environments.

Time was given to the layout, structure and formulating the survey questions. Consideration was given to the wording of the questions. The researcher reflected on formulating questions that endeavoured to be unambiguous, unbiased, clear and relevant.

Bell (2005) suggests piloting the survey to ensure the survey is easy to follow and coherent. Questions should be phased well for analysis purposes and examined from the perspective of the participants. The researcher piloted the questionnaires with a group of 5th years, similar ages to the TY cohort. This process assisted in verifying and clarifying whether the instructions were clear, length of survey completion, any confusion with the language and type of questions. Post piloting the questionnaires, some questions were edited and more options added. The researcher found there was some ambivalence regarding personal and career guidance counselling. The researcher ensured the distinction was explained to students, prior to completion of the questionnaires and the focus groups.

3.3.5 Phase Two - Focus Groups

Focus groups can be invaluable when in-depth information is required ‘about how people think about an issue – their reasoning about why things are as they are, why they hold the views they do’ (Law, 2013, p. 205).
Focus groups, as the name suggests, are discussions focused on a particular issue. They can be structured, with prepared questions or unstructured, where the intervention of the researcher is minimal. The optimum size is 6-8 participants (Thomas, 2013). Focus groups are used for generating information on collective views, and the meanings that lie behind those views. They are also useful in generating a rich understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs. One criteria for using focus groups include in a multi-method design, to explore a topic or collect group language to be used in later stages (Bloom et al, 2001).

The composition of a group needs care to get the best quality of discussion. There is no 'best' solution to group composition, and group mix will impact on the data, according to things such as the mix of ages and sexes. What is important is that the researcher gives consideration to the impact of group mix and how the group may interact with each other.

Interaction is key to a successful focus group. Pre-existing groups may be easier to recruit, have shared experiences and enjoy a comfort and familiarity which facilitates discussion or the ability to challenge each other comfortably (Bloom et al, 2001)

Focus groups emerged as a technique from market research. Where the researcher is a facilitator. Thomas (2013) suggests that if you are running a focus group you aim to facilitate discussion among participants, not between yourself and the participants. The aim being to take a marginal rather than a pivotal role. The idea is to discover understandings, values and beliefs of the participants. Therefore, where appropriate the discussion was allowed to flow. The researcher endeavoured to initiate discussion and prepared a range of material for the group to discuss. As an observer was not used, proceedings were recorded using an audio recorder.

3.4 Validity

Validity is concerned with the reliability and credibility of the research (Robson, 2007). Validity is described as a measure of how well the survey is measuring what it is supposed to measure. More specifically, validity applies to both the design and the methods of your research. Validity in data collection means that your findings truly represent the phenomenon you are claiming to measure. Validity can be classified as:
1. Internal validity – 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 being explained.

(Lindlof and Taylor, 2011).

As the variables in a survey are less flexible than qualitative interviews, quantitative survey research tends to have a higher reliability and a lower validity (Fink, 2009; Cohen et al., 2011).

3.4.1 Reliability

The reliability of a survey informs data reproducibility and consistency. Reliability tests e.g. ‘test, retest’ (administering the test twice, over period of time to the same group of individuals) and ‘internal consistency’ (the degree to which different variables that probe the same construct produce different results) are time consuming and difficult. Using a positivist paradigm should reach the optimum stance of validity and reliability. It is more challenging to argue from an interpretivist approach (Flick, 2011). To ensure the qualitative results are reliable the researcher engaged in on-going reading and analyzing the data as it was collected in case of any changes needed to the collection instrument. The researcher compared transcripts against the audio recorded data and ensured the TY participating students reviewed and were in agreement with the transcribed scripts (Thomas, 2013; Morse et al., 2002).
3.4.2 Reflexivity

Reflexivity…” viewed as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher’s positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome (Berger, 2015, 2015, p. 220).

Reflexivity acknowledges and understands the position of the researcher within the environment they are researching. The researcher must recognize, acknowledge and disclose their pre-conceived thoughts, perceptions around the research topic (Cohen et al., 2011).

Reflexivity is acknowledging the limits of one’s professional role and the effects for ethical research (Havercamp, 2005). At all stages of conducting the research study the researcher must be clear and aware of one’s subjective bias and develop a more reflexive approach, this should decrease any threats to validity or reliability, this can be enhanced further by thorough planning of data collection and analysis (Yin, 2009).

In order to be more reflexive, the researcher kept a diary during the research project, noting their position at different times during the study. In consultation with the supervisor the researcher designed instruments of data collection, addressed researcher bias and interpreted the data (McLeod, 2014). As the researcher is involved in teaching students, only students who the researcher are not involved with were invited to take part. ‘Member checking’ was used, students were allowed view the transcribed interview to exclude researcher bias (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011).

3.4.3 Triangulation

Two prominent types of triangulation are:

- Data triangulation – the use of variety of different data sources.
Methodological triangulation – the combination of two or more research strategies (quantitative and qualitative).

(Bryman, 2012).

By using a mixed method design, this supported implementing triangulation thus ensuring validity. Employing methodological triangulation assisted the research study by reducing bias (Cohen et al., 2011).

Validity, in qualitative research, refers to whether the findings of a study are true and certain “true” in the sense that research findings accurately reflect the situation, and “certain” in the sense that research findings are supported by the evidence. Triangulation is a method used by qualitative researchers to check and establish validity in their studies by analysing a research question from multiple perspectives. Patton (2002) cautions that it is a common misconception that the goal of triangulation is to arrive at consistency across data sources or approaches; in fact, such inconsistencies may be likely given the relative strengths of different approaches. In Patton’s view, these inconsistencies should not be seen as weakening the evidence, but should be viewed as an opportunity to uncover deeper meaning in the data (Guion et al., 2008).

Methodological triangulation involves the use of multiple qualitative and/or quantitative methods to study the program. In the case of this research study results from surveys and focus groups will be compared to see if similar results are being found. If the conclusions from each of the methods are the same, then validity is established. One of the primary disadvantages of triangulation is that it can be time-consuming. Collecting more data requires greater planning and organization. Other disadvantages include the “possible disharmony based on investigator biases, conflicts because of theoretical frameworks, and lack of understanding about why triangulation strategies were used” (Thurmond, 2001, p. 256).

3.5 Data Analysis

The data was analysed using the thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis involves searching across a dataset, in this case qualitative transcripts from focus groups to find repeated patterns of meaning or ‘themes’. Theme mapping involves
using a theoretical lens to analyse data and establish themes (Thomas, 2009). The first step of analysis was familiarization with the dataset. This involved the verbatim transcription of the focus group recordings and a reflection on the data collected. The dataset was then read and re-read and coding was carried out. Notes were taken on the initial emerging themes. The themes were then finalized and pertinent quotes from transcripts were collated under each of the themes.

In the case of the surveys, Excel was used to organize and present the quantitative data gathered from the surveys. The researcher analysed both quantitative and qualitative data and collated descriptive answers.

### 3.6 Ethical Issues

Ethical research derives from a much larger field of moral philosophy which addresses morals, beliefs and values within society (McLeod, 2010). Ethics ensures the researcher follows best practice and is considerate of the participants needs. Research undertaken in the field of guidance counselling can be of a personal nature therefore, care and ethical principles must be adhered to at all times, as advocated by the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (2012).

These ethical principles of competency, confidentiality, consent and a duty of care are also advocated by the NCGE (2008). In order to ensure these principals were adhered to the researcher firstly:

- Participants and their parents/guardians were informed of the nature, purpose and benefit of the research study.
- Participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to opt out at any time.
- All research data was password protected and transcribed information was member checked.
- Ethical approval was sought and granted from ULREC, see approval email in appendix J
- Anonymity was ensured throughout the process.
- IGC’s Code of Ethics was consulted and observed.
3.7 Conclusion

This chapter lays out the methodology which underpins the research study. The aim and objectives are detailed. Relevant methods of data collection and analysis are discussed. This chapter discussed research design considerations, including reliability, validity, reflexivity and ethical issues. The next chapter will lay out the main themes with relevant analysis from both sources of data.
Chapter 4 – Data Analysis

4.0 Introduction

This chapter will outline the main findings which have emerged from analysing the primary data. The first phase of data collection consisted of conducting surveys with a group of Transition year students. In total 30 students were surveyed. This data provided quantitative data in the form of visual statistics. The qualitative data was categorized from analysis of similarities in the participant’s responses to certain questions. This qualitative data was examined using Braun and Clarkes Thematic Analysis Framework.

The second phase of data collection involved conducting two focus groups comprised of eight participants in each group. This qualitative data was analysed again using Braun and Clarkes’ Thematic Analysis.

The following themes emerged from both the quantitative and qualitative data:

1. Adolescents’ views on the guidance counselling provision in the research school.
2. Adolescents’ suggestions on how the provision might be improved.
3. The advantages of accessing the Guidance Counselling Service.
4. Challenges or barriers to accessing the Guidance Counselling Service.
5. Students experiences of engaging with personal counselling.
6. A Whole School Approach to guidance counselling.

4.1 Demographic Profile of Survey Participants

The findings from question one show that a higher percentage of females compared to males took part (63% female, 37% male), see Chart 4.1 below. The average age of all participants was seventeen.
4.1.1 Personal Guidance Counselling Services, specific to the research school

In question two (Appendix I) students were asked if they had a personal problem and wanted to talk to someone confidentially, who would they approach. Just over 40% stated they would talk to a parent or guardian, 26% said they would talk to the school chaplain, 11% opted for the Deputy Principal, the same percentage who choose ‘other person’ and 3.4% stated a class teacher, see Chart 4.2. below.
4.1.2 **Information relating to Personal Counselling Service**

In question three (Appendix I) 59% of participants had made an appointment to see the guidance counsellor, 40% had not (See Chart 4.3 below).

In question 4(a), of those who did meet with the guidance counsellor, 63% stated they felt they had enough information about the personal counselling service prior to meeting with the counsellor.
Question 5 (b), participants who felt they did not have enough information stated they felt ‘boundaries should have been explained in more detail, I felt uncomfortable being silenced’. Another student stated, ‘who we are supposed to go to with a personal problem’. Another said they felt it should have been explained ‘what their exact job is, not just talking about college’. One participant reported ‘who is the specific person we should go to with personal problems’? Another student stated ‘I wasn’t clear on her role, I just thought the Guidance Counsellor is there to answer career questions not help with personal problems, this needs to be explained to students’ and ‘make it more know what she is there for’ This data indicates there is some ambivalence regarding the precise role of the guidance counsellor, in particular their role in relation to personal counselling.

