A Qualitative Study of Post-Primary Guidance Counsellors’ Perceptions and Experiences of Critical Incidents in Their Schools

Laura O’Flanagan
Supervisor: Gerry Myers

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of post-primary guidance counsellors involved in critical incidents in Ireland. In recent years, budgetary issues have had implications for guidance counselling in Irish post-primary schools. Furthermore, additional in-school responsibilities have been highlighted for guidance counsellors (DES 2018; DES 2016a; DES 2013; DES 2012; ACCS et al. 2012). This study aims to gain insight into post-primary guidance counsellors’ perceptions and experiences of critical incidents in the current landscape of guidance provision.

Following a review of the literature, an interpretivist paradigm was employed using semi-structured interviews to gather data from nine qualified guidance counsellors who are working in the post-primary sector (Bryman 2012; Kvale 1996). Data was analysed using a thematic approach (Gibbs 2007; Glaser and Straus 1967).

The research findings identify that guidance counsellors play an integral role in critical incidents in Irish schools. They primarily support students, but they also support school staff in a critical incident. Their role changes in a critical incident, with extra work and more responsibility being placed upon them. The findings also conclude that critical incidents have ramifications for guidance counsellors, personally and professionally. As a result they require support throughout and following the incident.

Finally, a number of recommendations are put forward to inform policy, practice and research.
Declaration

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

Signature ___________________________________________________
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Firstly, thank you to the nine guidance counsellors who generously gave their time to the research interviews, this project would not have been possible without your unguarded, selfless honesty.

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Finally, I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my Nanny, Rita May. She disapproved of my long commute to “that place”, but she always made sure that I knew how proud she was.
# Table of Contents

*Abstract* ........................................................................................................................................... 2

*Declaration* ...................................................................................................................................... 3

*Acknowledgements* .......................................................................................................................... 4

*List of Figures and Tables* ................................................................................................................. 8

*Glossary* ........................................................................................................................................... 9

**Chapter 1: Introduction** .................................................................................................................. 10

1.0 Introduction .................................................................................................................................... 10

1.1 Context and justification for this research ..................................................................................... 10

1.2 The researcher’s positionality in the study ..................................................................................... 11

1.3 Research methodology used .......................................................................................................... 12

1.4 Aims and objectives of the study ................................................................................................... 12

1.5 Plan of the thesis ............................................................................................................................ 13

1.6 Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 14

**Chapter 2: Literature Review** ........................................................................................................ 15

2.0 Introduction ................................................................................................................................... 15

2.1 Guidance counselling ....................................................................................................................... 15

2.1.1 Irish guidance counselling .......................................................................................................... 15

2.1.2 A whole school approach to guidance counselling .................................................................... 17

2.1.3 Guidance counselling internationally .......................................................................................... 18

2.2: Critical incidents ............................................................................................................................ 19

2.2.1 What is a critical incident? ............................................................................................................ 19

2.2.2 Types of critical incident ............................................................................................................. 20

2.2.3 Planning for critical incidents ..................................................................................................... 20

2.2.4 The role of the guidance counsellor in a critical incident ......................................................... 22

2.2.5 Potential professional risks of critical incidents for guidance counsellors ................................. 23

2.3: External critical incident supports for schools and students ..................................................... 24

2.3.1.1 NEPS .................................................................................................................................. 25

2.3.2 International external critical incident supports for schools .................................................... 25

2.4 Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 27

**Chapter 3: Methodology** ................................................................................................................ 28

3.0 Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 28

3.1 Identification of research questions .............................................................................................. 28

3.2 Methodology .................................................................................................................................. 29

3.21 Choosing a paradigm ..................................................................................................................... 29

3.22 Rationale for selecting a qualitative approach .............................................................................. 30

3.23 Choosing methodology ................................................................................................................ 30

3.231 Group interviews and focus groups .......................................................................................... 30

3.232 Semi-structured interviews ........................................................................................................ 31

3.3 Research sample ............................................................................................................................ 33

3.4 Data analysis .................................................................................................................................. 33
Chapter 4: Findings ................................................................. 39

4.1 Introduction ....................................................................................... 39

4.2 Participants ......................................................................................... 39

4.3.1 Theme: The guidance counsellor’s primary role in a critical incident is supporting students ................................................................................. 42
Subtheme: Guidance counsellors help students to understand grief ....................................................................................................................... 42
Subtheme: Students want to be in contact with adults they know and trust in times of tragedy ................................. 43
Subtheme: Mindfulness practice is a useful tool for guidance counsellors in supporting students ............................................................ 43

4.3.2 Theme: The guidance counsellor supports school staff in critical incidents ........................................ 44
Subtheme: The Guidance Counsellor can support staff who do not know how to respond to a critical incident, or what to say .................................................................................................................. 44
Subtheme: It can be challenging to know where to pitch support with various staff members ............................. 45
Subtheme: There can be pressure on the guidance counsellor from school staff to manage students who are experiencing difficulty ...................................................... 45

4.3.3 Theme: Guidance counsellors experience a personal emotional impact in a critical incident ................................................................. 45
Subtheme: Guidance counsellors’ initial shock at the outset of a critical incident can give way to exhaustion ...................................................................................................................... 46
Subtheme: Guidance counsellors’ confidence in their abilities can be low in a critical incident .............................. 46
Subtheme: The emotional impact of a critical incident can have lasting effects for guidance counsellors ...................................................................................................................... 47

4.3.4 Theme: Guidance counsellors need support during and following a critical incident ................................. 47
Subtheme: In-school support is crucial for guidance counsellors ......................................................................................... 47
Subtheme: A supportive personal life can be beneficial for guidance counsellors .......................................................................................... 48
Subtheme: IGC Supervision can be a great support for guidance counsellors following a critical incident ............................................................. 48

4.3.5 Theme: A guidance counsellor’s role in school during a critical incident is very different from their usual day-to-day role as guidance counsellor .............................................. 49
Subtheme: Working in a critical incident can yield a sense of job satisfaction ................................................................. 49
Subtheme: Working in a critical incident changes how the guidance counsellor is viewed by colleagues .............................................................................................................. 49

4.3.6 Theme: Guidance counsellors need a range of ancillary skills to assist in the management of a critical Incident ........................................................................ 50
Subtheme: It is advantageous to have a robust critical incident policy prepared in advance ........................................ 50
Subtheme: There can be an advantage in recruiting external guidance counsellors to assist with student support in a time of crisis ........................................................................ 51

4.4 Conclusion ............................................................................................... 52

Chapter 5: Discussion ............................................................................. 53

5.0 Introduction ........................................................................................... 53

5.1 Overview of Research Findings ............................................................. 53

5.2 The guidance counsellor’s primary role in a critical incident is supporting students .................................... 54

5.3 The guidance counsellor supports school staff in critical incidents ................................................................................. 56

5.4 Guidance counsellors experience a personal emotional impact in a critical incident ........... 58
5.5 Guidance counsellors need support during and following a critical incident .......... 59
5.6 The guidance counsellor’s role in school during a critical incident is very different from their usual day-to-day role as guidance counsellor ................................................. 60
5.7 Ethical Considerations .................................................................................... 62
5.8 Conclusion ..................................................................................................... 63

Chapter 6: Conclusion ......................................................................................... 65

6.0 Introduction .................................................................................................... 65
6.1 Summary of research ..................................................................................... 65
6.2 Strengths of this study ................................................................................... 66
6.21 The semi-structured interview ..................................................................... 66
6.22 The interview questions ................................................................................. 66
6.3 Limitations of this study ................................................................................. 67
6.31 Limitations of the semi-structured interviews ............................................. 67
6.32 Limited size of the research sample ............................................................ 67
6.33 Limitations of the study in addressing the research questions ..................... 68
6.4 Implications of this research study ................................................................. 68
6.5 Recommendations .......................................................................................... 68
6.6 My personal learning in this research project .............................................. 70
6.7 Conclusion ..................................................................................................... 71

References ............................................................................................................. 72

Appendices ........................................................................................................... 87
APPENDIX A Volunteer recruitment letter ....................................................... 87
APPENDIX B Volunteer information sheet ....................................................... 88
APPENDIX C Participant consent form .............................................................. 90
APPENDIX D Interview Questions .................................................................... 91
List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1  Guidance counsellor competency chart (IGC 2018) .................................................. 16
Figure 2  Example of data coding .......................................................................................... 34
Figure 3  Example of data analysis ....................................................................................... 35
Figure 4  Example of data analysis and comparison ............................................................... 35
Figure 5  Extract from reflective journal .............................................................................. 36

Table 1  Key of school sizes .................................................................................................. 39
## Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACCS</td>
<td>Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASCA</td>
<td>American School Counselor Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAMHS</td>
<td>Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIMT</td>
<td>Critical Incident Management Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CISD</td>
<td>Critical Incident Stress Debriefing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education and Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELGPN</td>
<td>European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETB</td>
<td>Education and Training Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDPR</td>
<td>General Data Protection Regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GP</td>
<td>General Practitioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSE</td>
<td>Health Service Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IGC</td>
<td>Institute of Guidance Counsellors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCCA</td>
<td>National Council for Curriculum and Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCGE</td>
<td>National Centre for Guidance in Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCSE</td>
<td>National Council for Special Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEPS</td>
<td>National Educational Psychological Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REMS TA</td>
<td>Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UL</td>
<td>University of Limerick</td>
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This chapter will introduce the research study, set out the theoretical and practice context of this topic specific to guidance counselling, present my position as researcher in the study and provide justification for this research from relevant literature. It will also outline the research methodology used, the aims and objectives of the research project as well as provide a plan for the thesis.

1.1 Context and justification for this research

This research study is an exploration of the role of guidance counsellors in post-primary critical incidents. In 2017 all schools received a document from the Department of Education, published with the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), with revised guidelines to assist in planning for coping with critical incidents. They define a critical incident as “any incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school” (DES 2016a). Schools are advised to develop a “Critical Incident Management Plan” as well as a “Critical Incident Management Team”. (DES 2016a, p.16). Guidance counsellors are described as having an important role in a Critical Incident Management Team. It is recommended that guidance counsellors undertake a range of duties, including providing individual assistance to distressed students, receiving referrals from staff members who have concerns about students in distress, co-ordinating the Student Support Team, receiving training to build their skills in assessing suicide risk; and liaising with parents. It is also clearly stated that “NEPS does not provide counselling, but rather immediate, short term support, information and advice to staff” (DES 2016a, p.13). The “Wellbeing in Post Primary Schools” (DES 2013) policy document also highlights that “Schools need to maximise the use of their available resources for the provision of guidance and should seek to ensure that the guidance counsellor has time allocated for individual counselling with students experiencing difficulties or in crisis” (DES 2013, p.26). Research has shown that guidance counsellors perceive themselves as not supported sufficiently in the counselling aspect of their work (NCGE 2011). Currently, the education system is restoring guidance allocation that was removed through budgetary cuts. In 2012, 600 guidance posts were withdrawn from schools, and with effect from September 2018, 500 of these have been restored (DES 2018). This study will bring to light the complexity and
the challenges faced by guidance counsellors in a critical incident, in the context of these responsibilities and the changing landscape of allocation and guidance provision.

1.2 The researcher’s positionality in the study

Reflexivity is the process of critical self-evaluation of a researcher’s positionality as well as acknowledgement that this position may affect the research process and outcome. As such, data collected from a reflexive position reflects a researcher’s place in time and social space. (Berger 2015, Bryman 2012).

My positionality in this research is that I am currently a trainee guidance counsellor, working as an English teacher in a new Educate Together Secondary School that does not have a qualified guidance counsellor on-site. As the school is new, policies are currently being written. I have had a practical insight in how a guidance counsellor's role is defined in school critical incident policy. This sparked an interest in me in researching how guidance counsellors themselves perceive and experience their role in a school critical incident.

In accessing participants, I used snowball sampling, which involved sampling from a network of contacts, with one research contact leading to another (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). I began with one guidance counsellor whom I know professionally, and this guidance counsellor introduced me to another and so on. Cohen et al. (2007) warn that sampling in this way can lead to homogeneity of the sample’s attributes as participants may have close relationships with one another and may not wish to break these. I navigated this risk by not researching within my own school and by not confining my research to one group of guidance counsellors. The participants did not all know each other in this research study, and beyond the initial introduction, I did not discuss any details of participants within the sample group.

Throughout this research, I endeavoured to be a reflexive researcher, and confronted the challenge of “continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation” (Berger 2015, p.220) by keeping a reflective journal. For this journal, I used ‘Driscoll’s “What?” model of reflection as detailed in Bassott (2016). This method of reflection begins with ‘What’. At this stage, the writer details the experience. The next stage is ‘So what’. At this stage, the writer reflects of the meaning, context and implications of the experience. The final stage is ‘What now’. At this stage the writer looks at ways of learning from the experience. Cohen et al. (2007) state that the researcher is a research instrument and that researcher reflexivity requires close monitoring of their own interactions with participants closely; as well as their own roles, biases, and any other
issues which might impact the research. Using this reflective journal allowed me to interrogate any biases or assumptions I had about the research and facilitated me in being a reflexive researcher.

1.3 Research methodology used

I conducted this research within the interpretivist paradigm to gain insight into guidance counsellors’ perceptions and experiences of their role in post-primary critical incidents. This took the form of nine semi-structured interviews with guidance counsellors who were selected for the study using snowball sampling. Data analysis was performed through thematic coding.

1.4 Aims and objectives of the study

The main aim for this study is to explore guidance counsellors' perceptions and experiences of their role in post-primary school critical incidents. The research questions are focused on the perceptions and experiences of guidance counsellors in the creation of school policy and also aims to explore how they perceive their role and what experiences they have during and after critical incidents. In addition, the study aims to gain insight into guidance counsellors' perspectives on how their role in critical incidents is seen by others in the school community.

The key objectives were:

1. Review relevant literature which relates to policy, practice and emerging research relating to the topic to provide a context to underpin the study.
2. To explore the experience and perceptions of qualified guidance counsellors of their role in post-primary critical incidents.
3. Conduct nine semi-structured interviews with guidance counsellors in a region of Ireland to gain insight into the guidance counsellors’ lived experience in post-primary schools of critical incidents.
4. Identify recommendations for future post-primary practice, policy and research in the light of this research study.

In the next section I will give a chapter by chapter overview of the thesis.
1.5 Plan of the thesis

There are six chapters in this thesis. In this section, I will briefly summarise the contents of each chapter.

Chapter 1 Introduction
This chapter introduces the research study, sets out the theoretical and practice context of this topic specific to guidance counselling, presents my position as researcher in the study and provides justification for this research from relevant literature.
It also outlines the research methodology used, the aims and objectives of the research project, as well as providing a plan for the thesis.

Chapter 2 Literature Review
This chapter examines policy documents and literature on the topics of guidance counselling and critical incidents. It is divided into three sections. The first section looks at post-primary guidance counselling in Ireland and internationally. The second section examines literature and research on critical incidents. The third section profiles the role of external supports in critical incidents for schools and students in Ireland and internationally. It also identifies key issues which arise in and from the literature.

Chapter 3 Methodology
This chapter considers the research questions, discusses the rationale behind the selection of the interpretivist paradigm and also considers the research methodology. The ethical considerations of the research study are also addressed.
Chapter 4  Findings

This chapter describes the participants involved in the study in their individual contexts and discusses the main themes and sub-themes which emerged from a thematic analysis of the data.

Chapter 5  Discussion

This chapter discusses and synthesises the key issues which arose in the literature with the main themes which arose in the research. Ethical considerations are also discussed.

Chapter 6  Conclusion

This chapter provides an overall conclusion to the study. It evaluates the merits and limitations of this research study. It also provides implications of the research study with recommendations for future practice, policy and research in the education field.

1.6  Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided an introduction to this research study. This chapter set out the theoretical and practice context of this topic specific to guidance counselling, presented my position as researcher in the study and provided justification for this research from relevant literature.

It also outlined the research methodology used, the aims and objectives of the research project and provided a plan for the thesis. The next chapter will review relevant literature related to the research topic.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Machi and McEvoy (2009, p.4) say that a literature review should provide a well-argued logical case based on a comprehensive understanding about the current state of knowledge on a topic. It should establish a thesis which is convincing enough to answer the question raised. While Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) describe a literature review as a critical evaluation of what the researcher sees as the relevant issues and questions which will be addressed in the research. The purpose of this literature review is firstly to provide the reader with an idea of key questions and the state of knowledge in relation to guidance counselling and critical incidents and, secondly, to outline what other research has already been carried out in the area (Bryman 2012). This review examines policy documents and literature on the topics of guidance counselling and critical incidents and is divided into three sections. The first section examines post-primary guidance counselling both in Ireland and internationally. The second section analyses literature and research on critical incidents. The third section profiles the role of external supports in critical incidents for schools and students in Ireland and internationally. The review will also identify key issues which arise.

2.1 Guidance counselling

Foxx et al. (2017) place guidance counselling as a profession in the behavioural sciences within the applied fields of education and counselling. This section examines literature and policy on guidance counselling in Ireland and internationally.

2.1.1 Irish guidance counselling

In Ireland, guidance counselling was introduced into post-primary education in 1966 (Sheil and Lewis 1993). Irish government policy sets out that “students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices” (Education Act 1998). Post-primary guidance counselling services in Ireland incorporate an integrated approach including personal, educational and vocational aspects (NCGE 2004). The role of the guidance counsellor is clearly defined. It is to engage with clients “in personal, educational and vocational counselling… in the particular circumstances of the life” (IGC 2012a, p.3).
In 1968, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) was established. The IGC, representing over 1,330 practitioners, is the professional body for guidance counsellors in Ireland. These counsellors are placed in adult guidance services, private practice as well as post-primary schools and third level colleges (IGC 2019). The Irish Institute of Guidance Counsellors set out a code of ethics (IGC 2012a) and a competency framework (IGC 2018).

![Diagram](image)

(IGC 2018, p.9)

Figure 1

The self at the centre of this chart refers to the self of the guidance counsellor. The fact that it is placed at the centre suggests that the personal values and qualities of the individual guidance counsellor form the base for competent practice. The acquired theoretical knowledge and skills provide the guidance counsellor with the ability to act professionally and perform their core duties.

Post-primary guidance counsellors are qualified second-level teachers who hold an additional qualification in Guidance recognised by the Department of Education and Science (DES 2009, p.6). Irish government policy states post-primary guidance activities include, *inter alia*, designing a guidance programme; individual and group counselling to facilitate personal, educational and career development; providing labour market information; using psychometric tests; leading the whole school guidance plan; and, making appropriate referrals and establishing links with feeder schools, further education and higher education. (DES 2016b). In post primary Irish schools, the guidance counsellor’s role is a complex one. The provision of guidance in schools incorporates personal, educational and vocational guidance (NCGE 2004). Irish state educational policy documents set out that the guidance counsellor is a key figure in the co-ordination of a Student Support Team (DES 2014).
In the co-ordination of a Student Support Team, the co-ordinator is tasked with, *inter alia*, organising and preparing meetings; liaising with attendees; circulating documentation; making appropriate referrals, and keeping staff informed of actions. This is in addition to the guidance counsellor’s role which includes: providing ongoing support to teachers and students and acting as a contact point for parents and outside agencies (DES 2014). Guidelines for wellbeing and suicide prevention in post-primary schools also place the guidance counsellor in a key role in schools (DES 2013). Additionally, it is recommended that “Timetabling guidance as part of Wellbeing in first year could be very beneficial” (NCCA 2017, p.49) Therefore, there is little doubt that the Irish guidance counsellors’ role is both multi-faceted and complex.

2.1.2 A whole school approach to guidance counselling

A whole school approach to guidance counselling places direct responsibility on the entire school to deliver a guidance programme across curricula with the guidance counsellor leading (ACCS 2012; Ireland, Department of Education 2005a, 2012, 2017; Hearne *et al.* 2018; NCGE 2004). This type of approach to guidance counselling is advocated by Irish policymakers. It aligns with international thinking that the entire school community, including management, teaching staff and other stakeholders have a responsibility for delivering guidance (OECD 2004; EU *et al.* 2014; ACCS *et al.* 2017). Guidance is a “whole school activity where each school collaboratively develops a whole-school guidance plan as a means of supporting the needs of students” (DES, 2017). Guidance planning in this respect “should involve the guidance counsellor(s) in the first instance, other members of school staff and management also have key roles to play” (DES, 2012). Accordingly, although it is led by the guidance counsellor, the whole school approach to guidance counselling relies on the involvement of all members of the school community. The directions on whole school guidance provisions came from policy-makers during the same period that guidance allocation to schools was being redesigned. In 2012, guidance counselling’s status as ex-quota \(^1\) was removed. Thus, school managers were directed to source guidance from within the school’s allocation of teachers (DES 2012). This resulted in a total of six hundred guidance counsellor posts being withdrawn from schools. As of September 2018, five hundred of these have been restored (DES 2018). Therefore, it is clear that guidance counselling has undergone significant changes in the recent years and that budgetary issues have impacted upon staffing and allocation.

\(^1\) Extra to the allocation of teachers which is calculated through the pupil-teacher ratio (DES 2019)
The emphasis on a whole school approach to guidance counselling in Irish post-primary schools became more pronounced following the cuts to provision in 2012 (Hearne et al. 2018). A guidance counsellor, leading a whole school approach to guidance counselling at a time of such flux in guidance provision in Irish schools, is tasked with leading this approach on precarious foundations. Additionally, research conducted by McCoy et al. (2006) found that there is a lack of understanding of the precise nature of the role of the guidance counsellor in Irish schools among subject teachers and management. This lack of understanding of the role, when placed in the context of the changing landscape of guidance provision over the past number of years in Ireland, further undermines the foundation of a whole-school approach to guidance counselling where school stakeholders (guidance counsellors, all members of management and staff, as well as students and parents, local business, NEPS and other agencies) all have a role in delivering guidance (Hearne et al. 2018). Hunt et al. (2015) identify a lack of staff understanding of whole school initiatives as being a major barrier to their success. If the guidance counsellor’s role is unclear to stakeholders, then the whole-school approach is somewhat compromised. This can have a negative impact on the delivery of guidance to students.

2.1.3 Guidance counselling internationally

European policy sets out that career guidance provides services to help people at various points throughout their lives to manage their educational and vocational decisions (OECD 2004). At a European level, guidance is referred to as an ongoing process that encourages clients to identify their capacities and competencies, thus enabling them to make informed decisions relating to their education and careers (ELGPN 2015).

In the United States of America, the American School Counselor’s Association (ASCA) describe school counsellors as

“uniquely qualified to address all students’ academic, career and social/emotional development needs by designing, implementing, evaluating and enhancing a comprehensive school counseling program that promotes and enhances student success”.

(ASCA 2019)

This aligns with the Irish integrated model of guidance counselling which is concerned with “personal, vocational and educational guidance” (IGC 2012a).

In the United Kingdom, a distinction is drawn between personal and career guidance with these being delivered separately, as opposed to the Irish integrated model. In Scotland, the term
‘guidance’ is used in place of ‘pastoral care’. Guidance posts are structured through formal promotion in all state schools (Watts and Kidd 2000) whereas in England, there are several counselling models currently being used. Some schools employ counsellors, either as salaried staff, or by having individual contracts with self-employed counsellors (UK, Department for Education 2016, Everitt et al. 2018). In England, career guidance in school has responsibility for providing access to independent and impartial information, advice and guidance. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland career guidance is provided through government funded independent careers services (Euroguidance 2019).

In contrast to this, Irish schools, through the use of the integrated model, lay responsibility for the three areas of guidance at the foot of the post-primary guidance counsellor, as opposed to the UK model where this responsibility is divided.

2.2: Critical incidents

This section examines literature on critical incidents, which is sometimes referred to as a crisis. The terms are used interchangeably in this section.

2.2.1 What is a critical incident?

A school crisis can be defined as a situation that incumbers the running of a school organisation and overwhelms the school’s usual coping mechanisms. It is characterised by uncertainty, complexity and urgency (DES, 2016; Tokel 2018; Liou 2015). Atici (2014) reports that school counsellors deal with various crises in their work such as bereavement, aggression, conflict, accidents and injuries. A school crisis exposes students and staff to danger and trauma which threatens the security and constancy of the entire school (Morrison 2007). Trauma can be defined as the response to stressful events where coping abilities are undermined (TLPI 2019). School based trauma is inevitable (Werner 2014). During a crisis, immediate support helps to facilitate recovery for the students and the school community. It is fair to say that school counsellors are the frontline of psychological response and recovery. They are often the first professional that students and families come into contact with following a crisis (Allen et al. 2002; Werner 2014).
2.2.2  Types of critical incident

Irish government literature lists the types of critical incidents in Irish schools as suicide or suspected suicide, violent or accidental death, and, death through illness (DES, 2016). Werner (2014) states that school crisis plans should typically include procedures and guidelines for adequate responses to a variety of potential events. Irish schools have faced a broad array of crises which extend far beyond the scope of the DES (2016) list. For example, in 2000, four pupils who had recently graduated from Blackrock College in Dublin were charged with the murder of a fellow past student. The school’s name was widely reported in the media (Donnellan 2000). In 2006, five school girls were killed in a school bus crash in Co. Meath. This was a crisis which extended into the community and the effects are still lingering a decade after the event (Clifford 2015). In 2018, a female teacher in Dublin was charged with the defilement of a male student (Foy 2018). In 2019, two students of a school in Leinster were convicted of the murder of their school colleague. This was a major crisis in the school, with the guidance counsellor being called to testify in court (Gallagher 2019; MacNamee 2019). The contrast between the complexity of these incidents and the incidents described by Irish government policy suggests that Irish guidance counsellors may have to face critical incidents without being adequately prepared. Therefore, it can be argued that this list is somewhat limited and in need of review and development.

2.2.3  Planning for critical incidents

Experts in this area agree that advance planning for crisis events and creating crisis teams are crucial for effectual crisis response (Adamson and Peacock 2007). Villarreal and Peterson (2015) assert that schools must be prepared to respond to crises and the effects that crisis events may have on students. They also suggest that formation of crisis teams which are focused to meet the needs of particular schools is one way of making the necessary preparations. Allen et al. (2002) assert that guidance practitioners must be prepared to actively and competently participate in the development and execution of crisis plans, including participation on crisis teams. Research conducted by Nickerson and Zhe (2004), in the United States of America, found that crisis response teams were the most commonly used and perceived as being the most effective strategy, in a time of school crisis.

More USA based research, conducted by Werner (2014), found an increase from 57% in 2002 to 69% in 2014 of school counsellors reporting feeling moderately to extremely prepared for a
crisis situation. Werner posits that this may have resulted from an increase in school counsellors’ awareness of their role as members of the frontline in crisis response and recovery. Irish schools, in a government publication which was issued to all schools, are advised to implement Critical Incident Management Teams. This document also presents preventative approaches for schools to adopt to create a secure and supportive culture for students (DES, 2016a). As discussed above, the list of potential critical incidents detailed by Irish government policy (outlined in section 2.1) is quite limited and is in need of review and development. The potential for effective contingency planning for crisis events is impacted by this limited list.

Werner (2014) includes school shootings on the list of possible crises in the American context. This inclusion is not without merit. American schools have had numerous shooting incidents, with Columbine High School in Ohio, being one of the most notorious. This shooting in 2000 resulted in the death of fifteen and the injury of twenty four members of the Columbine High School community (Cullen 2009). Since then, contingency plans for school shootings have become a feature of school crisis planning, with both American and European schools adopting this as a form of crisis planning (Werner 2014; Atici 2012; Allen et al. 2002). In Germany in 2009, contingency planning for a school shooter enabled the school principal to give a coded warning over the school’s intercom (Davies and Pidd 2009). However, it should be pointed out that Irish schools are not prepared for such an event. This is primarily due to the limited scope of the DES (2016) guidelines.

In the aftermath of a school crisis, debate surrounds psychological debriefing in supporting students and the school community in processing their trauma. Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) is the most widely used form of psychological debriefing (Raphael and Wilson 2000). CISD has seven phases: introduction, the facts, thoughts and impressions, emotional reactions, normalization, planning for the future, and disengagement. This practice has been adopted by numerous school districts across the USA as their post-crisis procedure (Yifeng et al. 2010). Research conducted by Morrison (2007, p.773) found “considerable consensus regarding their positive perceptions” among school counsellors using this model following a critical incident. However, there are differing opinions on the safety of psychological debriefing following a crisis. Some research indicates that it can have no effect.