This part of the survey aimed to understand student’s knowledge of the role of the guidance counsellor regarding personal counselling and their perceptions in relation to accessibility of guidance counselling.

4.1.3 Satisfaction Level relating to Guidance Counselling Service

All participants knew how to make an appointment to meet the guidance counsellor. When asked how satisfied they were with the service, 15% said they were very satisfied. 37% stated they were quite satisfied and 22% said they were dissatisfied with the level of service. 26% of participants did not answer this question (Chart 4.4).
When asked overall to what extent do you think guidance counselling has helped you, 30% answered that they felt it had helped them ‘quite a lot’. 37% responded ‘a lot’ and 7.4% answered it had helped them ‘a little’, the remainder did not answer this question (See Chart 4.5 below)

Responses to these questions suggest students are aware of how to go about seeing the Guidance Counsellor and of those who have had an appointment 52% were reasonably satisfied with the service, with 67% saying the counselling had helped them. Students differed slightly in their levels of satisfaction with the guidance provision. In general students were broadly satisfied with the career guidance they received. Students responded ‘yeah it was good and I found the career exhibitions helpful. When you talk and ask questions to the speakers from the colleges who visit the school, they give ideas about what the college has to offer and the courses’. Another student reported ‘it helped me to narrow down my choices’. The Guidance Counsellor helped us to research courses in class with worksheets which helped us narrow down interests. Then when the local colleges and others from further gave presentations, we were able to ask them questions and this helped us find out information’.
This qualitative data is relevant. It appears the preparatory work, completed in class helped students research and narrow down searches relating to possible career choice and courses. Students highlighted they felt school visits from the third level institutions assisted them further and some students reported ‘it helped me narrow down my research and I decided after some of the presentations to visit colleges with my family during the open days’

4.2 Which areas of Guidance Counselling helped the most

Interestingly when asked which areas guidance counselling helped them with the most (question 10. Appendix I) the same percentage of participants answered it helped with information on third level as with their personal and social development - 26% in each case. 19% felt it helped with subject choice for the Leaving Cert, with 7% feeling it helped with employment opportunities. 7% also thought it helped with researching vocational training (See Chart 4.5).

![Chart 4.6](chart.png)

Students spoke about the Guidance Counsellor and stated ‘she is in the school and you can make an extra appointment to meet her if you need to’. Students stated ‘we will meet the Guidance Counsellor from September in 6th year and again in January for a follow up talk’. Some students also reported ‘I would have liked to have received more guidance earlier, the
rotation of classes happens quickly and sometimes you don’t always have all yours questions answered’.

Male students noted ‘I think it’s all about CAO courses in this school, PLCs and apprenticeships are kind of seen as the last option. Some students are interested in these kind of courses and there doesn’t seem to be the same amount of information or talks about them’. This qualitative data is significant and would suggest that students who are interested in alternatives to the CAO courses feel they are not receiving equivalent information on these types of careers/courses. In addition to naming the area(s) guidance helped with, students were asked to rate (1-6) the service (see question 10. Appendix I). Option C, which was information on third level ranked the highest.

4.2.1 How Personal Counselling helped

Regarding how personal counselling had helped them, respondents noted ‘it helped me to become stronger mentally’. Other replies included ‘I learned about relationships, how to be safe sexually’. One respondent mentioned ‘it helped me see what was bothering me and how I could solve it’. Another replied, ‘I needed someone to talk to and she listened and gave me useful advice, I have gone to see her twice and both times I felt better afterwards’. Indeed, the theme of ‘listening’ emerges from the replies regarding the personal counselling with 20% of respondents mentioning it in their answers. A female student stated ‘I was suffering from anxiety and racing thoughts. I met with the Guidance Counsellor and the Chaplain and they both helped me by listening and giving me tools to lessen the anxiety, when I feel it coming on during the school day’.

Another area that emerges as useful to students is talking to someone about their strengths and hobbies and how they could integrate them into a career. A high percentage mentioned advice around motivation (‘working harder’) careers, college courses, advice and better clarity on what they wanted to do after the Leaving Certificate. ‘The Guidance Counsellor really helped me set goals, organise my time and advised me on courses I could work towards’
Delving further into the area of social/personal counselling, when asked in Question 10 (Appendix I) on a scale how guidance counselling had helped them from a social/personal perspective 12% stated it helped them feel better about themselves. The same percentage reported it helped them to deal with issues at school. 5% stated it had helped to improve relationships with others. 2% reported it helped them deal more effectively with problems/issues.

There was a high non-response to this question, which may indicate respondents didn’t feel guidance counselling helped them in this area or they may not have accessed the service. It should be noted that the school has a Chaplaincy service and Pastoral Care Team which works closely with the Guidance Counsellor to flag and refer students with personal problems, this may have had a bearing on the low response rate.

### 4.2.2 Importance of the Personal Guidance Counselling

On the basis of their experience of using the personal guidance service (question 12. Appendix I), the same percentage of respondents stated they would either use the service again or recommend the service to a friend, 26% in each case. 22% stated they would not use the service again, two respondents saying they would talk to someone else.

![Experience using Personal Guidance Service](chart.png)

**Chart 4.7**
When rating the importance of the personal guidance counselling service, 40% of students rated the service as a ‘10’ (essential). 55% rated it just below this figure (8 or 9). This illustrates students value the personal guidance service and believe it to be an important service in their school. Considering how high the students rated the importance of the personal guidance counselling service, it is noteworthy only 22% stated they would use the service again.

### 4.2.3 Improvements to the Personal Guidance Counselling Provision

When asked regarding suggestions on how the personal guidance counselling provision could be improved. Greater than two thirds of students suggested more frequent appointments. Students responded, ‘more regular meetings’ and ‘a meeting for each student at least once or twice in a school year that is mandatory to discuss mental health and how you’re feeling’. Another student stated ‘not to leave such a time gap between the initial request for an appointment and the date of the appointment. Guidance may be needed immediately, don’t just leave issues to pray on people’s minds and be more empathetic’. Overwhelmingly students were in favour of more meetings, especially during exam years, ‘they should attend to each student in exam years, Junior and Leaving Cert students’. ‘In exam years I think every student should have to go and see the counsellor’ Some students suggested ‘make themselves more known and talk to more students without them having to come forward’. One student mentioned ‘more approachable’ and another that “there should be another Guidance Counsellor in the school”.

### 4.3 Areas of the Guidance Counselling Service Accessed by students

Of the cohort who met with the Guidance Counsellor, just over 90% considered the meeting addressed educational/vocational concerns, 10% answered the meeting dealt with personal or social issues. One student felt both personal issues and educational/vocational issues were addressed (See Chart 4.8). When students elaborated on their answers some stated, ‘I met with the Guidance Counsellor to discuss subjects, studying and going to college, after
school’. A student explained ‘my meeting was just about third level education and my future career’. ‘It was a formal meeting and I was handed prospectus books’ Students reported they ‘talked about school’ and ‘I learned more about what I asked’.

Again, it is worth noting there is a full-time Chaplain in the school whose role is to meet with students who have been referred and work through personal/social issues. This fact may account for the low percentage going to the Guidance Counsellor for personal support.

The results collate with information gained from the Guidance Counsellor who stated she spends a large percentage of her time dealing with educational and careers related issues, working with senior cycle students regarding college and grant applications.

**4.3.1 Accessing External Guidance Counselling**

Students were then asked if they would consider accessing an external guidance counselling service. 55% said they would not consider going to external counselling, 18% stated they would consider attending a private guidance counsellor, 27% did not reply to the question (See Chart 4.8 below).
When asked if they felt there is adequate support structures in place in the school to cater for their personal needs (question 17 appendix I), 57% stated they believed there were and 12% felt there were not. A further 31% did not know.

When asked if they would be comfortable talking to their class teacher regarding personal issues (question 18 appendix I), just over 60% reported they would whereas, 23% stated they would not. Students expressed they did not feel they had ‘a strong enough relationship with teachers’ and ‘I feel it would be awkward’. Another student stated, ‘I don’t feel comfortable because I see them every day and I wouldn’t want to be treated differently’ and ‘It is known that teachers talk about students’. One student expressed a preference for discussing confidential information with ‘the Principal or Vice Principal’. Interestingly two students stated ‘They are not trained to deal with our personal problems’.

Students expressed they had good rapport with class teachers, reflected in the high percentage of students who said they would confide in teachers. When the questionnaire was piloted 80% of the group said they would go to the Vice Principal with personal issues. This reflects the high level of trust students have in the Vice Principal. 15% of the pilot cohort also said they would ask their Class Tutor for advice. Class Tutors and Year Heads are given class
periods off to meet students. Interestingly very few (less than 1%) stated they would make an appointment with the Guidance Counsellor, in relation to personal/social issues. Again, this low rate may be due to Class Tutor/Year Head/Chaplaincy system in the school and the fact that a high percentage of students noted the Vice Principal. Students perception is the Guidance Counsellor is there to answer educational and career guidance questions.

4.4 Educational/Career Guidance Counselling

Five questions were asked in relation to educational and career guidance services (Questions 19-23, Section B Appendix I. Interestingly when asked who students would ask if they had a career related question, 56% said the guidance counsellor, 19% stated the Principal, the same percentage as class teachers, 6% replied friends or peers. The option of ‘other’ was only filled in by three students, all male who stated they would ask their parents. Parents are singled out as being influential regarding the career decision making process (DES, 1995; NCGE, 2004; McCoy et al., 2014) and being “integral partners in the education of their child” (NCGE, 2004 p. 149). McCoy et al. (2014) note that parents are the primary authority for students regarding education and career choices at second level, they are rarely a decisive influence.