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2 “Psychological debriefing is a group-oriented intervention in which the participants examine the major elements of the stressful event shortly after their exposure” (Raphael and Wilson 2000, p.162)
on recovery from trauma (Slomski 2003; Yifeng et al. 2010). Raphael and Wilson (2000, p.165) describe a “worrisome negative impact” of psychological debriefing. Yifeng et al. (2010) question the safety of psychological debriefing. They posit that it interferes with internal natural processes which work to recover from emotional distress. Therefore, they claim it tends to inhibit normal recovery from trauma. Irish government policy on critical incident management does not refer to psychological debriefing. Follow-up is outlined in terms of referral to outside agencies of students who are not coping within six weeks of the incident (DES 2016a, p.30). Liou (2014 p. 280) stresses the importance of reflection in the post-crisis phase in schools. In Irish state policy, while in-school follow up is not outlined in detail, an evaluation process of the incident is recommended (DES 2016a, p.31).

2.2.4 The role of the guidance counsellor in a critical incident

Research has found that in a time of crisis, school managers often cite the guidance counsellor as a key figure in the resolution of a crisis (Tokel 2018). In 2001, future school administrators rated crisis intervention as one of the most important duties of a school counsellor (Fitch et al. 2001). Therefore, the guidance counsellor is perceived as a key figure in the management of these crisis situations. Indeed, Irish government policy places the guidance counsellors in a key role in a critical incident, including the following responsibilities: providing support for very distressed students; acting as in-school support and being available for school referrals; assisting with the identification of those who may need additional support; assisting with the reintegration of bereaved children to school and exploring student reactions to a critical incident (DES 2016a). Therefore, in the event of a school-based crisis, the guidance counsellor is charged with additional emergency responsibilities outside of their normal remit of personal, social, vocational and educational guidance (NCGE 2004). Following the reallocation of guidance in 2012, (detailed in section 1.3), the IGC (2017) reported a 51.4% reduction in one-to one guidance counselling hours.

With the reduction in allocation, and the more recent restructuring of guidance services with the restoration of some of the hours, the profession is in a time of flux and inconstancy. This factor can potentially pose professional risks for guidance counsellors. The next section discusses this issue.
2.2.5 Potential professional risks of critical incidents for guidance counsellors

There are potential professional risks for guidance counsellors involved in critical incidents. McLeod (2003) identifies having too many clients, with not enough time, as being a contributing factor to burnout. Hamilton (2008, p.12) defines burnout as “a state of physical, mental and emotional exhaustion or dissatisfaction with one's work situation.” With the added workload of a critical incident, and the flux and inconstancy in Irish guidance counselling, described in section 2.2.4, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that Irish guidance counsellors are vulnerable to professional burnout. Rothschild (2004) notes that counsellors’ empathy with clients can result in them taking on the feelings of the client in a physiological way which can lead to compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue is considered as “secondary traumatic stress” (Hamilton 2008, p.14). Hamilton (2008) states that a counsellor experiences this secondary trauma through exposure to the victim’s trauma or experience. Hamilton (2008, p.11) warns of the issue of compassion fatigue in school counsellors who “begin to notice that they are not emotionally available to themselves or to the important people in their personal lives”. Many school counsellors feel unprepared for their own reactions to the trauma of others (Hamilton 2008).

The complexity of the Irish guidance counsellor’s role in a school setting, particularly in relation to their placement at the centre of a Critical Incident Management Team (DES, 2016) poses serious and definite risks for compassion fatigue, burnout and secondary traumatic stress. In fact, counsellors who are unknowingly affected can damage vulnerable clients and cause harm by becoming invasive and hostile with clients (Corey 2013). This may also reduce a counsellor's attentiveness, patience or ability to focus and think clearly (Hamilton 2008). A. Cooper (2003) advises that a counsellor’s work is tiring and that practitioners require the opportunity to process their experiences, to ensure that they remain engaged and stay effective. Irish guidance counsellors are advised that attending supervision supports practitioners in relation to client issues and can help reduce work related stress (IGC 2017). Reid (2010) defines supervision as “the experienced person looks from above (super) on the work of a less experienced person and has a view (vision) of the work”. The IGC provides Department of Education and Skills funded supervision to qualified post-primary guidance counsellors through the ‘Professional Support (Counselling Supervision) Programme for Second Level Guidance Counsellors’ (IGC 2012b). Reid (2010) stresses that clients require a practitioner who is resilient. Riley and McDaniel (2000) refer to the importance of school
counsellors being aware that they themselves are part of the school community which has been impacted by crisis and that they must take care of themselves. Research has identified having an external life and hobbies outside of work, as well as having professional support, as conditions necessary for the resilience of guidance practitioners (Hearne 2012). Therefore, guidance counsellors must be possessed of the self-awareness necessary to seek help and maintain their external life in order to best support their students in a critical incident.

2.3: External critical incident supports for schools and students

This section examines external psychological supports for schools and students in critical incidents.

2.3.1 Irish external critical incident school supports

In the event of a critical incident, NEPS psychologists are the primary support for Irish schools (DES 2016). Primary Care psychologists and/or CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) staff will also support schools, when so requested. The most recently published HSE performance report, (2019d) shows that only 70.4% of young people urgently referred to CAMHS were seen within three working days, far below the target of 100%. At the same time, 8,498 individuals were waiting to be seen by primary care psychologists, far in excess of their target of 7,918 for this period. The pressure on these services is evident in these figures. Furthermore, in the event that there are general concerns about suicide, schools can consult the HSE Suicide Resource Officer, of which there are nine throughout the country (DES 2013, HSE 2019c). It is clear from these figures that in a critical incident post-primary guidance counsellors are tasked with making referrals to services that may not be immediately available to distressed students.

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3 Primary Care psychologists, funded by the HSE, work in the community to support the psychological well-being of people who live in an area. (HSE 2019a)

4 CAMHS, funded by the HSE, is a service for people under the age of eighteen with mental health difficulties. (HSE 2019c)

5 There are nine HSE funded Suicide Resource Officers nationally, as part of the Connecting for Life Strategy 2015-20 (DES 2015, HSE 2019b)
2.3.1.1 NEPS

In September 1999, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) was formally established as an executive agency of the Department of Education and Science (DES) in Ireland (NCSE 2019).

The mission statement of NEPS is as follows:

“Our mission is to work with others to support the personal, social and educational development of all children through the application of psychological theory and practice in education, having particular regard for children with special educational needs”.

(NCSE 2019)

NEPS’ mission statement closely echoes those areas in which guidance counselling is concerned, namely: “personal, vocational and educational guidance” (IGC 2012a). NEPS is organised into ten regions across Ireland. It is a school-based service to both primary and post primary schools (NCSE 2019). Since the establishment of the Schools Psychological Service in 1965, psychologists have been involved in assisting school communities to respond to critical incidents. This has continued to be a fundamental part of the work of NEPS (DES 2016).

Somewhat surprisingly, in the establishment of a Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT), the NEPS psychologist’s role is giving advice and support to school staff, but not directly giving support to students (DES 2016a).

2.3.2 International external critical incident supports for schools

The UK Department for Education (2014) commissioned a guide to managing critical incidents. This document sets out strategies for managing a critical incident through the establishment of a school-led critical incident management team. This does not directly involve an outside agency such as NEPS in Ireland. However, the document outlines external supports available for students in need of more support than the school can internally provide (UK, Department for Education 2014). UK based research indicates that schools refer students to a range of agencies for external psychological support including local public health teams, local authorities, specialist mental health services and mental health organisations. This provides specialist support and guidance for schools (UK, Department for Education 2017).

In the USA, the Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Supportive Schools oversees the REMS TA Center (Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical
Assistance). REMS TA “build the preparedness capacity (including prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery efforts) of schools” (USA, Department of Education 2019, p.1). This comes in the form of resources and guidelines for establishing critical incident management teams and implementing contingency plans and drills for emergency situations. The centre also advocates the use of Psychological First Aid for Schools\(^6\) in the immediate aftermath of an emergency and encourages schools to train their existing staff in this model (USA, Department of Education 2019). A study conducted by McCabe et al. (2014) found that this model is effective for a large variety of psychological crises. It is suitable for training both professional and lay participants, and, is applicable to a broad range of crisis incidents.

Both of these international jurisdictions, along with Ireland, place the management of crisis events as an internal school responsibility (DES 2016a, USA, Department of Education 2019, UK, Department for Education 2017). In this respect, school staff are regarded as being best equipped to manage critical incidents. “Best practice indicates that in the aftermath of a critical incident, students need to be with people they know and trust” (DES 2016a, p.13). School staff are adults that students know. Research has indicated that they are also adults whom students trust. In the “My World Survey” (Fitzgerald and Dooley 2012), school students surveyed about accessing formal mental health support ranked their Doctors/GPs as the most common source of formal support accessed (19%), followed by their guidance counsellors or teachers (12%). Mitchell et al. (2016) report that this trust can facilitate intervention and can assist in the creation of a safer school environment.

This highlights the importance of the role of the guidance counsellor in an emergency situation, both as a direct support to students and as a support to teachers who are giving support to students in a critical incident.

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\(^6\) Psychological First Aid for Schools is an intervention model designed to reduce the initial distress caused by emergencies, facilitates the expression of difficult feelings and helps students to developing coping strategies and actions to deal with fear and anxiety. (USA, Department of Education 2019)
2.4 Conclusion

This literature review highlights key issues in the area of guidance counselling and critical incidents. These key issues include the complexity of Irish post-primary guidance counselling and the broad ranging scope of responsibilities of the professional guidance counsellor. In a critical incident, the guidance counsellor works in an unpredictable and high-risk environment. We have seen that in such an environment, serious additional responsibilities are placed upon the guidance counsellor, and that external supports are not offered to students directly. Students can be referred to outside agencies, but there is pressure on these services and they may not be immediately available. Contested issues exist in the literature around the area of crisis management. This research aims to explore how the guidance counsellor navigates these challenges. There is a need to understand the consequences of a critical incident in the professional practice of guidance counsellors so that it can ensured that students receive optimal guidance from a professional who is, in fact, capable of delivering it.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

Research, according to Tuckman and Harper, is “a systematic attempt to provide answers to questions” (2012, p.3). Methodology, or research design, relates to criteria which are used when evaluating research (Bryman 2012). In undertaking this research project into post-primary guidance counsellors’ perceptions and experiences of critical incidents, I have the option of two alternative methodological paradigms. Thomas (2013) describes the paradigms. Positivist research obtains knowledge objectively, it can be measured, it is quantitative. The interpretivist approach is interested in individuals, and in how they connect. It is qualitative. Cohen et al. (2007) advise researchers to be guided by the principle of fitness for purpose when selecting a research paradigm. The focus of this chapter is to consider the best possible approach for my research. Firstly, the research questions are considered. Secondly, the rationale behind selection of a particular paradigm is discussed. Thirdly, the research methodology is considered and examined. Lastly, the ethical considerations of this research study are addressed.

3.1 Identification of research questions

The primary research question of this study asks: what are the perceptions and experiences of guidance counsellors of post-primary school critical incidents? The aim of the study is to obtain insight into the experiences and perceptions of guidance counsellors working in Irish schools in the current landscape of guidance provision. The objectives of the study are to gain insight and data on the roles a guidance counsellor plays in the contingency planning for critical incidents, in the creation of policy, in the actual crisis event and also how they experience other stakeholders’ perceptions of their role – with a view to understanding the guidance counsellor’s own experience of a critical incident, and the impact it has on their role within the school.

Bryman (2012) asserts that research questions should be informed by the literature. The research questions in this study are linked to the complexity of the guidance counsellor’s role as outlined in the literature review but are viewed through the lens of the Irish post-primary context and the guidelines published by Irish policy-makers, as discussed in chapter two.
Basit (2010) recommends that research questions should be linked to the aims and objectives of the study. There are several questions which arise from the aim and objectives of this study and six such questions are detailed below.

The research questions are:

1. What involvement does the guidance counsellor have in the creation of a school critical incident policy?
2. What are the expectations of school managers of a guidance counsellor’s role in a critical incident?
3. What roles do guidance counsellors play in a critical incident?
4. How effective is a critical incident policy when put into practice?
5. What supports are available to a guidance counsellor during and after a critical incident?
6. In what ways has the guidance counsellor’s role been impacted by the experiences of critical incidents within a school?

In the next section of this chapter, I will discuss my approach to this research. I will discuss qualitative and quantitative methodologies and my rationale for opting to research using a qualitative approach.

3.2 Methodology

A paradigm is a model of conceptual framework that assists the researcher in structuring their ideas, beliefs, perspectives and practices into a logical form and as a result, inform their research design (Basit 2010). In this section I will outline my rationale for selecting qualitative methods for this research study. My questions stem from a wish to understand the guidance counsellor’s experiences and perceptions of their role and as such I believe that the qualitative approach is the best method to lead to this understanding.

3.21 Choosing a paradigm

A quantitative approach to research, based in the epistemological paradigm of positivism, is founded on the idea that knowledge can be obtained objectively (Thomas 2013). A quantitative study collects facts and examines the relationship between one set of facts and another (Bell
In this way, the researcher’s aim is to obtain factual data which can be analysed to yield objective findings. Approaches to quantitative methodology often involve surveys (Basit 2010). In my research, my aims and objectives set out to obtain an understanding of a guidance counsellor’s experiences and perceptions of critical incidents. These are personal to the individual guidance counsellors and are concerned with their subjective perceptions and experiences. The research therefore sets out to yield subjective data. Quantitative methodology and its basis in empirical data and objectivity is consequently an unsuitable approach for this study and therefore I chose not to use it.

3.22 Rationale for selecting a qualitative approach

A qualitative approach to research, based in the epistemological paradigm of interpretivism, is founded on the idea that knowledge is perceived by human beings in a subjective way (Thomas 2013). A qualitative study is interested in gaining understanding of peoples’ perceptions. (Bell 2010). In this way, the researcher’s aim is to obtain insight into individual’s experiences of the world. Qualitative methodology aims to achieve “depth rather than breadth” (Basit 2010, p.16). As my research questions are concerned with gaining understanding of the perceptions and experiences of guidance counsellors, a qualitative approach to the research is best suited to this study.