Interestingly, according to research carried out by McCoy et al., (2006) regardless of educational attainment, young males are more likely to seek advice from their parents while females are more reliant on advice from the school, in particular the Guidance Counsellor. This finding was also born out in the primary data collected for this research study. McCoy et al., (2006) research highlights the important role of parents regarding educational and career choices of young people. Parents are a key source of advice and information on post-school choices. This advice is particularly important to those leaving school prior to Leaving Cert. This suggests the crucial role for policy when conveying career information to parents, especially to those at most risk of dropping out of school. Parents must be included in career guidance and awareness around educational choices, this is of particular importance when it comes to males at risk of ESL (McCoy et al, 2006; Cedorf, 2014).
4.4.1 Educational and Career Guidance Provision

When asked their understanding of the term ‘educational/career guidance provision’ students showed a good understanding of the service (question 20, appendix I). Students spoke about ‘The service caters for talking about education and third level colleges’. Another student described the service as ‘teaches you about colleges and other career options’. Students describe the service as ‘a person who helps you figure out what you want to do after school and chose appropriate subjects’. A male student answered ‘someone who helps you in educational areas’. Others spoke about ‘to help when it comes to choosing subjects and what to do in the future’ and ‘talking about colleges and jobs’. ‘The Careers Counsellor talks to you about your future career options’. ‘Advising us on vocational studies in third level e.g. PLCs’ and ‘One to help you pick the best option for your educational future’. Students indicated ‘Getting help with your queries about third level education’ and a ‘person to go to and talk about future careers and colleges’.

Overall students had a good sense of the main function of the Guidance Counsellor. The majority spoke about her role regarding education, subject choices, aptitude tests, third level colleges, colleges of further education and apprenticeships schemes.

In question 21 (appendix I) when asked did they feel student’s needs are provided for in the school, from an educational and careers perspective, some students views were split. Two thirds believed their needs were met. The remaining third reported:

‘No, not much information was given by the Guidance Counsellor’, more by teachers’ and ‘I think we could be given more information about roundabout ways of getting to college’. A male student reported he felt ‘Not enough information and time is invested in meetings. Brief pathways only are given, there is not enough faith or choice’.

Females indicated ‘Very vague once off meetings that are much too vague. You don’t have time to expand your mind and it’s almost as if you have to know what you want to do to get guidance, this entails the whole service’ and ‘I don’t think the Guidance Counsellor is approachable, it is hard to receive information on the courses you are interested in. The knowledge the Counsellor has is limited on certain careers’. Another student reported ‘we aren’t given information we couldn’t find ourselves on-line’.
Please refer to Appendix I for a copy of the Transition Year Questionnaire. Students were asked to rate aspects of the career guidance service and in other questions written qualitative responses were sought.

4.5 **Focus Groups**

The second phase of data collection and analysis entailed conducting two focus groups with eight TY students in each group. The data was analysed using thematic mapping and analysis method developed by Braun and Clarke (2013). This section aims to give a deeper understanding surrounding adolescent views on the guidance counselling provision in their school.

The following themes arose in the qualitative findings:

- The advantages of accessing the Guidance Counselling Service.
- Challenges or barriers to accessing the Guidance Counselling Service
- Benefits of taking part in the Transition Year programme and the work experience programme.
- Whole School Approach to Guidance Counselling.

4.5.1 **Guidance Counselling Provision – Context of an Irish Post Primary School**

Students showed a good understanding of the provision and delivery of guidance counselling. They illustrated an understanding of the role of the Guidance Counsellor, in particular in relation to educational and vocational supports. They discussed the main reasons they make appointments to see the Guidance Counsellor, which was in relation to third level colleges and career/subject choices.

All students mentioned they believe there ‘should be more one-to-one meetings with the Guidance Counsellor’. Another student stated ‘I think the Guidance Counsellor should check
in on us more often and just ask if we would like to meet her, if there is anything bothering us, whether it’s about education or a personal problem.

Two students brought up the fact they had asked their class teacher for support and advice when choosing subjects and levels for Leaving Cert. They also discussed the fact that their Year Head gave advice and encouraged them to have ‘structures in place to help with study and setting goals for the future’. This is consistent with the ‘Whole School Approach’ to guidance as advocated by the DES (2012; Circular 0008/2018). Students spoke about their Class Tutor and Year Head ‘helped motivate us’ and ‘she spoke about role models and the OGA campaign’. Students spoke positively of the ‘My Friends Youth Resilience Programme’ (Barrett, 2010).

Students emphasized that it was important to get practice with goal setting, study and time management in TY and 5th Year. A student stated ‘we should start getting help with study plans and how to learn in 5th year’.

In relation to Question 3, Section A (Appendix H). All students felt they benefit from engaging with the guidance counselling service. However, they all stated the majority of their contact with the Guidance Counsellor is during timetabled class time (3 per week, rotated every 4 weeks). They all suggested they would prefer more ‘one-to-one guidance counselling as we need it’. This was seen as a challenge to engaging with the guidance service.

There is a perception from the students that the Guidance Counsellor is ‘always busy with the Leaving Certificate students’. Students seemed understanding of this fact however two suggested taking on another Career Guidance teacher. This would help ‘to free up the Guidance teacher to give more career guidance classes to 5th years and TYs, as it’s nearly too late by the time we get into Leaving Cert year, it’s such a busy year’. Students voiced they would prefer more career guidance in TY and fifth year, as they feel from speaking to Leaving Cert students it is ‘all very rushed’ in Leaving Cert.

Another student suggested they spend more time in 5th Year and TY on ‘how to study, get organized and manage your time and stress’. Students mentioned advice given by teachers and Year Heads and Class Tutors regarding time management, study and exam nerves.
However, students suggested getting someone in to do a workshop on study techniques and stress management.

Overall students felt supported with their career guidance counselling in the school. They all suggested more contact time with the Counsellor. Students were cognizant of the fact there was only one Guidance Counsellor for a large school (670 students and growing).

Interestingly students didn’t feel the need for guidance counselling at junior cycle. They felt the SPHE programme, tutor time, together with taking part in positive mental health initiatives (Wellbeing week, Amber Flag, Darkness into Light, Friends for Life) were sufficient.

### 4.5.2 Section B (Appendix H) – Personal & Social Guidance Counselling Service

Students were knowledgeable regarding the new ‘Junior Cycle Wellbeing Programme’. Students felt the programme helped to build awareness of the importance of positive mental health and maintaining this throughout their lives. They felt the fact the school takes part in various mental health initiatives helped raise awareness. Students stated ‘we help the Chaplain come up with ideas for Wellbeing Week’ and ‘there is a different theme each year and we organise speakers, quotes and posters around the school’

Students believed keeping a reflection diary during Transition Year was a positive and helpful initiative. It is worth noting students who took part in the research study had not followed the new Junior Cycle Wellbeing Programme however, they were familiar with the main aims and indicators of the curriculum.

When asked Question 8 (Section B, Appendix H) regarding how students are supported with their personal and social development, not all students related this question directly to the Guidance Counsellor. Six of the eight students stated they would approach the Vice Principal or their Year Head or Class Tutor if they wanted to talk to someone on a personal issue. Year Heads are mainstream teachers and remain with their year groups from first through to Leaving Cert, ensuring continuity. Four of the six students also said they would consider talking to their peers and/or parents depending on the nature of the issue.
When asked if the students felt the wellbeing/career guidance programme is relevant to their needs. Students stated “we have a fairly good idea of different school courses and subjects and how they relate to college courses and careers”. Another student said “I found the tests were good at helping me see my interests and hobbies and how I could try match them to courses and careers”. Students felt the Guidance Counselling service catered for their educational/vocational needs but it didn’t address their personal/social needs to the same extent. A student stated ‘We spend time looking up courses and colleges on Careers Portal and Qualifax’. Another highlighted ‘I found the career investigation exercise good, I don’t do LCVP so it helped me to look at different careers’ Students also felt that drafting a Curriculum Vitae, cover letters and interview techniques were practical and beneficial.

A student made the point that they missed career classes because of other activities happening during the Transition Year. He stated ‘the classes rotate every four or five weeks so if we have matches or rehearsals, you might only get to one careers class’.

Two students mentioned they thought it would be beneficial to give time to learning about mental health, ways of combatting anxiety and helping peers with problems. The student suggested getting in more guest speaker to talk about mental health issues and also mindfulness and/or yoga classes. She stated ‘I think there should be more workshops on ways to cope with stress, not just during Wellbeing week’.

Students mentioned that they only have three classes per week rotated every four weeks. They felt it was more important to focus on the educational or vocational areas of guidance as opposed to the personal counselling. They all mentioned they could always make an appointment with the Chaplain or talk to their Year Head/Class Tutor if they had a pressing problem. Students suggested the Guidance Counsellor or Year Heads should periodically check in with them. A female student mentioned ‘the Guidance Counsellor should just check in with us and make sure everything is ok’. Another student stated ‘It’s kinda awkward if you have to go to her with a problem, she should come to us’. One student mentioned the possibility of going to a personal counsellor externally.
4.5.3 Transition Year Programme

Students were overwhelmingly positive about the Transition Year programme in their school. Students spoke about learning “a lot about other subjects I hadn’t studied for the Junior Cert. I got to sample other subjects which helped me choose my subjects for the Leaving”.

“My work placement was so helpful, it gave me a good idea about what I would like to train in and the area I would be happy working in”.

Students said the Transition Year Programme was well set up in the and had been running for a long time. They all found the year beneficial and said they would recommend it to third years. They agreed it helped them mature and gave insights into the world of work. Students also spoke that sampling other subjects and work placements helped them choose subjects for senior cycle and possible areas of study after second level.

Among the aspects of the curriculum they found the most beneficial were the mini-companies, work placement, extra-curricular activities – driving/dance lessons, swimming, tours, junk couture, positive mental health, movie making workshops and the musical. Students mentioned there is a TY Coordinator, they can go and meet her if there is anything they need to know. Students said that they would approach her if they had a problem or question in relation to Transition Year.

Students also stated they liked having a break from ‘serious exams’, and they stated they felt this allowed them to ‘relax and have more free time’. Another student mentioned ‘I think I got to know my teachers better, they were less stressed and I guess we were more chilled’.

4.5.4 Junior Certificate

Overall students were happy with their subject choice for the Junior Certificate. However, twenty-five percent of students thought there were too many subjects. Other students stated ‘it gives you a fairly broad choice of subjects’. Students said they tended to keep on their ‘best subjects’ into senior cycle. Fifty percent of students felt they didn’t have enough information about subject choice, ‘I felt it was all a bit rushed, we had three days before we
had to hand in our choices’. Another student said ‘There wasn’t enough time to ask other people about the subjects and what it is like to study them and which ones you need for certain college courses’.

Overall students stated there should be more time given to subject choice for senior cycle, the process should start earlier with the option of a follow up one-to-one meeting with the Guidance Counsellor. However, students spoke positively about advice given by teachers and the range of subject choices.