3.23 Choosing methodology

In order to address my research questions effectively, I considered different qualitative methodologies which allow me to gain insight into other peoples’ experiences and perceptions. I considered using group interviews with guidance counsellors, focus groups with guidance counsellors and semi-structured interviews with guidance counsellors. I will now present my rationale for selecting semi-structured interviews with guidance counsellors as my methodology for this research.

3.231 Group interviews and focus groups

Focus groups are group discussions led by a facilitator with a particular topic for the discussion (Silverman 2013). A group interview is similar to a focus group in that there is a group discussion, but the main difference between the two is the role of the facilitator. In a group interview, the facilitator leads the discussion and individuals respond to the researcher’s
questions, whereas in a focus group, the group discuss a topic (Thomas 2013). In exploring the possibility of using group interviews or focus groups as my chosen methodology, I had a number of factors to consider. A potential advantage of group interviews and focus groups for this study is that they are time-efficient. I could meet guidance counsellors in groups and this would save me the time and logistics of organising individual interviews. Working with deadlines, this is appealing. However, Savin-Baden and Major (2013) discuss some limitations of working with groups in research. They state that group discussions are not the best approach to use when the “discussion has the potential to become emotionally charged” and that individuals may feel “silenced by the presence of others” (Savin-Baden and Major 2013, p.389). My research questions are concerned with guidance counsellors’ individual experiences and perceptions of their role. A group discussion would not necessarily allow a guidance counsellor to fully express their individual experience in an incident. As this research project is interested in an area that has the potential to create strong emotions in research participants as they recall and reflect upon their role within critical incidents, a focus group is not the ideal methodology. Another issue in choosing a methodology, discussed by Hearne (2013), is nonmaleficence in guidance counselling research. This is the concept of minimising the risk of personal, psychological, emotional and professional damage to research participants. The use of focus groups in this study raises the issue of nonmaleficence as individuals are being asked to recall incidents which may have been upsetting and difficult. To do this in a setting that could potentially become emotionally charged, and which also has the potential for them to feel silenced in the presence of others, presents a risk in the use of group interviews and focus groups as a methodology. This risk outweighs the advantage of time efficiency.

For these reasons, I decided not to use focus groups or group interviews for this research.

3.232 Semi-structured interviews

The methodology in this research study is face-to-face, individual semi-structured interviews with guidance counsellors. The semi-structured interview was chosen as I wished to have the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and did not wish to stick rigidly to questions as I would have had to in a structured interview (Thomas 2013). Interviews are suited “for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues and enable probing for more information and clarification of answers” (Barriball and While 1994, p.30). In this way, semi-structured interviews provide me with a means of addressing my research questions and allow the participants time to consider their responses in
a setting where they are assured of confidentiality. There are limitations in the use of interviews, which I needed to be mindful of in my research. They are very time-consuming and require preparation, and then also practically I needed to travel to meet each participant individually. Additionally, there is a danger of bias. Bell (2010) discusses how a researcher should be aware of their own bias when conducting interviews. M. Cooper (2003, p.119) discusses an attitude of openness “an openness to the other: a willingness to respect and confirm the other’s way of being and viewpoints, rather than attempting to impose one’s own biases and assumptions”. As a trainee guidance counsellor, I need to be aware of my own positionality in this research and be aware of my own biases while conducting interviews and analysing responses. I am working in the post-primary sector and have experience of working with guidance counsellors, and so this experience is something that I need to remain open about and work to avoid making assumptions. Polkinghorne (2004) states that a practitioner’s cultural background inevitably informs their work. However, Polkinghorne posits that practitioners can strive to limit bias through reflective understanding of their practice and background. In this research study, I am researching within my own field of future practice and therefore need to endeavour to ensure that this does not create biases or assumptions in my research. I addressed this concern through my use of a reflective journal, using ‘Driscoll’s “What?” Model’ for my reflective writing - as detailed in Bassot (2016) (See Fig. 4 in section 3.5).

Participant responses are dependent on the types of questions: either closed – which demand a particular response, or open which allows the participant to respond in their own way (Cohen et al. 2000). Culley and Bond (2011) discuss how open questions are useful for inspiring participant involvement. In my design of the interview questions (Appendix D), I used open questions with the aim of eliciting responses from participants which would allow them time to consider their responses and also to address my research questions. Kvale (1996) asserts that interview questions should be brief and simple. I constructed the interview questions with this assertion in mind. Kvale (1996) also stresses that an interviewer needs to be aware of the interpersonal dynamics of an interaction, and that these need to be taken into account when analysis is being done. I used my reflective journal (described in Section 3.5) to record anything of note in the interpersonal dynamics of the interview.

In the next section, I will discuss my selection of research participants.
3.3 Research sample

In this study, the population required was selected from the title of the study – which is guidance counsellors. I sought out individuals who are most likely to be in possession of the knowledge and experience which would address my research questions (Silverman 2000). Snowball sampling was used to select participants. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) define snowball sampling as sampling from a network of contacts, with one research contact leading to another. This method of sampling was very time-efficient, and was suitable to my research as I did not have access to a “population from which to draw a sample” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011, p. 47). I did not have access to a large number of guidance counsellors whom I could approach to take part. I began with a guidance counsellor whom I know professionally, and then that guidance counsellor put me in contact with another, and so on. Nine guidance counsellors were interviewed. All are currently working within the Irish post-primary system and all were in their post as guidance counsellor for at least one year post-qualification. Ethical approval for this research study was granted by UL’s Ethics Committee in April 2019. The process of this application is discussed in section 3.6. Following ethical approval, contact was made with participants via telephone initially, and then they were sent the information documents (Appendix A, B). When they agreed to participate, I arranged a time and location suitable to the participant, and brought the informed consent letter with me to the interview (Appendix C). Interviews were forty minutes in length on average and were digitally audio-recorded for manual transcription. All interviews were conducted between May and early July 2019.

3.4 Data analysis

To analyse the data in this research project, I am using a grounded theory approach. Glaser and Strauss (1967) define a grounded theory as “the discovery of theory from data” (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p.1). Charmaz (2006) explains how grounded theorists begin with data. Kvale (1996, p.144) described the interview as the “raw material” for the data analysis. The data for this research project came from the semi-structured interviews. All interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone. Verbatim transcripts of the interviews, which were transcribed by me personally, served as the raw data for the inquiry. Basit (2010) states that the objective of qualitative data analysis is to establish the categories which inform the research participants’ view of the topic. The data was analysed using thematic analysis.
Guest *et al.* (2012 p.11) discuss thematic analysis and assert that it is “the most useful in capturing the complexities in meaning within a textural data set”. Charmaz (2006) describes the grounded theory approach to analysis. “We study our early data and begin to separate, sort, and synthesize these data through qualitative coding”. (Charmaz 2006 p.3). Following transcription, I began a system of coding. Gibbs (2007) describes coding as “a way of indexing or categorizing the text in order to establish a framework of thematic ideas about it”. To code the data in this research study, I used “open coding” (Gibbs 2007, p.50), where the text is read, sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase. I constantly asked myself questions. Gibbs (2007) stresses the value of this constant questioning as a way of alerting the researcher to the issues underlying the text, and also giving the researcher a sense of the deeper theoretical layers within it.

I began by reading over the transcripts and developing a system of initial codes using electronic highlighter. (See Fig. 2)

Charmaz (2006) asserts that “Coding distills data, sorts them, and gives us a handle for making comparisons with other segments of data” (Charmaz 2006 p.3). These codes provided me with an initial categorization of the data which I then grouped, printed and pasted on to a large sheet for further analysis. (See Fig 3)
With these large sheets, I was enabled to make comparisons between the interviews. Gibbs (2007) advises that researchers should be “more analytic and theoretical” (Gibbs 2007, p.52) and that researchers should develop their codes from simply descriptive to “more analytical ways of explaining the data” (Gibbs 2007, p. 54). Following this advice, I took my initial codes and themes and moved them from being a simple description of what was said to an analysis of what was said. I did this by comparing respondents’ viewpoints, with coded quotes side by side, and drawing analysis of them. (See Fig. 4)

The next step of the data analysis was writing. Gibbs (2007, p.146) asserts that it is the responsibility of the researcher to interpret their data. I have provided my interpretation of this data in the next chapter (Chapter 4).
3.5  Reliability and validity

Bell (2005 p.117) defines reliability as “the extent to which a test or procedure produces similar results under constant conditions on all occasions”. Thomas (2013) asserts that in interpretivist research, the data sample yields insights instead of generalisations. (Thomas 2013) This study aims to gain insight into the role of the guidance counsellor in a critical incident, which is a wide and varied role in a broad array of incidents. No two guidance counsellors will have identical experiences. For this reason, interpretivist, qualitative methods are appropriate to the study, rather than positivist, quantitative methods.

As a trainee guidance counsellor, while I conducted the research within the education sector, I did not research within my own school. I am currently teaching in a new school which opened in 2016 and has no qualified guidance counsellor on site. Consequently, as I was not conducting research in my own organisation, I avoided the validity issue of the internal researcher’s biased subjectivity and its possible contamination of the data (Smith and Holian 2008, p.36). This issue did not end with my own school organisation, however. As a trainee guidance counsellor, I researched my future area of professional practice. Reflexivity is a process of internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of a researcher’s position in the research; as well as recognition and acknowledgement that this position may affect the research process and outcome (Basit 2010). Berger (2015 p.231) stresses that “researchers must continually ask themselves where they are at any given moment in relation to what they study and what are the potential ramifications of this position on their research”. It is crucial that I am reflexive in my research, and I am aware of potential for bias. Validity in qualitative research is a “process whereby the researcher earns the confidence of the reader that he or she has ‘gotten it right’. Trustworthiness takes the place of truth” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011, p.48). Having spent fifteen years as a classroom teacher, my own views on schools, management and guidance services need to be examined.

In order to be a trustworthy, reflexive researcher, I kept a reflective journal, using ‘Driscoll’s “What?” Model’ for my reflective writing - as detailed in Bassot (2016). (See Fig. 5)
Using this reflective journal highlighted any potential biases and allowed me space to interrogate them and disable their potency. Some issues arose for me during the research interviews, particularly in the areas of empathising with Guidance Counsellors and their perceptions of their workload and its challenges, and this was something I remained mindful of throughout this research project, aided by my reflective journal.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Flick (2015) asserts that researchers should justify why a study is necessary, they should also give the rationale for the research to participants, be able to explain their chosen methodology, be able to determine the ethical consequences for participants, assess any potential harm, take action to avoid harm, they must not make untrue statements and they must be in line with legislation around data protection. In this study, I was mindful of these ethical obligations. I am bound by the code of ethics of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC 2012a), and ethical approval was sought from the university’s Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Research did not progress until approval was granted. The Ethics Committee rejected my initial application, as I had not clarified that I would personally be transcribing the interviews. Much consideration was undertaken in the organisation of interviews and in ensuring the confidentiality of participants.

An ethical consideration I had was that recounting critical incidents may be upsetting for participants, and as such, was it OK to ask them about it? Kvale (1996, p. 36) states that if an interview is well-conducted, it can be a “rare and enriching experience for the interviewee”. Additionally, the IGC Code of Ethics (2012) sets out that the dignity and wellbeing of research participants should be protected. To ensure that the interviews were well-conducted and to address this ethical concern, I spoke to participants in advance of the interviews, and explained they could stop the interview at any point, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. I arranged all of the interviews at least a week in advance to give the participants time to consider their participation and withdraw from the study if they did not wish to recount critical incidents. I also sent participants documents detailing the study, giving the rationale behind the study and explaining the methodology. This addressed many concerns the participants had. Participants were happy to take part and were fully aware that they would be asked to recount critical incidents, they gave generously of their time and this resolved this ethical consideration for me.
Another consideration was the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. Hearne (2013) discusses the limitations of anonymity in face to face interviews. The researcher can only promise anonymity to participants in face to face interviews. To ensure anonymity for the participants in this study, all transcription was done by me personally, I have used pseudonyms and codes in the dissertation. Data collected is being stored in line with the University of Limerick’s GDPR policy (University of Limerick 2018).

3.7 Conclusion

The focus of this chapter was to consider the best possible approach for my research. Firstly, the research questions were considered. Secondly, the rationale behind the selection of qualitative methodology was discussed. Thirdly, the method of data collection was outlined and the thematic analysis methodology was described. Lastly, the ethical considerations of this research study were addressed.

The next chapter, chapter four, will present the findings of the research study – my interpretation of the perceptions and experiences of critical incidents of nine Irish post-primary guidance counsellors. Chapter four will explore the themes which emerged from the data.
Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This section presents the research findings of nine semi-structured interviews with Irish post-primary guidance counsellors who are based in the province of Leinster, Ireland. The themes presented relate to the research questions and demonstrate the complexity of the role of the Irish post-primary guidance counsellor in schools. Firstly, the participants involved in the study will be described in their individual contexts. Secondly, the main themes and sub-themes which emerged from my analysis of the data will be identified and explored.

4.2 Participants

*Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality for research participants.

The key in the following table was used to describe the size of the school in which each participant is working:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>0-400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>400 - 800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Over 800</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Catherine*

Catherine is the sole guidance counsellor in a medium sized single-sex post-primary school with Catholic patronage. She has been in the role of guidance counsellor there for over ten years. She spent two years in another school as guidance counsellor prior to this post. Catherine spoke about a critical incident in her school where two students witnessed violence in the local community which had an impact on both the students and the school community.

*Elizabeth*

Elizabeth is one of four guidance counsellors in a large co-educational post-primary school with inter-denominational patronage. She has been in the role of guidance counsellor there for over fifteen years. Elizabeth spoke about a critical incident where a student died by suicide.
Sarah*

Sarah is one of three guidance counsellors in a medium sized co-educational post-primary school with Catholic patronage. She has been in the role of guidance counsellor there for over three years. Sarah spoke about a critical incident where a staff member died after a short illness.

Denise*

Denise is the sole guidance counsellor in a medium sized single-sex post-primary school with Catholic patronage. She has been in the role of guidance counsellor there for over twenty years. She also spent twelve years as guidance counsellor in 2 other schools prior to this post. Denise spoke about two critical incidents: one where a student died after a short illness and another where a student died by suicide.

Adrienne*

Adrienne is the sole guidance counsellor in a medium sized single sex post-primary school with Catholic patronage. She has been in the role of guidance counsellor there for over five years, but was a member of the school staff as a subject teacher for over ten years prior to this post as guidance counsellor. Adrienne spoke about an incident which occurred in the school that had the potential to be a critical incident but was averted.

Fiona*

Fiona is one of three guidance counsellors in a large co-educational post-primary school with inter-denominational patronage. She has been in the role of guidance counsellor there for over ten years. Fiona spoke about a critical incident where a student died after an illness.

Claire*

Claire works as the sole guidance counsellor in two different post-primary schools. She splits her working week between a small co-educational post-primary school with Church of Ireland patronage, and a small single-sex post-primary school. She has been in the role of guidance counsellor and worked in this way for over 10 years. Claire has not experienced a critical
incident in her career, but has had critical incident training and has developed critical incident policies in two schools.

**Gillian***

Gillian is one of three guidance counsellors in a large co-educational ETB\(^7\) post-primary school with inter-denominational patronage. She has been in the role of guidance counsellor there for over four years. She spent seven years as guidance counsellor in another school prior to this post. Gillian spoke about two critical incidents, one where a student died in an accident and another where a student died by suicide.

**Mary***

Mary is one of three guidance counsellors in a medium sized single-sex post-primary school with Catholic patronage. She has been in the role of guidance counsellor there for over twelve years. Initially she was the sole guidance counsellor in the school, but in more recent years, she has been joined by two colleagues in the guidance department. Mary spoke generally about her experience of different critical incidents in her career.

The next section discusses the themes and subthemes which emerged from the data collected from these participants.

### 4.3 Themes

Through the interviews, participants described their roles in schools during and following a critical incident. The interview questions were quite open and thus yielded a lot of data. Through my analysis of this data, I have identified themes and subthemes which emerged in the interviews. There are many complex aspects to the role such as: supporting very upset young people, added responsibility in a distressing time and managing one’s own emotional.

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\(^7\) ETBs (Education and Training Boards) are statutory education authorities with their own corporate status which have responsibility for education and training, youth work and other statutory. ETBs operate second-level schools, further education colleges, pilot community national schools and a range of adult and further education centres. (DES 2019)
reaction to a critical incident. These aspects informed the themes which are discussed in this section.

4.3.1 Theme: The guidance counsellor’s primary role in a critical incident is supporting students

All nine respondents indicate that they see their primary role in a critical incident as being a support to students. This role has many duties such as one-to-one counselling, giving news to students, organising school services, visiting homes, meeting students in groups. This role requires many skills and varies between incidents, there is no one way that guidance counsellors approach student support in a critical incident. There are many demands on guidance counsellors in providing student support and these demands create complexity in the role.

Subtheme: It is important to have clear boundaries in managing a critical incident

Five respondents described the importance of having clear boundaries during a critical incident. Students can be facilitated by being given a space in school to process the incident, but strict time boundaries are required to ensure that this is effective and beneficial. Gillian stresses the importance of boundaries as a method of preventing “gathering hysteria”. In Catherine’s experience, the incident “grew legs” in her school due to a lack of time boundaries being implemented on students being out of class and out of their normal school routine.

Subtheme: Guidance counsellors help students to understand grief

Four respondents spoke of their interactions with students around the area of grief and how they helped students to understand how grief can affect them and others. Guidance counsellors deal with students directly affected with critical incidents as well as other students in the school who may be less affected. This can create a range of emotional reactions across the student body, and guidance counsellors can assist students in understanding these. Elizabeth described how some students can “feel ownership of the grief”, and how she explains to them that different people experience and express grief in different ways. Fiona’s office was visited by younger siblings of her bereaved students who wanted her advice on how to “fix” their siblings’ grief. Fiona spent time explaining how grief is a part of life and how it is a process that human beings go through. Gillian communicates to her students that grief is a part of the human journey and “that they have the capacity within them” to overcome grief in time.
Subtheme: Students want to be in contact with adults they know and trust in times of tragedy

Five respondents indicate that their students sought out their help and guidance in critical incidents based on the fact that they had pre-existing positive relationships prior to the incident occurring. The student-guidance counsellor relationship can be familiar and one of mutual trust and this can be a positive aspect to the guidance counsellor’s role. Gillian remarked that she felt that her students didn’t need “strangers” dealing with them during the incident. “Students would have seen us very much as someone to lean on” (Elizabeth). “I think they saw, maybe, they can specifically talk about what they’re feeling to you” (Gillian).

Participants also described the expectations from students that the guidance counsellor could provide them with help. “They were looking for reassurance and they were looking for... They were just extremely sad and needed calmness, needed to be soothed” (Mary). “Tell us what to do to fix this, because you are the expert in this” (Fiona).

Students’ expectations of the guidance counsellor’s characteristics were described. “They expect us to be really open minded and really supportive and really kind and non-judgemental” (Elizabeth).

Denise described how students’ required more of the guidance counsellor in the months following a critical incident. “A lot of support is needed after the incidents and that’s where the needs are great”.

Subtheme: Mindfulness practice is a useful tool for guidance counsellors in supporting students

Two respondents indicate that their own practice of mindfulness is a very effective way of assisting students in critical incidents. Training in mindfulness is not a component of guidance counselling training programmes, the guidance counsellors who trained in this practice did it in their own personal time. This practice enables them to “regulate breathing and be good use and available to other people” (Mary) and to “sit with” (Gillian) students who are experiencing extreme sadness.
Subtheme: It can be challenging when guidance department colleagues have opposing views on what it is appropriate to say to students

One respondent indicated that her role became very complex when a disagreement emerged within the guidance department. This disagreement stemmed from an incident where a colleague made a comment to students during a critical incident that the rest of the guidance department found inappropriate in the circumstances. This created complexity in the incident and in the aftermath of the incident. Elizabeth’s colleague “caused awful hurt and...anger among the students”. Elizabeth’s work with these students became complex as she felt that she could not openly oppose her colleague’s remark to these students: “We were tip-toeing around”, and at the same time she disagreed with what was said. This had a further complexity as students later refused to work with this colleague and Elizabeth was required to see extra students and at the same time maintain an air of professionalism and not undermine her colleague in front of students. This created a “rift in the department which was only resolved when (this colleague) retired”.

4.3.2 Theme: The guidance counsellor supports school staff in critical incidents

All nine respondents spoke of supporting school staff during and following critical incidents in their interviews. Supporting school staff can create a new layer in the school structure, where the guidance counsellor is not simply one of the school staff, but instead is in an advisory role or a role with added responsibility. This can be challenging for guidance counsellors, as the role is not usually one with this level of responsibility towards school staff.

Subtheme: The Guidance Counsellor can support staff who do not know how to respond to a critical incident, or what to say

Teachers can feel ill-equipped in a critical incident, and not know how to respond to students or what to say in a classroom situation when confronted with a critical incident in school. Guidance counsellors can provide support to these teachers. One respondent said that she supported staff through distributing “How To Respond” fact sheets (Fiona). Another said that staff often don’t know what to say after a critical incident and that the guidance counsellor can help to “normalise” not knowing what to say (Sarah).
Subtheme: It can be challenging to know where to pitch support with various staff members

Seven respondents indicate that it can be difficult to know just where to pitch staff support, given the range of staff members who can be involved in a critical incident. For instance, Denise indicates that it can be uncomfortable giving guidance to your own managers. Also some members of staff may not want to go into the “woolly counselling” area (Elizabeth). This raises the question of what kind of support to give them. A further challenge is that in a critical incident, the guidance counsellor may go from being “just a member of staff” to one who guides colleagues (Denise).

Subtheme: There can be pressure on the guidance counsellor from school staff to manage students who are experiencing difficulty

Teachers can feel uncomfortable with a student who is upset and there can be an expectation that the guidance counsellor will take over and provide support to these students. Five respondents described how they have felt pressure from their school colleagues to manage any student who is upset in school during a critical incident. “This person is upset. go to the guidance counsellor” (Fiona). Gillian discussed how staff can feel uncomfortable with the levels of grief students experience and thus send them to the guidance counsellor. Some teachers do not see themselves as being equipped to deal with students who are upset and so look to the guidance counsellor to manage these students.

4.3.3 Theme: Guidance counsellors experience a personal emotional impact in a critical incident

Seven respondents described feeling a strong emotional impact in a critical incident. These emotions were shock, sadness, upset, anxiety, nervousness and exhaustion. Being a member of school staff and having their own relationship with deceased students and their families means that guidance counsellors often experience similar emotions to the students they are supporting. This can create challenges for guidance counsellors who need to manage their own reactions and at the same time support students who are experiencing difficult emotions.
Subtheme: In a critical incident, guidance counsellors can feel conflicted in their role as guidance counsellor versus their reaction as a human being

Three respondents described feeling a conflict in their reaction to the critical incident as human beings versus their reaction as a human being. As guidance counsellors, these respondents felt conflicted because they were experiencing strong feelings of sadness and grief. They felt that it was part of their role as guidance counsellor to appear strong and to not express these feelings of sadness. “I feel I should be strong” (Elizabeth). This conflict can be challenging. Gillian describes a “lack of permission” within herself to express her sadness and also her perception that if she were to appear upset that school management would have moved her out of her role and replace her with another member of staff who was not upset.

Subtheme: Guidance counsellors’ initial shock at the outset of a critical incident can give way to exhaustion

Five respondents indicate that their initial response to the critical incident was shock, and that this created a sense of working on “autopilot” (Gillian, Elizabeth, Fiona) or “coping, adrenaline, response mode” (Gillian). This sense of working on “autopilot”, where the guidance counsellor is fully engaged in the incident, can be a challenging and exhausting way to work. Sarah described how she did not realise how difficult her job had been or how tired she was until the initial shock of the incident was over. Fiona spoke of her exhaustion following a day in school during a critical incident, and how this led to a lack of focus while she was driving home and caused her to have a car accident.

Subtheme: Guidance counsellors’ confidence in their abilities can be low in a critical incident

Four participants described feeling nervous and anxious in a critical incident. These feelings were due to worrying that they would not know what to do or that what they were doing was not enough. “I don’t know what I’m doing here” (Catherine). These feelings of nervousness and anxiety can create an internal struggle for guidance counsellors who are professionally trained in student support, but in a time of crisis have doubt in their own abilities. “We were losing sleep because we were making sure, or trying to make sure we had everyone who was at risk covered” (Elizabeth). “Not really being sure what to do, you know?” (Sarah). “There’s an element of anxiety, nervousness that goes with it” (Gillian).
Subtheme: The emotional impact of a critical incident can have lasting effects for guidance counsellors

Four respondents indicate that the emotional impact of the critical incident can have lasting effects. Denise feels “scarred” by the incident and it has a daily impact on her life as she hopes “that nothing will happen to the students today”. Elizabeth discussed her guidance department colleague, who, in her view, retired early due to a critical incident which caused “sleepless nights”. Catherine’s experience left her feeling “isolated” and informs her work years later. These lasting impacts, while challenging, can also be a source of learning for future incidents. Gillian described how her first experience of the aftermath of a critical incident had a profound influence on her approach to later incidents. She described how in the first incident: “in the down times it would come up that it needed to be taken care of”. Later in her career, in other incidents, her previous experience gave her a sense of wisdom that she found beneficial. “I was just bringing this, this sense of, you know, that we can as humans, that we can withstand and that we can hold and that we can be with these very, very difficult times in life”.

4.3.4 Theme: Guidance counsellors need support during and following a critical incident

All nine respondents indicate that they need professional and personal support during a critical incident - professional support in school from school managers, colleagues and outside agencies for their role in the incident, as well as personal support outside school following the incident. This support is necessary as the experience of a critical incident is challenging, demanding and complex.

Subtheme: In-school support is crucial for guidance counsellors

All nine respondents spoke of their need for support from their colleagues, school managers and outside agencies during a critical incident. Two respondents found NEPS a great source of support in the initial stages of the incident, for advice for themselves and in assisting them to disseminate information to school staff. Two respondents described their staffroom colleagues as “kind” (Elizabeth, Catherine), and this gave them a sense of feeling supported in their role. Two respondents discussed how their colleagues questioned their role in the incident and how this created a sense of doubt in them about how they were working. Sarah was new to her school when the incident occurred, that she perceived her colleagues as feeling that she should
not be involved in the incident, and this resulted in her feeling like a “fake”. Elizabeth had some colleagues who questioned the efficacy of the guidance department following the incident. She discussed how within her department, her guidance colleague took this questioning “very personally”. This lack of support from colleagues creates a difficult working environment for guidance counsellors.

**Subtheme: A supportive personal life can be beneficial for guidance counsellors**

Four respondents highlighted the difference between their personal life and their professional life, and how returning to their personal life following a critical incident is a source of support and comfort. A strong supportive personal life can be very advantageous for a guidance counsellor in the aftermath of a critical incident when their “adrenaline levels” (Gillian) return to normal and there is time to process the incident’s impact on them. Elizabeth spoke of how returning to her young child helped her to “switch off” from the incident. Catherine also described how her family are her main source of support. Fiona’s “own defences” were increased by returning to her personal life.

**Subtheme: IGC Supervision can be a great support for guidance counsellors following a critical incident**

Six respondents indicate that they found beneficial support from attending IGC supervision following a critical incident. This supervision is described as “amazing” (Gillian), “great” (Elizabeth). Supervision provides a space where a guidance counsellor can link with colleagues from other schools. “You can actually feel really listened to and heard and supported and empathised with and cared for in, in that, in that setting” (Gillian). As the school setting is a very specific place of work, supervision and connection with other guidance counsellors provides a unique and effective support network for guidance counsellors. Mary stressed her view that supervision is a crucial component of a guidance counsellor’s self-care.
4.3.5 Theme: A guidance counsellor’s role in school during a critical incident is very different from their usual day-to-day role as guidance counsellor

Seven respondents indicate that their role in school was hugely different during a critical incident. Due to the emergency nature of critical incidents, normal guidance counselling services in school were suspended for the duration of the incident. Managing the incident and the students directly affected became the primary school concern of these respondents.