4.5.5 Subject Choice for Senior Cycle

In terms of subject choices for senior cycle. Students are tested in TY to assist them in making subject choices for the Leaving Certificate programmes. The Guidance Counsellor follows up with students to give feedback and advice on the basis of their test results.

Feedback from students was mixed ‘I am not happy with my subject choices, I hate my choices’. ‘Yes, I was fully aware of what I wanted to do, so her guidance wasn’t vital, yet it was nice to have it’ and ‘they helped me pick the right subjects by directing me’.

‘Yes, I felt I was greatly informed on all of them’ and ‘Yes, she answered my questions’. ‘She gave me great insight into the subjects and I am very happy with what I choose’.

Another student stated, ‘yes, as she helped me choose subjects appropriate for the career I want to do’ and I am happy with my subject choices’.

‘A male replied by stating ‘yes, they helped me see where I could go in life’ and ‘yes, we met in TY and I will meet again next year, but I think we should meet more often’.

However, another indicated ‘No, I did not feel like I could approach the Counsellor, I got help outside of the school’ and ‘no, you should be given more one-to-one attention’. Another student indicated ‘no, I didn’t get any support’.

Overall the feedback from students was broadly positive. The school provides a structured approach with students having class in third year to help with subject choice for senior cycle.
In addition, students take aptitude tests (Cambridge), Career Interest Inventory and Holland Personality tests in 5th Year and TY. Students receive feedback from the Counsellor to assist their career and course choices. Parents information talks are facilitated where different subject choice, senior cycle programmes and access programmes to third level are explained.

Finally, students were asked how best can the guidance service improve in relation to subject/programme choice for senior cycle?

Two thirds of students mentioned ‘more meetings’ and ‘more regular meetings’. One student expanded saying ‘each subject should be described in detail and the implications for career and course choices explained, so there are no shocks later on’. Students explained ‘If we were told more information about college and helped with subject choices’. Two female students mentioned ‘more interaction and information about studying abroad’. Another student singled out ‘The Careers Counsellor should provide more information and they should show more interest’ and ‘they should be more open and not judge people’.

Students also stated, ‘speak more about work’ and ‘more approachable, more knowledgeable and more motivation’. Students expressed a sense of how busy the Guidance Counsellor is. The suggestion of more one-to-one meetings with students kept coming up and the suggestion of a post for another Guidance Counsellor.

Two male students felt there was not enough emphasis on apprenticeships and sports scholarships. ‘The Guidance Counsellor should get speakers in to talk about how to go about getting apprenticeships’, another male student highlighted ‘I know a guy who got a sports scholarship to the USA, we should get more information on how to apply for them’.

4.8 Conclusion

This concludes the data analysis gathered from the questionnaires and focus groups. The school endeavours to operate from a Whole School Approach to guidance counselling in order to support their students’ holistic growth and development. Students see Class Tutors, Vice Principal, Year Heads and Class teachers as some of the staff members they would approach if they had career or personal issues.
The career guidance service is viewed by students as a positive in the research school. The Transition Year programme and subjects offered at junior and senior cycle were seen as positives.

Mainstream teachers are providing a supportive role as are Class Tutors, Year Heads, Chaplaincy, management and staff. There are challenges for students wishing to access the guidance service. Time constraints are seen as one of the main barriers. Students suggested more one-to-one guidance session, checking in more regularly and greater career guidance in 5th year and TY. Students suggested the Guidance Counsellor market the service more, invite varied guest speakers and check in with students regarding their wellbeing. They also suggested the school take on another Guidance Counsellor.

The next chapter will discuss the findings in accordance with the relevant literature.
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the themes that have emerged from the research study. The study set out to explore adolescents’ views on the career guidance provision in their school.

The findings will be discussed by following the main subthemes that emerged:

- Adolescents’ views on the guidance counselling provision in the research school and adolescents’ suggestions on how the provision might be improved,
- the challenges for the guidance counselling provision
- a Whole School Approach to guidance counselling.

5.1 Guidance Counselling Service in the Research School

Students expressed they felt the school catered for their educational and vocational needs. The results clearly indicate students felt the school helped meet their needs for information regarding subject choice, programme choice at senior cycle, career, course investigation, psychometric testing and preparation for the world of work. Students recognized the school offered a good choice of subjects and they spoke very positively in relation to the school’s programmes, facilities, teaching and learning.

Students who spoke about the school catering for their personal development stated they had timetabled ‘wellbeing’ classes on rotation in 5th Year and TY which followed on from the SPHE programme in junior cycle. They spoke about exploring relationships, friendships, consent, bullying, drugs/alcohol, mental health, internet safety, social media, identity, diversity, inclusion and isolation.

Some students recognized they could or have received personal support from the school, the figures show this was not something the majority of students experienced.
The statistics indicate students did not see the Guidance Counsellor as someone they would primarily identify with personal counselling. The Vice Principal, Chaplain, Class Tutors, Year Heads and the Principal were all identified as people they could talk to with personal issues. Parents/Guardians were also identified as individuals they could speak with, as were their peers.

These findings support research in Irish Post Primary schools that indicates schools are focused on the Leaving Certificate state examination and exam points (Leahy et al., 2017; Hearne and Galvin, 2014). This poses a challenge for the school, there is scope for expanding resources for students’ holistic development and aiding preparation for non-educational or career progression.

The NGF (2007) defines guidance as a facilitative process, encouraging students to take control of their personal, educational, social and career decisions. Recognizing student’s holistic development, the Junior Cycle Wellbeing programme states the requirement of a minimum of 300 timetabled hours, increasing to 400 by 2020. The aim being to support students to flourish and help them to become the best possible person they can (NCCA, 2017).

Marshall (2002) highlights the importance of educational attainment and retention, especially in rural areas where career and employment opportunities can be lacking. The research school needs to continue to deliver educational supports. From the research findings the school should market and advertise the ‘personal’ counselling element of the guidance service. The Whole School Approach to guidance counselling needs to continue and the Guidance Counsellor work collaboratively with staff to ensure all students have access to this part of the service, as required. It is noteworthy that only a very small percentage of students indicated they would access external personal counselling. This would appear to indicate the school is doing a good job of catering for students personal and social needs. There was a high level of satisfaction among students, with fifty-seven percent stating they felt their personal/social needs are supported in the school.

The 400 hours of Wellbeing could be used to offer additional guidance counselling therefore, catering for students’ personal needs on an individual or group basis, depending on resources and student requirements.
5.1.1 Adolescent Views on the Guidance Counselling Provision

Students showed a good understanding of the role of the Guidance Counsellor. However, the statistics gathered from the questionnaires indicate students perceive the Guidance Counsellors role as predominantly in the educational/vocational areas.

All students were aware of how to go about making an appointment with the Guidance Counsellor. During the focus groups students discussed the career information room, notice board and the fact there is a career section on the school website. This illustrates awareness of where and how to access career information. Almost forty percent of students surveyed stated they had never made an appointment to see the Guidance Counsellor. Of those who had met with the Guidance Counsellor, the vast majority, ninety percent was in relation to educational or vocational queries (subject choice, programme choice, career/course information). This high percentage illustrates the student perception that the Career Guidance Counsellor is primarily there to answer career/course related questions. This was also born out in feedback given by students in the focus groups. Students spoke about ‘The Guidance Counsellor helped me narrow down the courses I was interested in and she got me to research and find out the subjects I would study in each year’. ‘I did a careers investigation in 5th year and it helped me to focus on the areas I would be interested in studying. ‘I researched a fair amount myself at home, on careers websites and then I had some questions which she answered when I met with her again’.

Effective guidance counselling benefits students, it enables them to learn skills to help take responsibility for their decisions. Research shows that engaging with the guidance counselling service offers benefits for students. Effective guidance can strengthen student confidence and motivation (Hughes et al., 2002). Guidance counselling aids students transitioning into second level education and can help reduce the number of early school leavers, encouraging success in the world of work (DES, 2019; Hooley et al., 2016, Pullen et al., 2013; DES, 2005; Cedorf, 2014). The low percentage of students who have made an appointment with the Guidance Counsellor may indicate their needs are being met by class contact with the Guidance Counsellor (3 per week), Year Heads/TY Coordinator and other support staff in the school (e.g. Chaplain). Students also stated they are ‘only in TY, haven’t really thought about colleges or career stuff yet’
5.1.2 **Improvements to the Guidance Service**

In order to inform students of her role, the Guidance Counsellor could address students at assembly. The Guidance section of the school’s website could be kept up-to-date with career information and links to relevant websites and application forms. Students stated in the surveys ‘more up to date information on careers on the webpage’ and ‘make themselves known and what they do and talk to more students without them having to come forward’. All students displayed good ICT skills and stated they frequently access the school’s website for updates. Some students were not aware of the SUSI, HEAR and DARE application process. As this can be a lengthy process, information on the procedure and local Access offices could be provided in advance on the website, options to meet the Guidance Counsellor and parental talks could also be highlighted.

As stated students suggested the Guidance Counsellor could check in more frequently with them during the year. Ensuring they are coping well and have no personal issues. Students also suggested getting an external person or agency in to give a workshop on study and organizational skills in TY or 5th year. They advocated more guest speakers to talk about mental health. They felt the guest speakers from the various colleges were informative and they envisaged the right speakers addressing mental health issues could be equally beneficial.

In relation to career guidance, students suggested having more one-to-one meetings with the Guidance Counsellor to discuss feedback from testing, interests, subjects, areas of study or careers. Students felt it would be better to start this process in 5th Year and TY as Leaving Cert. year is extremely busy. ‘

Students in the focus groups stated they found websites like Careers Portal and Qualifax helpful and they had all used these platforms. They described it as a ‘one-stop shop’ They said they found the interest tests and course finder particularly useful. However, they all stated a preference for both ICT and contact time with the Guidance Counsellor as the best approach. This concurs with the recommendations made by Cedorf (2014) and DES (2019) for a blended approach to career guidance.

Some boys in the focus groups stated they felt there wasn’t enough class time devoted to apprenticeships and scholarships. They suggested getting guest speakers in to inform students
about the process of securing apprenticeships. They also suggested getting past students back to address the class regarding their experiences, particularly regarding studying abroad.

5.2 A Whole School Approach to Guidance Counselling

As the Guidance Counsellor spends the majority of her time on Leaving Certificate educational and vocational issues, this leaves little time to devote to personal counselling. Research has shown Irish students at second level schools are lacking personal support, with a 51% decrease in one-to-one personal guidance since 2012 (IGC, 2012).

The research school employs a fulltime Guidance Counsellor, Chaplain and a pastoral care team. This fact together with their class tutor and year head structures offer students personal support. Class Tutors meet students daily, monitor attendance and generally check student wellbeing. A strength of the tutor system is it gives students the opportunity to communicate. It builds a supportive relationship, working alongside the students consistently which helps establish trust between the students and teacher (Bradley et al, 2012). However, from the research carried out not all students see their Class Tutor as a support for personal issues. Some students stated confidentiality would be a concern. They stated they would feel ‘embarrassed’ and ‘awkward’ discussing personal issues with Class Tutors. Students mentioned ‘I don’t trust them’ and ‘I would rather go to a private counsellor because I wouldn’t feel embarrassed’.

Mainstream teachers take on the role of Class Tutor voluntarily and receive four class period a week in lieu. The fact that teachers take on this role shows the dedication and caring nature in the research school. Teachers who take on this role could emphasize their role in relation to supporting students’ personal needs if, they are comfortable to do so. From speaking to mainstream teachers and Class Tutors, some teachers do not feel sufficiently trained or comfortable dealing with students’ personal issues. They feel there should be a clear internal referral system for more complex issues that may arise. They stated they are comfortable dealing with trivial, day-to-day issues that may arise. The school management could organize training for staff to support students’ personal or social needs.
Initial teacher training does not involve training in guidance and therefore mainstream teachers lack the skills to support students’ personal issues (Galvin, 2012). Therefore, additional training needs to be given to class tutors and other staff that support students’ wellbeing.

The pastoral care team and management need to agree and update the pastoral care policy and ensure all students have access to personal counselling when required. This may involve increasing the guidance allocation, restructuring and reprioritizing time to accommodate students’ needs. Subject planning time could be used to plan this policy and other related policies which aid the whole school approach to guidance (SPHE, Wellbeing, Pastoral Care)

5.2.1 Whole School Approach to Educational/Vocational Guidance

Students identified teachers as a source of information in relation to careers and course requirements. Students stated they would approach teachers in particular if they had a question relating to the teacher’s subject area. Students said they found mainstream teachers had helped them ‘clarify’ questions they had in relation to subject choice for senior cycle. Teacher also engage with parents regarding their children’s subject options. Teachers and Class Tutors in the research school are working as agents who motivate and encourage students to reach their potential. This practice is in line with best practice as advocated by the DES, where a WSA to guidance is promoted (DES, 2012; 2018). Results from the student survey show students are comfortable approaching staff and management in relation to educational and vocational guidance. A male student reported ‘my Year Head advised me on subject choices for Leaving Cert and encouraged me to do up a study plan and set goals’.

The Deputy Principal and Class Tutors are seen as the main sources of information outside of the guidance service. It is a positive that staff support students with their educational and vocational choices and this practice should be encouraged with support from management and continuous professional development.
5.3 Challenges or Barriers to accessing the Guidance Counselling Service

The research school has access to broadband however, there is limited class time allocated to the computer rooms. This can lead to the necessity for students to access career websites and complete application forms from home. Not all students living in rural areas have access to broadband and this can be a limiting factor. Unfortunately, there is still poor broadband in many rural areas (Weckler, 2016).

Feedback from the Guidance Counsellor show she spends a significant portion of her time on the areas of senior cycle educational and vocational decisions. The time and work constraints on the Guidance Counsellor result in her spending less time on personal counselling. The NGF (2007) and the DES highlight the Guidance Counsellor as the only trained professional with the skills to deal with ‘crisis’ counselling. Furthermore, research shows if a student requires support and this is not promptly addressed, the window of opportunity may lapse (Bradley et al., 2012). The time, work and resource constraints on the guidance service regarding personal counselling is a concern for the future delivery of the service. This is born out in the feedback from students. Lam and Hui (2012) acknowledge teachers play a crucial role deterring student’s personal issues from escalating. However, student feedback highlights the need for confidentiality. The school needs to inform students regarding the pastoral care system and the confidentiality element within the process needs to be emphasized. School policy development time could be used by the team to update relevant plans and extra training undertaken by relevant staff.

5.3.1 Junior Certificate Accessibility and Equality

Another area to suffer due to the limitation of the guidance service is contact with Junior Certificate students. The DES (2006) highlight the necessity of “increased and more accessible guidance counselling for Junior Certificate students” However, the new allocation of 300 hours (increasing to 400 by 2020) as part of the new Junior Cert Wellbeing Programme should improve this situation. Research by Philips et al., (2006) identified students in rural areas were making restrictive subject choice. Feedback from students spoke about “not having enough time to explore and research the knock-on effects of choosing
certain subjects for the Leaving” and “I do not think there is enough information about subject choices for LC in this school”.

Junior Cert students could start the process of subject choice in advance of the deadline and have timetabled classes with the Guidance Counsellor, allocated from the 300 Wellbeing hours. Students could be given the option of making a follow up appointment with the Guidance Counsellor. Furthermore, students could be encouraged to discuss subject choice with teachers and parents in advance of parent/teacher meetings. An information night for parents/guardians could also be arranged to assist the decision making process.

Students from privileged socio-economic backgrounds have the option to access private guidance counselling and tuition. This is leading to social inequality (Leahy et al., 2016). There is an unequal distribution of educational resources in rural areas verses urban areas (White, 2016). Guidance Counsellors working in rural areas need to advocate social inclusion rather than being restricted by challenges, which restrict student attainment and progression (Schraad and Tishler, 2011). Rural areas lack career opportunities, despite the growing economy (O’Grada, 2014).

5.4 Challenges for the Guidance Counsellor in the Research School

From research carried out by the IGC, it appears the value of the Guidance Counsellor in post primary schools may have been eroded by the 2012 cutbacks. With over 10% of post primary schools employing unqualified staff in the guidance role (IGC, 2014). However, the government and Minister for Education have committed to the restoration of guidance posts (Circular 0008/2018). The DES (2012, 2019) acknowledge the valuable work carried out by Guidance Counsellors and recognize they are the only people trained with the skillset to assist students with career decision making. Research shows Guidance Counsellors do not feel valued in their primary role (McCoy et al., 2016; IGC, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial Guidance Counsellors who are already under time and budgetary constraints avail of professional supervision, to share good practice and safeguard their own wellbeing (Hann-Morrison, 2011).

Another challenge highlighted by the Guidance Counsellor, Year Heads and Chaplain is in relation to the meeting students personal and emotional needs. Some staff voiced concern in
relation to the WSA to this area of pastoral care. They stated ‘there are too many prongs to the system and students may fall between two stools’. Staff highlighted the internal referral system needs to be examined, revised and tightened to ensure that all staff are aware of their role(s) and responsibilities regarding student’s care and wellbeing. The School planning and policy development time could also be used to assist the Guidance Counsellor examine, revise and update policies, promote the guidance provision and work collaboratively to plan and implement the WSA to guidance as advocated by the DES.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the main themes emerging from the research topic to explore adolescent views on the guidance counselling service. As a result of the cutbacks in 2012 the research school seeks to implement a ‘Whole School Approach’ to Guidance Counselling. Samples of this approach were highlighted by students who spoke about receiving advice from Class Tutors, Year Heads, management and mainstream teachers, as well as the Guidance Counsellor.

The findings indicated the majority of students are comfortable seeking career information and options from their teachers and among other staff members. However, a smaller number were not comfortable exploring personal issues with class teachers and other staff members, mainly due to confidentiality. Therefore, a more structured approach needs to be established to ensure students personal/social needs are addressed as well as their educational and vocational requirements. Student and staff could benefit from a clear system of referral for students who may require personal issues addressed. The system needs to be promoted within the student cohort and resourced appropriately. The reduction of guidance counselling hours together with the removal of the ex-quota Guidance Counsellor has increased the challenges facing the Guidance Counsellor when faced with providing an accessible, inclusive service to all students.
Chapter 6 – Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

This concluding chapter will summarise the main objectives, themes and findings which have emerged from phase one (surveys) and phase two (focus groups) of the research. The chapter also makes recommendations for policy and practice. The strengths and limitations of the research are also highlighted.

6.1 Summary of Findings

The aim of this research study was to explore ‘adolescent views on the provision of guidance counselling in an Irish post primary school.’ Based on the primary aim two secondary research aims were identified. To explore students’ experiences of engaging with the guidance counselling service and their suggestions for any improvement to the service. The research was carried out in light of the new Junior Cycle Wellbeing Programme and in the context of an Irish rural post primary school.

Two phases of data collection were involved. Firstly, students completed questionnaires. Secondly students took part in two focus groups to gather further data.

The main themes that emerged were:

8. Adolescents’ views on the guidance counselling provision in the research school.
9. Adolescents’ suggestions on how the provision might be improved.
10. Challenges for the guidance counselling service.
11. A Whole School Approach to guidance counselling.

6.1.1 Adolescents’ Views on the Guidance Counselling Provision

Students demonstrated a good understanding of the main role of the Guidance Counsellor and the guidance service. However, students perceived the role of the Guidance Counsellor as
predominantly in the educational and vocational areas. This was born out in the statistics where ninety percent of students who made an appointment to meet the Guidance Counsellor stated it was in relation to educational or vocational queries (subject choice, programme choice, third-level courses and careers).

In relation to the personal/social provision just over sixty percent of students felt they had enough information regarding the personal counselling service. However, feedback from students indicate there is some ambivalence regarding the precise role of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to personal counselling. Over forty percent stated they would talk to a parent or guardian and twenty-six percent to the Chaplain. ‘I would tell one of my friends first and if it was serious, I’d talk to my parents or sister’. The results concur with Irish research highlighting the strong influence family can have on student career choices (McCoy et al, 2016; DES, 2019). There are however, other important influencers including work experience, teachers and guidance counsellors (DES, 2019). This was born out in the focus group feedback where other school staff and ‘people outside of school’ were highlighted as being important. Students were not always aware they could go to the Guidance Counsellor with personal issues. Students mentioned Class Tutors, Management and the Chaplain as other individuals they would approach and trust within the school setting. ‘I would approach the Vice-Principal…I know friends of mine have gone to her with a problem and…she found her good’. Students were broadly satisfied with the personal guidance service with over fifty percent expressing their satisfaction.