Subtheme: Working in a critical incident can yield a sense of job satisfaction

Three respondents described how working in the incident gave them a sense of pride at their achievements. This pride stemmed from the fact that they had carried enormous workloads successfully, “That you have done everything you could do” (Elizabeth), and navigated a complex and difficult situation successfully “Proud of the fact that we basically almost took over the funeral for that family because they weren't able” (Denise). Additionally, school managers seeking guidance counsellors’ advice and guidance in an incident can provide an opportunity for them to excel in their role, and this can provide the guidance counsellor with a sense of being “elevated” (Gillian) in terms of status in the school. This pride can be challenging, as there can be feelings of guilt from the “ego” (Gillian) which may arise from this, when coupled with the knowledge that this satisfaction is derived from working in a tragic incident. Gillian described the “mixed” feelings she experienced as a result of this elevation of her role by management.

Subtheme: Working in a critical incident changes how the guidance counsellor is viewed by colleagues

Four respondents indicate that their colleagues’ attitudes towards guidance counselling changed during a critical incident. Without an incident, in the normal running of the school, guidance counsellors can feel that their colleagues view the role as an “easy job” (Elizabeth), and that they are not taken seriously or viewed as having any real challenges in the role. This can be “banter” (Gillian) among colleagues who poke fun at the guidance counsellor who has no exams to grade and has their own office, or “negativity” (Elizabeth) and a lack of belief in or respect for the service the guidance counsellor provides.
During a critical incident, when the staff look to the guidance counsellor for direction, guidance counsellors can feel that staff are seeing the complexity and challenges of the role, and the need for specialist training to take it on “Now you know” (Gillian). This change to staff’s perspective of guidance counsellors indicates that when the school is running normally, the guidance service is not seen as important to the school, but in a time of crisis “the staff’s picture puts the guidance counsellor at the centre” (Denise).

4.3.6 Theme: Guidance counsellors need a range of ancillary skills to assist in the management of a critical Incident

All nine respondents indicated that they were called upon to assist in critical incidents using skills not usually related to their role as guidance counsellor. These skills included managing and recruiting staff, writing and developing school policy, organising and running a space where students could gather.

Subtheme: It is advantageous to have a robust critical incident policy prepared in advance

Having a critical incident policy prepared in advance has a positive impact on how a critical incident proceeds in schools. Five respondents indicated that their school had a critical incident policy in place prior to the critical incident. These five respondents all had a role in the development of this policy. “I would have driven having the policy put together” (Adrienne). “I drafted our critical incident policy, I manage it, I update it after every incident” (Elizabeth). These policies were referred to at the outset of the critical incident. Three respondents spoke of the effectiveness of the policy and how it provided a very useful reference for the management of the incident. Denise credits the fact that they had a policy in place as the key thing that “held us together” (Denise).

Elizabeth compared two incidents in her school, the first there was no policy and the second they had a policy in place. The experience of the first incident informed the writing of the policy because it was “so fresh” in her mind and she had the advantage of knowing “what worked well and what didn’t”.
Subtheme: There is a lot of extra administrative work to do in a critical incident

Three respondents indicate that they undertook a range of extra administrative duties during a critical incident. This type of work adds to the workload of the guidance counsellor in a critical incident, who is undertaking a range of duties which are not necessarily part of their normal day to day role in the school. These duties included writing emails, making phone calls and arranging a rota of counsellors to see students in school “a lot of it secretarial work” (Elizabeth). This work was time consuming “You couldn’t just get them together in five minutes” (Denise). The extra administrative work can result in guidance counsellors being less available for direct student support, and also add work that needs to be done at home. One respondent (Elizabeth) spoke of how she undertook administrative work at home during a critical incident.

Subtheme: There can be an advantage in recruiting external guidance counsellors to assist with student support in a time of crisis

Three respondents described their experience with external guidance counsellors being recruited to assist with one-to-one counselling in a critical incident. In her school’s critical incident, Denise recruited guidance counsellors from her local IGC branch and organised a rota for one-to-one student support.

This was due to a large volume of students who sought individual counselling during an incident, and she “Couldn't see any way of getting it without the guidance counsellors coming in” (Denise).

Gillian, on the other hand, was recruited by a neighbouring school, through her school’s ETB, to assist with student support during a critical incident. This was beneficial to the school’s students as relationships within this school were strained in the immediate aftermath and Gillian’s impartiality with the students helped them to access the support they needed. “I suppose spoke just to have a space to go into that is not a member of staff that they might have, that there might be anger towards, maybe blame and was probably helpful for them” (Gillian).

4.3.8 Theme: School support from NEPS is experienced as patchy and not given directly to students

Six respondents described the type of support their school received from NEPS. This support was given in the form of advice to staff on how best to manage the incident. NEPS did not
provide support for students directly, but were available to speak to staff and to explain the role of the guidance counsellor to staff in the incident itself.

Respondents varied in their assessment of this type of support, “They were my touchstone” (Denise), “I don't really remember NEPS having a huge role in it” (Fiona).

NEPS speaking to school staff can have negative consequences when the NEPS psychologist does not know the dynamics of the relationships of the school staff. Elizabeth spoke of how the NEPS psychologist’s description of the guidance department in her school as “ducks”, working very hard under the surface but appearing calm, made her cringe and caused negativity in her staff room as colleagues became “sneery” at an outside agency coming to speak to them.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings from the data collection, nine in-depth semi-structured interviews. The analysis is demonstrated through the use of themes and subthemes. These highlight the central issues of the research topic. The following chapter will examine the findings in relation to the key issues identified in the literature review (chapter two).
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to contextualise the research findings with the literature review chapter. The literature review, in chapter two, highlights the complexity of Irish post-primary guidance counselling and the broad and ranging scope of responsibilities of the professional guidance counsellor. In a critical incident, the guidance counsellor works in an unpredictable and high-risk environment. In this environment, additional responsibilities are placed upon the guidance counsellor. The research aimed to explore how the guidance counsellor navigates these challenges. This chapter will discuss and synthesise the key issues which arose in the literature with the main themes which arose in the research. Ethical considerations will also be discussed.

5.1 Overview of Research Findings

This section will succinctly contextualise the discussion in relation to the research questions underpinning the study. The primary research question in this study set out to gain insight into the experiences and perceptions of guidance counsellors of critical incidents in Irish schools in the current landscape of guidance provision. In addition, secondary research questions set out to gain insight and data on the roles a guidance counsellor plays in the contingency planning for critical incidents, in the creation of policy, in the actual crisis event and also how they experience other stakeholders’ perceptions of their role – with a view to understanding the guidance counsellor’s own experience of a critical incident, and the impact it has on their role within the school.

Overall, the key findings from this study indicate that guidance counsellors play an integral role in critical incidents in Irish schools. They primarily concentrate their duties on supporting students, but they also support school staff in a critical incident. Their role changes in a critical incident, with extra work and more responsibility being placed upon them. Critical incidents have ramifications for guidance counsellors, personally and professionally, and this results in them needing support throughout and following the incident.
The discussion is presented under the following five key themes which have emerged from the data analysis:

1. The guidance counsellor’s primary role in a critical incident is supporting students.
2. The guidance counsellor supports school staff in critical incidents
3. Guidance counsellors experience an emotional impact in a critical incident
4. Guidance counsellors need support during and following a critical incident
5. The guidance counsellor’s role in school during a critical incident is very different from their usual day-to-day role as guidance counsellor

The following sections will synthesise these themes with the relevant literature.

5.2 The guidance counsellor’s primary role in a critical incident is supporting students

As stated in chapter two, Irish government policy places the guidance counsellor in a key role in a critical incident. The role, as outlined in government policy, involves supporting distressed, bereaved students; being available for student referrals from other staff and parents, identification of students who may need extra support, and exploring student reactions to a critical incident (DES 2016a). Participants in this research project reported that this was indeed their chief role in a critical incident, with all nine participants identifying student support as being their primary concern through a critical incident; and the duties outlined in government policy were listed by participants as forming a large part of their role in a critical incident. This is evidence that the State’s policy on critical incident management is being applied in Irish schools.

Additionally, research has shown that school managers and teachers see guidance counsellors as the key figure in the resolution of a school crisis (Tokel 2018; Fitch et al. 2001). Participants in this research study indicated that their school colleagues and managers place them at the centre of the management of critical incidents, and that students who were seen as upset or in distress were sent to the guidance counsellor. The guidance counsellor, in providing this support to students in a critical incident, is therefore a trusted adult in a time of crisis. Research has found that a trusted adult is a crucial part of youth mental health and recovery (Fitzgerald and Dooley 2012). This was true for participants in this study who found that young people in their schools sought them out as a trusted adult in a time of crisis. Participants experienced students seeking out their guidance counsellors for support, advice and comfort during a time of crisis. Participants supported students through one-to-one counselling; through the creation
and supervision of a space where distressed students could gather; and, through mindfulness practice and advice. Guidance counsellors made themselves available for students when they were needed, and this was seen by participants as being very beneficial to students. One participant noted that her school did not “need strangers coming in to see individual students” (Gillian). The support provided by the school, with the guidance counsellor at the centre, was appropriate and adequately met the needs of students.

School-led crisis management is seen as best practice (DES 2016a; UK, Department for Education 2014; USA, Department of Education 2019). Outside agency intervention is available in Ireland on request (DES 2016a). Participants in this research study found that this intervention was not directly given to students; it is given to school staff. Agencies did not meet students, rather they addressed staff and gave advice on managing the incident. This support was experienced as patchy, with some participants describing it as hugely supportive and beneficial, while others did not recall many details about it, and one found that it created complexity in the school. The guidance counsellor, in this research, is at the frontline of crisis support and intervention. Research shows that school counsellors are often the first professional whom students and families come into contact with following a crisis (Allen et al. 2002; Werner 2014). Participants’ experiences of outside agency involvement in critical incidents underline these research findings. Guidance counsellors, at the forefront of school-based crises, provide support to students in the midst of crisis, meeting them while the crisis is in progress, and also following the incident in the aftermath.

Participants in this research study found that students required a lot of support after a critical incident. One participant (Denise) stated that, for students, “support is needed months after the actual incident”. Riley and McDaniel (2000) describe student support and debriefing as a school counsellor’s role in the aftermath of a crisis event. As members of the school community, and as a trusted adult turned to in a time of crisis, guidance counsellors, therefore play a key role in the healing after a critical incident. Participants in this research study outlined their role in helping students to understand their grief, which was a key element to the healing process in their schools. One participant, (Mary), acknowledged that there is a need for follow up meetings post-incident. The Irish government policy guidelines (DES 2016a) advise follow up meetings to assess the efficacy of the critical incident management team, but no participants indicated their participation in any such meetings. Liou (2014) advises that reflection is an important course of action, and includes follow-up evaluation as a form of this reflection. Without review and evaluation of the crisis intervention, any problems experienced through the management of a critical incident may not be resolved in advance of the next crisis. Therefore, guidance
counsellors have a role to play in engaging in such follow up and review. This needs to be a priority in the post-crisis phase within schools.

A contested issue which emerged from the literature in chapter two, was the issue of psychological debriefing following a crisis. As outlined in chapter two, research conducted by Morrison (2007) found that many American schools have adopted CISD (Critical Incident Stress Debriefing) as a model of post-crisis support for students. Also, as discussed in chapter two, there is debate among theorists on the effectiveness and safety of psychological debriefing. Irish government policy does not recommend psychological debriefing following a school critical incident, as outlined in chapter two. This state policy advises that six weeks following an incident, students who remain distressed should be referred to outside agencies. (DES 2016a). This guidance is problematic as there are therefore six weeks where these seriously distressed students are in school, in the care of the guidance counsellor. Participants in this research study reported that outside agency support during a critical incident, is not given directly to students, it is given to staff in an advisory capacity. Also, as outlined in chapter two, referral to outside agencies may not be immediately available due to the pressure on their services (HSE 2019d). As discussed here, and outlined in chapter two, guidance counsellors are often trusted adults whom students turn to in times of crisis. Indeed, it is seen as best practice to have the school leading crisis management (DES 2016a; UK, Department for Education 2014; USA, Department of Education 2019). Therefore, as a trusted adult in the immediate aftermath of a critical incident, a guidance counsellor is tasked with supporting students who perhaps need more support than they can offer within their professional competency level. And yet, outside agency support may not immediately available to students, with large waiting lists reported in the recommended psychological services (DES 2016a, HSE 2019d). Consequently, students in serious crisis in school do not have the appropriate level of support to meet their needs. This is a serious issue which needs attention from policy-makers.

5.3 The guidance counsellor supports school staff in critical incidents

The whole-school approach to guidance, advocated by Irish policymakers (ACCS et al. 2012; Ireland, Department of Education 2017) presents guidance counsellors with challenges with respect to collaboration with school staff (Hearne et al. 2018). Research conducted by McCoy et al. (2006) found that there is a lack of understanding of the precise nature of the role of the guidance counsellor in Irish schools among subject teachers and management. The guidance counsellor is not a member of school management, yet is placed at the centre of a crisis
situation, in a school environment where their role is not necessarily fully understood by their colleagues who look to them for support and guidance in a crisis situation. Participants in this research study noted that in a crisis situation, their role was viewed as more important by their colleagues, in contrast with times outside of a critical incident where their role was not fully understood. Outside of a critical incident some participants would experience “banter” (Gillian) and perceive a lack of regard from their colleagues around their role. However, during a crisis, there was a feeling among participants that their colleagues saw complexity in their role, where they had not seen it before. This is a concrete example of the lack of understanding and, arguably, lack of respect for the guidance counsellor’s role in some Irish schools. This is problematic for the management of a critical incident as the guidance counsellor is a central figure of the Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT) (DES 2016a).