6.1.2 Student suggestions for improvements to the Guidance service

Overall students felt that guidance counselling had helped them (67%). The same percentage of students stated guidance counselling helped them with third-level choices and personal issues (26%). The other areas named were subject and programme choices, work experience, further training, employment and vocational choices.

In summary the following suggestions were put forward by students who participated in the research study:

- Increased one-to-one meetings with the Guidance Counsellor.
• More awareness and promotion of the personal counselling service available to students.
• Emphasis on confidentiality in relation to personal counselling.
• Invite guest speakers to present in relation to positive mental health, apprenticeships and scholarships.
• Invite past students to talk regarding their experiences of college life and careers.
• Workshops on study skills and exam preparation.
• Guidance Counsellor to check in frequently with students regarding their wellbeing as opposed to students approaching her.
• Guidance classes targeted at Junior Cert students, particularly in relation to subject choice for Leaving Certificate.
• Students to have the facility to make a follow up appointment with Guidance Counsellor to discuss subject choices.
• School to take on a second part-time Guidance Counsellor.
• Clearer information on the school’s internal referral system for students experiencing more serious personal issues.

6.1.3 Challenges for the Guidance Counselling Service

As stated above students have suggested increased one-to-one meetings with the Guidance Counsellor. The increased demands on the guidance counselling service in the school has resulted in the Guidance Counsellor finding it difficult to roll out an accessible service to all students. The Guidance Counsellor spends an inordinate amount of her time assisting an ever increasing number of Leaving Cert students with applications for third level, grants and access programmes. Resulting in some students feeling reluctant to approach the Guidance Counsellor with queries. Students are approaching subject teachers, Class Tutors/Year Heads and the Vice Principal with career related questions and in some instances, personal issues. Although this could be viewed as a signal the WSA to guidance counselling is being implemented, it also demonstrates the time and resource constraints on the service and in particular on the Guidance Counsellor herself. A concern highlighted by some staff is that the responsibility is delegated across all staff. However, ownership of the service should be clearly defined and its effectiveness considered for assessment.
It would appear the value of the Guidance Counselling service in post primary schools has been damaged by the cutbacks in 2012, with less hours and qualified staff being employed in schools (IGC, 2014). The DES (2012, 2019) have highlighted the valuable work provided by Guidance Counsellors, as they are the only staff with the necessary counselling skills to assist students with career decisions.

The additional 300 hours allocated to wellbeing in the new Junior Certificate programme could be used to provide timetabled guidance hours and allow more planning for a coordinated WSA (DES, 2012).

Education aims to provide accessible guidance for all, a statutory requirement. The reality in post primary schools is government funding is inadequate to ensure a sufficient service. The service is compromised resulting in a limited service which may augment the socio-economic divide. Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) highlight the need for increased scaffolding for senior students in rural Ireland, due to the reality of parents not being familiar with higher education. Muller (2014) suggests educational policy which aims to equalize opportunities focus on areas that restrict rural students from progressing. Students from wealthier backgrounds are able to access private guidance and tuition, resulting in increased social inequality (Leahy et al., 2016). This together with the lack of employment and training opportunities in rural Ireland further exasperates the inequality, despite a growing economy (O’Grada, 2014).

6.1.4 A Whole School Approach to Guidance Counselling

According to feedback from student surveys and the focus groups mainstream teachers are facilitating students with their educational and career guidance. Students acknowledge they discuss subject choices with teachers and parents. This indicates there is collaboration between home and the school. Particularly in rural areas this link between home and school is vital to reduce educational challenges (Harmon, 2017). Class Tutors and management often speak to students regarding educational and career matters. Students stated teachers help them with organizational and study skills. This illustrates teachers are helping students with motivation, educational and vocational growth as advocated by the DES (2012) as part
of the WSA. Results from the questionnaires indicate a high percentage of students would ask their teachers regarding subject choice and careers. This illustrates the research school is endeavouring to implement best practice by providing career related information to students (DES, 2012).

The research school should continue to support student’s educational and vocational needs. Students and parents benefit from teachers assisting students. The DES (2005, 2012, 2019) and the NCGE (2004) acknowledge guidance as a collaborative process, where collaboration is necessary with all the school community (school, parents and students). Harmon (2017) postulates collaboration is key when tackling educational challenges in rural areas. Feedback from students and the Guidance Counsellor illustrate the importance of collaboration between parents and the school. Positive relationships are fostered from First year/6th class by organising open days, parents’ information evenings, parents’ classes and HSCL visits.

Third level entry applications, access programmes and grant applications can be complex, online based and confidential. The research school has access to the internet however, students living in rural areas may lack broadband access. The lack of broadband is a significant challenge in rural Ireland (Wheckler, 2016).

The research school provides a class tutor system. Each year group has an assigned Class Tutor from first year to Leaving Cert. The Tutor meets with students daily, attendance and communication from home is checked as is student’s wellbeing. As stated the advantage of the class tutor system is supportive relationships are built over time. This consistent work with students helps to form trust (Bradley et al., 2012). Teachers who work as Class Tutors may need to highlight their supportive role and obtain further training.

6.2 Strengths and Limitations of the Research Study

6.2.1 Strengths of the Study

Deciding to use a mixed method approach may be seen as a strength of the study. Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected. This is a positive as it yields statistical and narrative data.
Management and students were very willing to take part in the research study. This may be attributed to the positive relationship established by the Guidance Counsellor and the researcher with students and management.

The study allowed an opportunity for adolescent’s voices to be heard in relation to their perceptions of the guidance counselling provision. It also created an opportunity for students to express their suggestions for improvements to the service, an area under researched to date in the context of rural post primary schools.

There was a good gender balance of students both in the questionnaires and the focus group.

6.2.2 Limitations of the Research Study

Invited students were not currently taught by the researcher. Therefore, not all students were in a position to take part. This reduced the breadth and mix of students and restricted student views that may have been valuable to the research.

The research was conducted in one post primary school in a specific context, the researcher recognized that it is not applicable to all schools.

The researcher was compelled to limit the sampling size used in both phase one and phase two for a number of reasons (time, availability) therefore, decreasing statistical power and the scope of the study.

6.3 Recommendations

The following recommendations were identified for practice and policy:

Practice

- There is an identified need to expand the resources in guidance, additional wellbeing hours could be used to offer more guidance to Junior and Leaving Cert students (class and one-to-one meetings).
• Mainstream teachers involved in personal support should have professional training to support students’ social and personal needs.

• Relevant staff be made aware of non-statutory agencies like Jigsaw/Crib as an interim referral for students with mental health issues.

• The Class Tutor system needs to be promoted among students in particular in relation to students’ wellbeing.

• The role of the Guidance Counsellor needs to be promoted in the school, situated in a rural setting where third level applications are lower.

• It is advocated the school continue to build collaborative relationships with members of the school community which benefits students (evening classes, guest speakers from industry and third level/further education and training colleges).

• It is advocated the school continue to build collaborative relationships with parents to assist their children’s progression to third level, training and employment. This can be achieved through communicating with parents (open nights, parent classes) and working with staff, HSCL officers and SCP staff.

• Parents benefit by accessing impartial, confidential information regarding SUSI grant application via the Citizens Advice Bureau.

• It is advocated the school should continue to build on their supportive pastoral care structures, encouraging students to trust and confide in relevant staff, where necessary.

• Guest speakers should be invited to enhance information sharing in relation to apprenticeships, scholarship and graduate placement programmes.

• Tutors to be employed (if not available in school) to deliver mindfulness and/or yoga classes.

• Workshops to be delivered on study skills and exam preparation.

• Past students to be invited to address students regarding college life and careers.

**Policy**

• The school should periodically update its guidance plan aimed at delivering guidance from a ‘Whole School Approach’.

• The ‘Whole School Approach’ to Guidance needs to be highlighted to staff at Year Head, Tutor, Wellbeing, Pastoral Care and staff meetings
• The guidance section of the school website needs to be updated and expanded with up to date information and links accessible to all students/parents. This could be supported through the new Digital Learning programme.

• Schools internal referral system for personal counselling be formalized into school policy and made clear to all relevant staff and students.

• Relevant staff be made aware of system for external referral to statutory and non-statutory support agencies (GP, CAMHS, Jigsaw, Crib).

6.4 Personal Learning and Reflexivity

The researcher teaches in the research school therefore, a reflexive approach had to be employed to deter any researcher bias. To overcome such bias Cohen (2011) suggests researchers recognize their feelings, preventing bias. As a consequence, the researcher should keep notes in their diary throughout the research process. The researcher kept notes in her diary during the study. Reflexivity is required to acknowledge how a researcher’s professional role could affect ethical practice (Havercamp, 2005).

The researcher communicated with parents/guardian and the gate keeper prior to carrying out any research. Student participation was on a voluntary basis with the option to withdraw at any time. The researcher was aware the questionnaires and indeed focus group discussion may arouse feelings or issues for students. Therefore, the researcher informed students of the school supports. The researcher used ‘member checking’ where participants were able to view their transcripts therefore, reducing researcher bias (Lindolf and Taylor, 2011).

The findings of this study have made the researcher more aware of student’s career guidance needs. As a future Guidance Counsellor, I will endeavour to manage my time appropriately, arrange follow up meetings in particular for JC subject choice and LC students. I will ensure as much preparatory work is addressed in class, using a ‘blended approach’. I will always strive to deliver an equal, accessible, inclusive, professional, balanced and collaborative service which addresses the four key areas of guidance, within budgetary constraints.
6.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the main themes, strengths and limitations emanating from the research. The accessibility of the guidance service and the challenges that emerged. Literature was associated with the results and the importance and benefits of guidance counselling were highlighted. The school endeavours to implement a WSA to guidance in light of the 2012 removal of the ex-quota Guidance hours. Overall students feel supported with their educational and vocational needs. Some students are not comfortable approaching teachers and the Guidance Counsellor in relation to personal issues.

The Guidance Counsellor works in a challenging sector with time and resource constraints. It was highlighted students from higher socio-economic backgrounds have the option to access external, private guidance counselling. Research shows students from lower socio-economic environments rely more on the guidance service in the school (DES, 2019; Cedefop, 2014; McCoy et al., 2006). With growing student numbers and reduced resources increased demands are placed on the sole Guidance Counsellor and staff to deliver an accessible service to all students as part of a WSA, as advocated by the 1998 Education Act and procedures outlined in Circular (009/2012).

To conclude the researcher put forward recommendations for policy and practice. The chapter concluded with acknowledgment of reflexivity and personal learning.
References


Counsellors available: 


McCarthy, J. (1993). *The Vocational needs of Irish disadvantaged youth.* Study undertaken for CEDEFOP, Luxembourg: CEDEFOP.


Appendices

EHS Rec No: 2019_04_07_EHS

Student Name: Karen Healy

Student ID Number: 16097211

Research Supervisor: Mr. Tom Geary

Research Title: ‘Adolescent views on guidance counselling provision in a post primary School’.

Appendix A – Subject Information Letter (Principal)
Appendix B – Consent Form (Principal)
Appendix C – Subject Information Letter (Parent/Guardian)
Appendix D – Consent Form (Parent/Guardian)
Appendix E – Subject Information Letter (Focus Group Participants)
Appendix F – Online Student Information and link to Survey
Appendix G – Consent Form (Participants)
Appendix H – Focus Group Schedule & Group Interview Questions – TY Student Participants
Appendix I – Sample Copy of Online Student Questionnaires.
Appendix J – Sample Section of School Guidance Plan.
Appendix A

Date:

EHS REC no.: 2019_04_07_EHS

Research title: Adolescent views on guidance counselling provision in an Irish post-primary school

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 Mr. Tom Geary. I am undertaking a research dissertation on the topic of guidance counselling as part of my studies.

In my research I aim to explore the topic of guidance counselling provision. In order to gather this information, I would appreciate if you would give me consent to carry out the research study in your school. A number of students would be invited to complete an online survey. This would involve me also conducting two focus groups with 6-8 students in each group. The students will discuss a series of topics and questions in relation to the topic.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Discussions will be audio tape recorded and the data will be destroyed after analysis according to UL 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 the name of the individual participants will not be used in the research and the school will not be identifiable to anyone other than those directly involved.

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

Researcher: Karen Healy  
School Tel. No. 071 9183285  
UL Email address: 16097211@studentmail.ul.ie

Research Supervisor/s: Mr. Tom Geary  
Telephone number/s: 085 7786610  
Email address: tom.geary@ul.ie

Principal Investigator:  
Dr. Lucy Hearne,  
Email address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie  
Telephone number: 061202931

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (2019_04_07_EHS). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
EHS Faculty Office, University of Limerick. Tel (061) 234101. ehsresearchethics@ul.ie
Appendix B

Date:

EHS REC no. 2019_04_07_EHS

Research Title: Adolescent views on guidance counselling provision in an Irish post primary school.

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

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

I hereby give my consent for Karen Healy to carry out this research in the post primary school.

Signature: ____________________________________________
Printed name: _________________________________________
Signature of Researcher: _________________________________
Date: _________________________________________________
Appendix C:

Date:

EHS Rec. No: 2019_04_07_EHS

Research Title: Adolescent views on guidance counselling provision in an Irish post-primary school.

Dear Parent 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 Mr. Tom Geary. 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 topics of career guidance provision. I am writing to you to enquire whether you would be willing to consent to your son/daughter taking part in a research study, by filling out a 20 minute online student questionnaire and/or being part of a Focus group discussion/interview, taking approximately 40 minutes of career class time. It should be noted that as focus groups are conducted within a group setting, each participant’s contributions will be heard by the other participants within the group. However, each student will be asked to sign an agreement to keep all opinions expressed during the focus group private. The recordings will have any names or identifiers removed, will be stored in a secure location or on a password protected computer in UL, and the information will be stored for seven years. It will then be safely destroyed.

Participation in the study is voluntary and students can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis phase. Should a student withdraw after the focus group has
begun their contribution will be removed. If you have any queries or require any further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Mrs Karen Healy Supervisor/s: Mr. Tom Geary.
Telephone number/s: 085 778 6610
UL Email address: 16097211@studentmail.ul.ie UL Email address tom.geary@ul.ie

Principal Investigator: Dr. Lucy Hearne,
Email address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie
Telephone number: 061202931

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (2019_04_07_EHS). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee
EHS Faculty Office
University of Limerick
Tel (061) 234101
ehsresearchethics@ul.ie
Consent Form (Parent/Guardian)

Date

Appendix D:

EHS Rec. No: 2019_04_07_EHS

Research Title: Adolescent views on guidance counselling provision in an Irish post-primary school.

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) All participants are free to withdraw at any time in the process prior to data analysis of the focus group.

(iii) The Focus Group and survey data will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the research team. Contributions during the focus group, however, will be heard by all other participants in that focus group.

(iv) While excerpts from the focus group 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.

I hereby consent to my son/daughter taking part in this research study in the form of a focus group.

Parent/Guardian Name: …………………………………………………………………………..

Students Name and School Year:………………………………………………………………

Parent/Guardian Signature:……………………………………………………………………

Researcher’s Signature………………………………………………………………………..Date:…………
Subject Information Letter (Participants – Focus Group)

Appendix E

Date

EHSREC no. : 2019_04_07_EHS.

Research title: Adolescent views on guidance counselling provision in an Irish post primary school

Dear Student,
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 Mr. Tom Geary. I am undertaking a research dissertation on guidance counselling.

What is the research about?
In my research I aim to explore the topic of guidance counselling in your school.

What will I have to do?
I would appreciate if you would agree to participate in a face-to-face audio-taped discussion, within a focus group. I will lead the group through a series of questions and we will discuss the topics and your views will be recorded. This discussion will take approximately 40 minutes and be held in a confidential location agreeable to you (Guidance Counsellors Office).
What are the benefits of taking part in the Focus Group?
Taking part in the focus group discussion will help us explore and examine the guidance counselling service in your school and your experiences of engaging with it. Your views, opinions, perspectives and suggestions will be explored and recorded.

It should be noted that as focus groups are conducted within a group setting, each participant’s contributions will be heard by the other participants within the group. However, each student will be asked to sign an agreement to keep all opinions expressed during the focus group private. The recordings will have any names or identifiers removed, will be stored in a secure location or on a password protected computer in UL, and the information will be stored for seven years. It will then be safely destroyed.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. The focus group will be audio tape recorded and the data will be destroyed after the analysis process. Participation in the study is voluntary. If a student wishes to leave the focus group on the day, they can do so and their data will not be removed. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

What are the risks?
You might decide that you don’t want to answer some of the questions. If this happens, you will not have to answer any question you do not wish to answer.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. It is important to note that your name will not be used in the reporting of the research. If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Mrs Karen Healy
Supervisor/s: Mr. Tom Geary.
Telephone number/s: 085 778 6610
UL Email address: 16097211@studentmail.ul.ie
UL Email address: tom.geary@ul.ie
Principal Investigator: Dr. Lucy Hearne,  
Email address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie  
Telephone number: 061202931  

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences  
Research Ethics Committee (2019_04_07_EHS) If you have any concerns about this study  
and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:  

Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
EHS Faculty Office  
University of Limerick  
Tel (061) 234101  
ehsresearchethics@ul.ie
Online Survey Information Email
(Participants)

Appendix F

Date

EHS Rec No: 2019_04_07_EHS

Research Title: Adolescent views on career guidance provision in an Irish post-primary school.

Dear Student,

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study on career guidance provision and student wellbeing through an online questionnaire. I am a student of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Mr. Tom Geary.

In my research, I aim to examine the current provision of career guidance counselling and student wellbeing in your school. The questionnaire will take approximately 20 minutes of your time, and needs to be completed by [enter date]. By completing this online questionnaire, you are consenting to participate in this research. Please click [https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/953P73G] to continue.

All information gathered in the questionnaire data will be held in the strictest of confidence, according to University of Limerick guidelines, policies and procedures. Participation in this study is voluntary. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through professional publications. 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: Mrs Karen Healy
Supervisor: Mr. Tom Geary
Telephone No/s.: 085 7786610
UL Email: 16097211@studentmail.ul.ie
Email Address/e: tom.geary@ul.ie

Principal Investigator: Dr. Lucy Hearne,
Email address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie
Telephone number: 061202931

This research study has been approved by the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (2019_04_07_EHS). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee
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University of Limerick
Tel (061) 234101
ehsresearchethics@ul.ie
Appendix G:

EHS REC no: 2019_04_07_EHS

Research Title: Adolescent views on guidance counselling provision in an Irish post-primary school.

- I understand what this research project is about, and what the results will be used for.
- I am fully aware of the procedures and of the risks and the benefits of the study.
- I am fully aware that the recording of the group interview and the data generated from it will be kept confidential.
- I am aware that my identity will remain anonymous.
- I know that my participation in the research study is voluntary and I can withdraw my involvement at any time prior to the data analysis stage.

I hereby agree to take part in this study:

Signature:_______________________________
Printed name:_____________________________
Signature of Researcher:___________________
Date:____________________________________
Appendix H:

EHS Rec No: 2019_04_07_EHS

Research Title: Adolescent views on guidance counselling provision and in an Irish post primary school.

Interviewers’ welcome: Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research study. As you are aware this research is being conducted as part of the Masters in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development. I aim to explore adolescent viewpoint on the guidance counselling service in an post primary school. I wish to hear about all your experiences, ideas, 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 thirty to forty minutes and you are free to withdraw at any time.

Section A – Guidance Counselling Provision (context of an Irish post primary school)

1. Can you explain your understanding of the provision/delivery of guidance counselling in this school?
2. Who is responsible for the provision of guidance counselling in the school and how is it delivered?
3. Do you feel you benefit from engaging with the guidance counselling service in the school?
4. In your opinion are there challenges or barriers for you engaging with the guidance counselling services in the school?
5. Can you describe how students are supported with their career guidance counselling?
6. Do you feel students need targeted guidance counselling at junior cycle? Can you please explain or expand on your answer?

Section B- Personal & Social Guidance Counselling Service

7. Have you been involved in any guidance or mental health (wellbeing) initiatives in the school? (For example mental health week, Pieta house flag, mindfulness….).
8. Can you explain your understanding of how students are supported with their personal and social development in the school?
9. How comfortable are you with peers approaching you with personal/social issues?
Appendix H:

EHS Rec No: 2019_04_07_EHS

Research Title: Adolescent views on the guidance counselling provision in an Irish post primary school.

Section B- Personal & Social Guidance Counselling Service

10. What do you understand by the term ‘wellbeing’?
11. Can you elaborate on what this programme means to young people?
12. Who delivers this programme in your school?
13. Are you timetabled for ‘wellbeing’/career guidance in TY?
14. To what extent do you think the content is relevant to your needs?