Irish government policy places the guidance counsellor in this key role in a critical incident management team due to their “particular expertise and skills” (DES 2016a p.16). These skills - counselling, assessment, guidance counselling practice and professionalism are highly applicable in a crisis situation (IGC 2016, Liou 2015; Werner 2014; DES 2016a). Guidance counsellors, with this knowledge and expertise, are therefore equipped to support students and also to assist other school staff in providing support in a critical incident. Participants in this research study described their role in supporting school staff: distributing fact sheets, assisting staff when they did not know how to respond, taking over the care of students who were distressed when staff felt uncomfortable. Some participants felt that this was appropriate and their support was received gratefully from staff. “They were just like: help us” (Gillian). There were challenges for some participants in providing this support to staff, with one participant feeling “uncomfortable” (Denise) in giving guidance to her peers, and another encountering resistance from staff who are unwilling to go into the “woolly counselling area”. These challenges had negative impacts for these participants in the critical incidents, creating conflict among school staff. A collaborative approach to crisis management is seen as best practice (Tokel 2018; Werner 2014; Fitch et al. 2001). Atici (2014) emphasises that a school counsellor’s efficacy is increased through collaboration between school counsellors and school staff. The challenges faced by the participants in this research study therefore had the potential to negatively impact their efficacy in a critical incident. A key issue which is highlighted in chapter two, is that in order for a whole school approach to guidance to be effective, partnership within the school community and a supportive school culture is required (Hearne et al. 2018). If the point that Hearne et al. (2018) make is extended into the realm of critical incidents, then logically, this can be extended to include that in a critical incident, the guidance counsellor...
requires a supportive school culture and professional partnership within the school community in order to best support the students, and to support school staff effectively.

5.4 Guidance counsellors experience a personal emotional impact in a critical incident

Hamilton (2008) asserts that dealing with a large school-wide crisis is the most difficult aspect of a school counsellor’s work. One participant in this research study described her experience in a critical incident as “one of the worst weeks of my career” (Catherine). The physical and psychological distress caused by crisis events can affect students, teachers and staff (Werner 2014). Participants in this research study described the emotional impact of a critical incident on them - shock, sadness, upset, anxiety, nervousness and exhaustion. Reid (2010) states that those who choose to make a career within the helping professions are likely to deeply care about vulnerable clients. An added layer of complexity for guidance counsellors in a critical incident is that they are a member of the school community. Being a member of school staff and having their own relationship with deceased students and their families means that guidance counsellors often experience similar emotions to the students and staff they are supporting (Hamilton 2008; Riley and McDaniel 2000).

As detailed in the research findings in chapter four, participants in this research study noted a conflict they experience in a critical incident as they feel as though they “should be strong” (Gillian). There was a distinction drawn by some participants between their reactions to a critical incident as a guidance counsellor and their reaction as “a human being” (Elizabeth). This raises the issue of the complex relationship between the human being and the professional, but deeper exploration of this is beyond the scope of this study.

The conflict between the human reaction and the professional reaction was compounded for some participants who described working in an automatic way: on “autopilot” (Elizabeth, Sarah, Gillian). Hamilton (2008, p.9) describes her own experience of responding to a crisis and notes that “her feelings went underground” and she went into action. This correlates with the experience of the research participants in this study. Hamilton (2008) puts forward that working in this way poses risks for compassion fatigue. As outlined in chapter two, compassion fatigue is considered “secondary traumatic stress” (Hamilton 2008, p.14). A counsellor, at risk of compassion fatigue is also at risk of professional burnout (McLeod 2008). Participants in this research study described feeling exhausted throughout and following their experience in critical incidents, further exposing them to the risks of compassion fatigue and professional
burnout. This has the potential to cause harm to both guidance counsellors and the students they are supporting. Counsellors suffering from compassion fatigue have been found to be evasive and aggressive with clients, or to silence clients preventing the therapeutic relationship from being effective (Hamilton 2008; Corey 2013; A. Cooper 2003). In this way, Irish guidance counsellors are at risk of both compassion fatigue and professional burnout and therefore require support in their work in critical incidents and afterwards (Reid 2010). Riley and McDaniel (2000) point to professional development as a means of ensuring that school counsellors are equipped to handle the challenges of crisis intervention. Three participants in this research study described attending a seminar on critical incident procedure and management which was run by NEPS. However none reported attending any professional development on emotional support. This raises the issue of professional development for guidance counsellors and the need for development in this area.

5.5 Guidance counsellors need support during and following a critical incident

Riley and McDaniel (2000) state that school counsellors should be aware that they themselves are part of the school community which has been impacted by a critical incident and they must take care of themselves. All participants in this research study who had direct experience of a critical incident spoke of the need for support during and following a critical incident. Support during an incident came from management and school colleagues. Mid-crisis support, participants reported, also included returning to their personal lives. Support following the incident came from IGC supervision and one participant accessed professional counselling support. Corey (2013) asserts that self-care as a counsellor is an ethical mandate, not a luxury. Participants in this research study, at the frontline of school crisis response and student support, fulfil this ethical obligation, through maintaining their personal lives and also by accessing supervision.

In-school support, from colleagues, was seen as very important by participants of this research study. As discussed in section 5.3, guidance counsellors provide support to their school colleagues in a critical incident. Support from school colleagues to guidance counsellors in a critical incident, was received in the form of collegiality, small gifts and kind words. However, one participant noted that there was conflict within her school staff during and following a critical incident, leaving her feeling unsupported by some colleagues. Another participant remarked that she felt “isolated” (Catherine). These experiences demonstrate the differing cultures in Irish schools. As discussed in section 5.3, a key issue which emerged in the literature
review of this study was that whole school approach to guidance counselling requires a supportive school culture and partnership within the school community (Hearne et al. 2018). Additionally, Liou (2014) found that school counsellors’ efficacy increases when there is collaboration with school staff. If this point is extended to critical incidents, then it can be argued that collegial staff support for the guidance counsellor in a critical incident will result in increased guidance counsellor efficacy.

Maintaining an external life and connection with others is a crucial component of developing resilience and reducing the risk of compassion fatigue as a guidance counsellor (Hamilton 2008; Hearne 2012). Participants in this research study described their personal lives: families, hobbies and friendships as being a huge source of support to them both during and following a critical incident.

All participants in this research study attend IGC supervision. Counselling supervision is provided by the Irish Department of Education and Skills, and is organised by the IGC (IGC 2012b). Reid (2010) asserts that supervision should provide guidance counsellors with a restorative space where attendees can benefit from meaningful and critical reflection. Participants in this research study spoke of the value of supervision in giving them a space in which they could process the impact of the critical incident with other post-primary guidance counsellors. There was a sense of shared experience and understanding that allowed these participants space to heal. One participant spoke of supervision as a space in which she “can actually feel really listened to and heard and supported and empathised with and cared for” (Gillian). Hamilton (2008 p. 18) discusses the value of peer support in helping to “build collegiality, reduce isolation and provide important opportunities to vent the difficult feelings often associated with helping others”. Attending IGC supervision provided the opportunity for this level of support to participants of this research study. This underlines the importance of attending guidance counselling supervision during and following a critical incident.

5.6 The guidance counsellor’s role in school during a critical incident is very different from their usual day-to-day role as guidance counsellor

The guidance counsellor’s role in the school setting is “to engage in personal, educational, educational and vocational counselling with clients through the lifespan” (IGC 2012a, p.3). As outlined in chapter two, post-primary guidance activities include designing a guidance programme, individual and group counselling to facilitate personal, educational and career development, providing labour market information, using psychometric tests, leading the whole
school guidance plan, making appropriate referrals and establishing links with feeder schools, further education and higher education. (DES 2016b).

Participants in this research study indicated that their role in school was different during a critical incident. During the critical incident, normal guidance counselling services in school were suspended for the duration of the incident. Students in crisis were prioritised and thus managing the incident and the students directly affected became participants’ primary school concern. Irish government policy places the guidance counsellor at the centre of a critical incident management team, with responsibility for one-to-one counselling, identifying students who are at risk and making referrals to outside agencies where appropriate (DES 2016a). Participants in this research study undertook these duties in critical incidents, providing and managing spaces where distressed students could access support and working with school management to identify students who required support. This is further evidence that Irish state policy on critical incident management is being enacted at the frontline of crisis response. As outlined in chapter two, in the UK, where guidance counselling is operated on a model which separates career counselling from personal counselling (UK, Department for Education 2016), research shows that in a critical incident schools refer students to a range of agencies for external psychological support including local public health teams, local authorities, specialist mental health services and mental health organisations (UK, Department for Education 2017). However, in this research study, participants undertook their duties without outside agency support that addressed students directly. This demonstrates the Irish guidance counsellors’ large workload in a critical incident which carries a high level of responsibility in supporting students in distress.

Participants in this research study also described performing a more broad range of duties in a critical incident than outlined in the DES (2016) document. These duties required administrative and logistical skills, such as writing letters, e-mails, making phone calls and organising rotas of counsellors. Undertaking this work added to the workload of participants who were also performing the duties as outlined in government policy. Atici (2014) asserts that counsellor efficacy is increased with support in administrative work. Fitch et al. (2001) also posit that any time spent doing administrative tasks and clerical duties which absorb time will compromise a school counsellor’s ability to perform the tasks associated with their particular skillset from their counselling training. This raises the point that guidance counsellors’ efficacy in a critical incident could be increased if they received support in administrative duties.

Werner (2014 p. 5) defines school counsellor self-efficacy as “the knowledge and skills as well as the capability to overcome problems and succeed under the stresses and pressures of life”.
Some participants in this research study indicated that in their changed role during a critical incident, they experienced a sense of job satisfaction. In the intense crisis period, participants felt a sense of pride in effectively carrying the workload. Werner (2014) states that a school counsellor’s expectation about their knowledge and skills as well as their capacity to overcome problems and succeed under stresses and pressure are keys to success. Indeed, some participants note that their past experience of a critical incident informed their work on subsequent incidents, with the confidence gained from managing previous incidents enabling them to “bring” (Gillian) effective practice to another critical incident.

Fitch et al. (2001) found that future school administrators view crisis management as a task of major importance for school counsellors. Indeed, participants in this research study spoke of their managers seeking their advice and guidance in a critical incident. Irish government policy (DES 2016a) lists identifying at-risk students and managing referrals from school staff as one of a guidance counsellor’s key duties in a critical incident. In this way, a guidance counsellor’s expertise is called upon by school management. This created mixed experiences for participants in this research study. One participant described feeling “elevated” in her role (Gillian) while another described feeling as though she “needed a leader” (Denise). The mixed response from participants to being called upon by school management in a critical incident demonstrates the complexity of the role of guidance counsellor in Irish schools. A guidance counsellor who takes on a leadership role in a critical incident can feel uncomfortable with this elevation. Riley and McDaniel (2000) stress the importance of collaboration between school management and school counsellors in a crisis situation. In a situation where the guidance counsellor feels uncomfortable with the collaboration, the efficacy of the management of the critical incident is called into question. School managers have a responsibility to provide a safe work environment for all school staff (Hamilton 2008). Therefore, supporting guidance counsellors in their role in a critical incident falls under this remit for school managers.

5.7 Ethical Considerations

Corey (2013) states that professional ethical codes provide a basis for accountability and that codes of ethics are best used as guidelines to formulate sound reasoning and to assist practitioners in making the best possible judgements.

The IGC Code of Ethics (2012) is clear that guidance counsellors “offer only those services for which they are qualified by education, training and experience”.

62
In a critical incident, post-primary guidance counsellors may encounter students whose level of distress exceeds their capacity to support. In this instance, a post-primary guidance counsellor is ethically bound to seek appropriate referral for these students. Participants in this research study described patchy support from outside agencies in a critical incident. This has the potential to create an ethical dilemma for a post-primary guidance counsellor. Making referrals to outside agencies is a clear element to the guidance counsellor’s role in a critical incident (DES 2016a). When the outside agencies are unavailable to guidance counsellors to make referrals, there is an ethical conundrum for guidance counsellors, but ethical guidance is clear – a guidance counsellor must not work beyond their professional competence.

Corey (2013) asserts that counsellor self-care is an ethical mandate. Additionally, the IGC Code of Ethics (2012) outlines that guidance counsellors must engage in self-care to ensure that their ability to act in a professional manner is not compromised. Bond (2000 p.243) emphasises that, for counsellors, ethical responsibility includes taking personal ownership for acting ethically. Participants in this research study detailed their self-care in the form of maintaining their personal lives. Two participants also discussed their engagement in mindfulness practice which they find hugely beneficial in the area of self-care. The IGC Code of Ethics (2012) also stresses the importance of attending professional supervision. As discussed in section 5.4, all participants in this research study attend professional supervision.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the overall findings of the research study in the context of the literature. Primary themes were examined to gain insight into guidance counsellors’ experiences and perceptions of critical incidents in Irish schools. The key arguments presented in this chapter were: in order to maximise guidance counsellor efficacy in a critical incident there needs to be a supportive school culture involving the whole school, including management; that as a guidance counsellor’s workload expands in a critical incident, administrative duties should be shared among other staff, to ensure the guidance counsellor has the time to give to direct student support. It was also argued that there is a need for development in the area of post-crisis follow up. The risks to guidance counsellors in a critical incident of both compassion fatigue and professional burnout were discussed, with the argument presented that guidance counsellors require additional emotional and professional support during and following a critical incident. Lastly, ethical considerations were discussed.
Chapter 6 will conclude the research study and highlight any strengths and limitations of the study. Recommendations for policy and future practice will also be outlined.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

This chapter will provide an overall conclusion to the study. It will evaluate the merits and limitations of this research study, as well as provide recommendations, with possible implications for future practice in the education field.

6.1 Summary of research

The primary research question in this study set out to gain insight into the experiences and perceptions of guidance counsellors of critical incidents in Irish post-primary schools in the current landscape of guidance provision. In addition, secondary research questions set out to gain the following insight and data:

1. What involvement does the guidance counsellor have in the creation of a school critical incident policy?
2. What are the expectations of school managers of a guidance counsellor’s role in a critical incident?
3. What roles do guidance counsellors play in a critical incident?
4. How effective is a critical incident policy when put into practice?
5. What supports are available to a guidance counsellor during and after a critical incident?
6. In what ways has the guidance counsellor’s role been impacted by the experiences of critical incidents within a school?