Section B- Personal & Social Guidance Counselling Service, Education & Career Provision.

15. Were you happy with your subject choice for the Junior Cert? Why?
16. Were you happy with your choice of subject levels for the Junior Cert? Why
17. What in your opinion are the implications following your choices for Junior cycle into senior cycle? Please explain your answer.
18. Why did you decide to take part in the TY programme?
19. To date has it been a positive experience?
20. Have you chosen your subjects for senior cycle?
21. Do you know what you would like to do after the Leaving Cert?
22. Are you familiar with the NUIG language exemptions/HEAR/DARE/Access programmes?
23. Have you accessed the career guidance service in your school to help with your subject choice?
24. If so, did you find your meetings and engagement in general helpful?
25. Have you anything further you wish to add?

Thank you so much for taking part in this group discussion/interview and giving up your time. The audio recording will be stopped.
Appendix I:

Transition Year Students Questionnaire Online Questionnaire (for Survey Monkey)

- Please tick the box to consent to take part in the study

I appreciate you taking the time to complete this questionnaire. It should take approximately 20 minutes. Your responses are voluntary and confidential. Please answer all of the questions in all of the sections.

Section A – Personal Guidance Counselling Services – Specific to the target School

Q1. Please write down your age and gender here ______________________

Q2. If you had a personal problem and wanted to talk to someone, confidentially, who would you approach in your school?
   a. Class Teachers
   b. Year Head/Class tutor
   c. Parent/Guardian/Carer
   d. Vice-Principal
   e. Principal
   f. Guidance Counsellor
   g. Chaplain
   h. Other person

Q3. Have you ever made an appointment to meet with the guidance counsellor in your school?
   Yes

   No

Q4. (a) If yes, do you feel that you had enough information about the personal guidance counselling service before you met with the counsellor?

   ____________________________________________________________
Q5. (b) if not, please write what else you would have liked to have known beforehand?
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Q6. Explain how you would go about making an appointment to meet with the guidance counsellor?
___________________________________________________________________________

Q7. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the service you received?
1 = Very dissatisfied 2= dissatisfied 3= quite satisfied 4= very satisfied

Q8. Overall, to what extent do you think guidance counselling has helped you? (Please Tick).
   a. Not at all
   b. A little
   c. Quite a lot
   d. A lot

Q9. If personal guidance counselling helped you, please write how it was useful to you?
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Q10. Which of the following areas has guidance counselling helped you with the most? (Please rate
From 1-6, 1 being the area it most helped you with and 6 the least).
   a. Helped me with subject choices for leaving cert.
   b. Helped me research work experience for TY
   c. Helped me with information on third level
   d. Helped me research further vocational training (apprenticeships, PLCs, agricultural colleges, Garda training…etc).
   e. Helped me with research on employment opportunities
   f. Helped me with my personal and social development

Q11. To what extent has guidance counselling helped you from a social/personal perspective? Please choose one of the options below. (Rate it from 0-3, 0 = least…..3 = the most).
   a. I feel better about myself
   b. I can deal more effectively with problems/issues
   c. It has improved my relationships with others
   d. It has improved how I deal with issues at home
   e. It has improved how I deal with issues in school
Appendix I:

Transition Year Students Questionnaire

Section A – Personal Guidance Counselling Services – Specific to the research school

Q12. On the basis of your experience of using the personal guidance counselling service, would you…
   a. Use the guidance counselling service again (Please tick as appropriate).
   b. Recommend the service to a friend

Q13. Overall, on a scale of 0 – 10 how important do you judge the personal guidance counselling service in your school? (0 = not at all 10 = essential). Please write no in the box

Q14. If you have any other suggestions or comments that you think might improve the provision of personal guidance counselling in your school, please write them down.

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

Q15. If you have met with the guidance counsellor, would you consider your meeting personal
      and social or more educational/vocational? (please tick,)
      a. Personal/social
      b. Educational/vocational
      c. This question does not apply to me

Please explain your answer.

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

Q16. Have you accessed or would you consider accessing external private counselling? (Please tick and expand on your choice).

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?

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

Q17. Do you feel there are adequate support structures in the schools to cater for your personal needs?
Yes
No
I don’t know

Q18. Are you comfortable telling confidential information to one of your class teachers?
Yes/No Please Explain your answer ____________________________________________

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Appendix I:

Transition Year Students Questionnaire

Section B – Education/Career Guidance Counselling Services in research school

Q19. Who in the school would you ask, if you had a career related question?

Teachers
Year Head/Class Tutor
Friends
Principal/Vice Principal
Guidance Counsellor
Chaplain
Peers
Other_____________________

Q20. What is your understanding by the term ‘educational/career guidance provision’ in your school? Please expand on your answer below;

___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Q21. Do you feel student needs are provided for in your school from an educational/careers perspective? Yes/No
Please expand on your answer
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Q22. Are you happy with the support offered to you from the guidance service in relation to your subject choice for senior cycle? If yes, please explain why?
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Q23. In your opinion, how best can this part of the career guidance service be improved?
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

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Sample Section of School’s Guidance Plan

A. Junior Cyle School Guidance Programme

The Wellbeing programme was introduced for first years from September 2017 and guidelines are given in the NCCA’s Wellbeing in Junior Cycle which aims to support schools in planning and developing a coherent Wellbeing programme. The Framework for Junior Cycle (December 2015) states that guidance provision may be included in the hours available for wellbeing in recognition of the unique contribution that guidance can make to the promotion of student’s wellbeing. The Circular letter ‘Arrangements for the Implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle (December, 2016) states the school’s Junior cycle programme ‘must include guidance education,

Therefore, based on the above guidelines the research school introduced a Wellbeing programme for first and third years since September 2017 under the guidance provision.

B. Social, Personal and Health Education – Junior Cycle

All students have one timetabled class period per week for the delivery of the SPHE curriculum. Staff are also supported to avail of training in this area. The aims of the programme include:

- To enable students, develop skill for self-fulfillment and living in communities
- To promote self-esteem and self-confidence
- To enable the students to develop a framework for responsible decision-making
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Sample Section of School's Guidance Plan

B. Social, Personal and Health Education – Junior Cycle

- To provide opportunities for reflection and discussion
- To promote physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing.

The programme is rolled out by delivering ten modules, each of which appear in each year of the three-year cycle. The modules incorporate belonging and integration, self-management, communication skills, physical health, friendship, relationships and sexuality, emotional health, influences and decisions.

Under the personal and social education for first years the aims of the guidance programme include:

- To help students identify and understand the six indicators of wellbeing
- To promote the key skills of wellbeing within themselves.
- To assist students cope with transition from primary to secondary school
- To assist students to get to know each other and their class groups.

The programme includes an Open Evening for parents/guardians and sixth class students, an Orientation day for first year students. Three class periods spread across the year with each dealing with topics of gratitude, emotions and building resilience. A Mentoring programme is also implemented by the Chaplain and a Friendship Programme is rolled out by outside personnel.
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B. Social, Personal and Health Education – Junior Cycle

There are also individual meetings with the Chaplain and class meetings with SPHE teachers, which are also Year Heads. The Guidance Counsellor and Chaplain may refer students to outside agencies.

C. Educational Guidance

The programme includes helping first year students to organize their time and homework, develop study skills, prepare for class tests, assistance with subject choice, introduce the concept of lifelong learning. In second year the programme reinforces an understanding of the decision-making process and personal responsibility. Teachers of SPHE, Religion and CSPE (Civic Social and Political Education) roll out the programme. Counselling is on-going and provided by the Guidance Counsellor and/or Chaplain with referrals to external agencies as required.

The programme in third year extends out the decision-making process to enable students make good subject choices and programmes for senior cycle. The programme also aims to raise students’ awareness of their traits, strengths and weaknesses to help them make informed subject and programme choices for senior cycle. Students are helped develop exam techniques and cope with exam nerves. Students are assisted to understand the relevance and usefulness of subjects and levels and how they relate to career and courses. The programme also raises students’ awareness of educational opportunities and the consequences of early school leaving.
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Sample Section of School’s Guidance Plan

D. Senior Cycle Guidance Programme

Senior students have three classes per week based on a seven-week rotation. Among the aims of the Transition Year programme are to build positive awareness of the importance of maintaining positive mental health. It also aims to encourage students to keep a daily diary of their Transition Year experience and of the highlights of each day/week. Students are encouraged to replace common misconception about mental health with knowledge and sensitivity.

The aims of the educational guidance component aim to:

- Enable students to make informed programme and subject choice for 5th year
- To deepen students’ understanding of the relevance and usefulness of subjects
- To deepen students’ awareness of educational opportunities and of the consequences of early school leaving
- To enable students to identify their abilities and career interests and develop an understanding of how these relate to choice of subjects, courses and careers
- To enable students to understand the concepts of qualifications, entry requirements, course requirements and work experience programme
- To enable students, prepare CV, letter of application and a cover letter
- To assist parents/guardians’ understanding of senior cycle programmes.
- To enable students, plan their own future visits to third-level colleges following a visit by the class to NUIG and GMIT.
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Sample Section of School’s Guidance Plan

E. Fifth and Sixth Year Career Guidance Programmes

The programme for fifth years and Leaving Cert students is similar however, they have two classes per week rotated four times during the year. The programme includes more in-depth exploring of progression routes to further and higher education. Students are helped develop research and ICT skills to allow access to information on further study and career options. Students have an opportunity to use sites like Qualifax, Careers Portal and access Career books and articles and complete worksheets to assist with career and personal development work.

All students complete an on-line aptitude test (Cambridge) to assist with subject and programme choices in third and 5th year/TY. The results of the tests are feedback following a meeting with the Career Guidance Counsellor. Students are helped to develop self-management skills including planning and organizational skills to foster good study habits.

Overall students gain an understanding of the third level system, transition from school to college and the world of work.

RE teachers and Resource and Learning Support teachers help conduct interest tests and Career Interest Inventory tests. Holland’s Personality test is also used in the school by the Guidance Counsellor in class. A number of guest speakers visit the school including Information Officers from local ITs, Colleges of Further Education and Universities. A guest
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Sample Section of School’s Guidance Plan

E. Fifth and Sixth Year Career Guidance Programmes

speaker from Solas also delivered a talk on apprenticeships to 5th years, TYs and Leaving Cert students.

There is a dedicated Guidance room with broadband connection. As well as a guidance resource room, IT classrooms, careers notice broad and storage cabinets for guidance resources.