The primary and secondary research questions were addressed through nine qualitative semi-structured interviews with post-primary guidance counsellors. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts were coded and interpretively analysed, producing key themes. The key themes which emerged indicate that guidance counsellors play an integral role in critical incidents in Irish schools. They primarily concentrate their duties on supporting students, but they also support school staff in a critical incident. Their role changes in a critical incident, with extra work and more responsibility being placed upon them. Critical incidents
have ramifications for guidance counsellors, personally and professionally, and this results in them needing support throughout and following the incident. Two of the six secondary research questions in this study were focused on critical incident policy in Irish schools. In conducting the research, I found that guidance counsellors were uninterested in addressing this area, and therefore these two secondary research questions were not fully addressed. I will discuss this limitation to the study in section 6.33.

6.2 Strengths of this study

This section will describe the merits of this research study. A key strength of the research is that the data generated in this study provides insight into experiences and perceptions of practicing, experienced post-primary guidance counsellors of critical incidents in a variety of school settings. Other strengths outlined in this section focus on the methodology used.

6.2.1 The semi-structured interview

Kvale (1996 p. 27) describes the purpose of semi-structured research interviews as a means to “understand themes of the lived daily world from the subjects’ own perspectives”. Participants in this research study were from a variety of school types and had range of experience in different critical incidents. This gave the research study rich data for analysis.

6.2.2 The interview questions

Kvale (1996 p.145) states that the “shorter the interviewer’s questions and the longer the subjects’ answers, the better”. Time was spent in constructing the interview questions for this study (Appendix D), with this advice in mind. The questions were short and simple, and allowed participants to speak at length on the topic. This generated rich data on guidance counsellors’ perceptions and experiences of critical incidents for analysis.

6.2.3 Openness in the interviews

M. Cooper (2003 p.40) asserts that “human beings are open to some aspects of the people they encounter in their world and closed to others”. He points to Carl Rogers’ core condition of ‘unconditional positive regard’ as a way of helping clients be more open. Throughout my training as a guidance counsellor, emphasis was placed by my tutors on the Rogerian core conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence (Rogers 1967).
In conducting the research interviews, I endeavoured to embody these core conditions, and I found that participants were very open and honest in the interviews about their role in a critical incident as well as their perceived achievements and weaknesses. This provided rich data for analysis.

6.3 Limitations of this study

This section will address limitations in this research study. The limitations discussed are focused on the research methodology and on the aspects of the research questions which were not addressed through the research.

6.31 Limitations of the semi-structured interviews

Cohen *et al.* (2007) discuss a limitation in semi-structured interviews in that they are not necessarily systematic and comprehensive if certain questions don’t arise ‘naturally’. Indeed, Denscombe (2007) warns that interviews produce non-standard responses, and that data collected is dependent on the specific context and the specific participants involved in the interview. As outlined in section 6.21, participants in this research study were from a variety of school types and had range of experience in different critical incidents. While this is a strength of the research methodology in that it generated rich data for analysis, a limitation also exists in that there is an issue with the universal applicability of the findings.

6.32 Limited size of the research sample

Bryman (2012) notes that critics of qualitative methodology argue that when qualitative interviews are conducted with a small number of individuals in a certain organisation or locality, it is impossible to know how the findings can be generalised to other settings. In this study, qualitative interviews were conducted with nine participants. Bryman (2012) argues that in qualitative methodology with a small number of individuals, it is the quality of the theoretical inferences that are made out of qualitative data that is crucial to the assessment of generalisation. In this study, I was aware of the small-scale nature of the findings, and endeavoured to link the findings to theory, as discussed in chapter five. In this way, the issues with generalisation of the findings are addressed, but limitations of the findings remain in the fact that the study was on a small scale.
Denscombe (2007 p.28) asserts that “provided that the limitations are acknowledged and taken into account, the limited size of the sample need not invalidate the findings.”

6.33 Limitations of the study in addressing the research questions

Two of the six secondary research questions in this study, as listed in section 6.1, were focused on critical incident policy in Irish schools. In conducting the research, I found that guidance counsellors were uninterested in addressing this area. Kvale (1996 p.145) posits that the quality of an interview is largely dependent on “the degree to which the interviewer follows up and clarifies the meanings of the relevant aspects of the answers”. On reflection, I can now identify pointers in the interviews towards policy that I did not follow up on.

6.4 Implications of this research study

A guidance counsellor requires a supportive school culture and partnership within the school community in order to best support students and staff (Hearne et al. 2018). As discussed in chapter five, this has implications for guidance counsellors in a critical incident. School staff should be more aware of the role of the guidance counsellor, more collaboration should occur in schools during a critical incident, guidance counsellors should be relieved of additional administrative work during a critical incident. Also, policy-makers should be realistic about guidance counsellors’ professional competencies in a critical incident.

6.5 Recommendations

Based on the findings in this study and the implications above, the recommendations in terms of policy, practice and research are as follows:

1. **School staff should be more aware of the role of the guidance counsellor**

As discussed in chapter five, the lack of awareness among school staff around the role of the guidance counsellor has a negative impact on the efficacy of the guidance counsellor (McCoy 2006; Hearne et al. 2018).

To address this, schools should involve the guidance counsellor in the induction of new staff. During their orientation period, new staff should be informed about the role of the guidance counsellor. Because the guidance counsellor is involved in the school at a whole school level, they should communicate their role to new staff at this time. Additionally guidance counsellors
have a role to play in building relationships in school staff rooms and not isolating themselves during the school year.

2. More collaboration should occur in schools during a critical incident
Management should be mindful of resistance from school staff towards guidance counselling and provide the guidance counsellor with support in this area. Hamilton (2008) asserts that school management have a responsibility to provide a safe work environment for all school staff. In this way, school management have a role to play in preventing conflict between school staff members. This could be achieved through the fostering of an open and inclusive environment in the school through team-building activities and exercises as well as by ensuring that all staff are aware of the guidance counsellor’s role via intra staff communication and whole-staff information sessions.

3. Guidance counsellors should be relieved of additional administrative work during a critical incident.
Guidance counsellors’ efficacy can be increased by reducing the administrative workload (Atici 2014; Fitch et al. 2001). School clerical staff, teachers, special needs assistants and management should ease the workload of guidance counsellors in a critical incident by taking on the added administrative work generated by the incident such as phone calls, e-mails and letters.

4. Policy-makers should be realistic about guidance counsellors’ professional competencies in a critical incident
The Irish government guidelines for managing critical incidents (DES 2016a) state that guidance counsellors should refer students who are still showing signs of distress six weeks following a critical incident. This presents guidance counsellors with an ethical conundrum as the ethical mandate to not exceed their competency is clear (IGC 2012a). Ideally, outside agency support would be provided to these students immediately as required. However, as access to outside agencies was found as patchy in this research study, guidance counsellors’ roles in managing seriously distressed students need review. Key educational stakeholders – the Department of Education of Skills; professional bodies such as the IGC and the Teaching Council, and outside psychological agencies such as NEPS should look at this issue and undertake an assessment of what work a guidance counsellor can realistically achieve within their professional competencies in a critical incident.
5. Future research

In the literature review, in section 2.2, I examined the broad range of incidents which occurred in Irish schools. In the research, participants’ experiences of critical incidents were not as broad as that described in 2.2. It would be interesting to explore the types of critical incidents in a larger scale study than this research study, to gain insight into the impact of the broader range of incidents on guidance counsellors and the implications of this on the guidance counselling profession. Another issue which emerged from this research study was the complex issue of the human being vs. the professional. As outlined in chapter five, this issue was beyond the scope of this research study. This could be researched in the future, in the context of Irish guidance counsellors and critical incidents.

6.6 My personal learning in this research project

In undertaking this research project, which is an integral part of the MA programme, I have had gained huge personal learning. From my extensive reading of the literature on critical incidents, I have gained insight into the key and contested issues surrounding critical incidents in Ireland and internationally. I have also gained knowledge on my area of future professional practice through my reading and examination of Irish state policy on guidance counselling and on critical incidents.

Additionally, through meeting and interviewing nine practicing guidance counsellors, I have gained insight into the complexity of the role, in terms of both the workload and the emotional impact of a critical incident. This will have application for me in the future as I embark upon my own career as a post-primary guidance counsellor.

Navigating the workload of the research and writing of the dissertation has been challenging, but also very rewarding, personally. Learning research methodology, especially data analysis methodology and interpretive methods has facilitated me in taking time and slowing down in my interpretations, which has been very beneficial. I have experienced an emergence of personal growth as a result, in my practice with students in my school setting. Where previously I may have rushed to a conclusion, I am taking time and allowing ideas to percolate, and this has provided me with a real sense of growth that I will endeavour to build upon as I enter the guidance counselling profession and begin my own professional practice.
6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a conclusion to the research study by presenting an overview of the findings in the context of the primary aims and objectives. Additionally, strengths and limitations of this study were discussed; the implications and recommendations in terms of policy, practice and research were presented. Finally, the chapter concludes with my reflection on my own personal learning.
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Dear (Guidance Counsellor’s name),

I am currently in my second year of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development in the University of Limerick. For the MA dissertation, I am carrying out a study on guidance counsellors’ perceptions and experiences of their role in critical incidents in post-primary schools.

In carrying out this study, I wish to recruit guidance counsellors who would be willing to participate in an audio recorded interview of approximately one hour. This interview aims to gain insight into guidance counsellors’ perspectives on their role in, and experiences of critical incidents in their schools. I am seeking to recruit guidance counsellors from a broad range of schools and would be very grateful if you would consent to take part. If you participate in this study, your anonymity and the anonymity of your school is guaranteed.

I enclose an Information Sheet detailing what will be required of participants. If you have any further questions, please contact me at the e-mail address below.

Yours sincerely,

____________________
Laura O’Flanagan
Email: 17123259@studentmail.ul.ie
APPENDIX B Volunteer information sheet

EHS REC NO.: 2019_03_11_EHS

VOLUNTEER INFORMATION SHEET

A qualitative exploration of the perceptions and experiences of guidance counsellors in their role in critical incidents in post primary schools

Dear Guidance Counsellor,

I am a postgraduate student on the MA in Guidance Counselling & Lifelong Learning at the University of Limerick. For my MA dissertation in the University of Limerick, I am carrying out a study of guidance counsellors’ perceptions and experiences of their role in critical incidents in post-primary schools. This information sheet will tell you what the study is about.

What is the study about?
The study aims to find out how guidance counsellors perceive their role in critical incidents and what their experiences in critical incidents are.

What will I have to do?
You will be invited to take part in an interview lasting approximately one hour. The interview will be audio recorded. Your involvement in the study will take place at a time and venue that suits you.

What are the benefits?
The study aims to provide rich textural qualitative data on guidance counsellors’ perceptions and experiences of their role in critical incidents in school, and this will benefit the profession in Ireland particularly. Currently in Ireland, guidance posts are being restored and new schools are being established. This study will benefit both guidance counsellors and school managers in the creation of and implementation of school policy on critical incidents.

What are the risks?
There are no apparent risks. You might decide that you don’t want to answer a question. If this happens, you do not have to answer any question you do not wish to.

What if I do not want to take part?
Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose not to take part or to stop your involvement in this study at any time.
What happens to the information?
The information that is collected will be kept private and stored securely and safely on the researchers’
computer. The computer is protected with a password and the data is encrypted. The transcript of the
interview will be anonymised and a pseudonym will be used instead of your name. Your school will
also be anonymised.

Who else is taking part?
Guidance counsellors in the Dublin metropolitan region are being asked to take part. I hope to recruit
ten guidance counsellors from a range of different schools. I hope to have a mix of genders and ages.

What if something goes wrong in the interview?
In the very unlikely event that you find the interview distressing the interview can be paused or you
can terminate the interview.

What happens at the end of the study?
At the end of the study the information will be used to present results in my dissertation. The
information will be completely anonymous. All anonymised data gathered from the research will be
stored securely and safely by the University of Limerick for 7 years, after which it will be shredded.

What if I have more questions or do not understand something?
If you have any questions about the study, you may contact me at 17123259@studentmail.ul.ie. It is
important that you feel that all your questions have been answered.

What happens if I change my mind during the study?
At any stage should you feel that you want to stop taking part in the study, you are free to stop and take
no further part. There are no consequences for changing your mind about being in the study.

Contact name and number of Project Investigators:

Principal Investigator
Gerry Myers, Lecturer, School of Education, University of Limerick, Tel (061) 213374
Email: gerry.myers@ul.ie

Other investigator
Laura O’Flanagan
Postgraduate Student
School of Education
17123259@studentmail.ul.ie

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

Yours sincerely,

Laura O’Flanagan

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health
Sciences Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact
someone independent you may contact: Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics
Committee, EHS Faculty Office, University of Limerick Tel (061) 234101
APPENDIX C Participant consent form
EHS REC NO.: 2019_03_11_EHS

PARTICIPANT CONSENT

Title of Project: A qualitative exploration of the perceptions and experiences of guidance counsellors in their role in critical incidents in post primary schools

Should you agree to participate in this study please read the statements below and if you agree to them, please sign the consent form.

- I have read and understood the participant information sheet.
- I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for.
- I understand that the results of this study may be shared with others but that my name will not be given to anyone in any written material developed.
- I understand that my place of employment will not be identified in any transcript of the interview or in the researcher’s dissertation.
- I am fully aware of what I will have to do, and of any risks and benefits of the study.
- I know that I am choosing to take part in the study and that I can stop taking part in the study at any stage without giving any reason to the researchers.

This study involves audio recording of the interview sessions. Please tick the appropriate box

- I am aware that the interview will be audio recorded and I agree to this. However, should I feel uncomfortable at any time I can ask that the recording equipment be switched off. I know that I can ask for a summary of the interview, which will not include anybody’s name. I understand what will happen to the transcripts and recordings once the study is finished.

I agree to the statements above and I consent to taking part in this research study.

Name: (please print): __________________________

Signature: ________________________________ Date: ______________

Investigator’s Signature ________________________ Date: ______________
APPENDIX D Interview Questions

1. Has your school had a critical incident that you know about?
2. What role did you have in it?
3. What was your experience in it?
4. Did your school have a policy/procedure in place?
5. How did that go? What was your perception of how it was supposed to go?
6. What were others’ perceptions of your role during the critical incident?
7. How were you afterwards?
8. Did you feel you needed support afterwards?