

An Investigation of the Factors that Influence Students in
their Choice of Music as a Senior Cycle Subject in Post
Primary Education

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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

Sinéad O'Sullivan

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Glossary

ASTI	Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DEIS	Delivering equality of opportunity in schools
DES	Department of Education and Science; Department of Education and Skills
ESRI	Economic and Social Research
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
IGC	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
ISSU	Irish Second-Level Students' Union
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
NICE	Network for the Innovation in Career Guidance and Counselling in Europe
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SEC	State Examinations Commission
TY	Transition Year
TYP	Transition Year Programme

Abstract

The overall aim of this exploratory research study was to elucidate the factors that influence students in their choice of Music as a Senior Cycle subject, in the context of providing guidance to students in secondary education. In recent years Music has come under increasing focus in media and educational discourse as being more likely to elicit higher marks in the Leaving Certificate Examination than other subjects (Faller 2013; McGuire 2019; Moore 2014). Moreover, recent statistics from the State Exam Commission would appear to support this claim with 97.8% of students achieving an honours grade (H5 or higher) in the Leaving Certificate Music exam in 2019 (DES 2019c). Notwithstanding its good performance as an exam subject, the provision of music in secondary schools varies considerably due to school status and only 6,234 students took the exam at Higher level in 2019 (Moore 2014; SEC 2019c; Smyth 2016). This study addresses a gap in research in relation to the factors which influence student take-up of Music in Senior Cycle.

An interpretivist paradigm was employed in this study with two phases of data collection (Braun and Clarke 2013). Phase 1 consisted of two focus groups with a sample of 24 Transition Year (TY) students in one secondary school, while phase 2 collected narratives from six Senior Cycle Music teachers through semi-structured individual interviews.

The main findings in this study indicate that a number of extrinsic and intrinsic factors influence students in their choice of Music as a Senior Cycle subject. Extrinsic factors include, subject sampling, timetabling, schools supports, parental influence, teacher influence and career guidance provision. Intrinsic factors include ability, passion for the subject, subject related gender issues and future career options. Finally, a number of recommendations are put forward for policy, practice and research.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the topic under investigation within the context of relevant policy and practice. It outlines the justification for the study and the positionality of the researcher. It provides a description of the aim and objectives, and research methodology of the study. The chapter concludes with an outline of the thesis.

1.1 Context and Justification for the Research Study

The main aim of this research is to explore the factors that influence students in their choice of Music as a Senior Cycle subject, in the context of providing guidance to students in secondary education. In recent years Music at Leaving Certificate level has come under increasing focus in media and higher education discourse as an easy subject option for second level students (Faller 2013; McGuire, 2019; Moore 2014). Recent figures from the State Examinations Commission (SEC) indicate that, in 2019, 97.8% of students who took Music at Higher Level received an Honours grade (H5 or higher). Conversely, in the mid-1990's the profile of students who took Music as a subject for Leaving Certificate were those attending private instrumental lessons and those who were likely to pursue Music studies at third level (McCarthy 1999). Within the Leaving Certificate music syllabus, the aim is "to provide a general education in music for all students, whether or not they proceed to further study or a career in music" (DES 1996b p.1). However, the provision of music in secondary schools varies considerably due to school status (Moore 2014; Smyth 2016a). Additionally, provision appears to be higher in all-girl schools, while disadvantaged or smaller schools are less likely to offer it at Senior Cycle indicating the impact of gender and social class on the take-up of Music in schools (Smyth 2016a).

Subject choice as a process is inextricably linked to adolescent career development. Piaget (1977) describes adolescence as a time when adolescents begin to think abstractly and can visualise themselves working in occupations. This stage of cognitive development known as 'formal thought' can often bring the adolescent into conflict with parents and teachers and is described by Piaget as a stage of mild turmoil (Sharf 2010). Similarly, Erikson (1963) hypothesised that adolescence is a time of identity and role confusion where decisions are

made that may affect the rest of their lives. The ability to deal with these decisions can vary greatly amongst adolescents, and although some adolescents have enough self-knowledge to take their goals and values into consideration when making educational or career decisions, their level of career maturity can vary (Super et al. 1998).

In second level education in Ireland, students are required to make a series of educational and vocational decisions throughout their time in school (Smyth 2016a). School-based guidance plays an important role in supporting this process, by providing advice on subject and post-school choices (Smyth 2016a). Guidance counselling is based on an integrated, holistic model and is made up of three strands; personal and social guidance; educational guidance and career guidance (DES 2005; 2019b; NGF 2007). However, as a consequence of limited resources, some schools tend to place a greater emphasis on providing information and advice on post-school options to sixth year students resulting in less availability of formal guidance in the Junior Cycle and the transition to Senior Cycle (DES, 2019b; Hearne et al., 2016; McCoy et al., 2014). Indecon's (2019) review of career guidance on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) indicates that guidance counsellors spend approximately 50% of their time on career guidance, but also a significant amount of time on other areas of counselling which can impact on the time and resources given to the subject choice process (DES, 2019b).

The particular focus of this study is the subject choice process for students in Transition Year (TY) of the Senior Cycle. The TY Programme is well established in the research school with the majority of Junior Certificate students opting to undertake the programme annually. Subject sampling is considered an essential part of the TY programme and students are given an opportunity to sample subjects they may have not studied at Junior Cycle, which can include Music. As the Leaving Certificate is a high-stakes examination to access higher education and employment (Smyth and Banks 2012) it can have a significant impact on the choice of Music as a Senior Cycle subject. However, there is limited empirical research on the selection of Music as a Senior Cycle subject and the associated progression for students. The results of the current study will provide up to date and relevant findings for this neglected field of study.

1.2 Positionality of the Researcher

The positionality of the researcher is a significant aspect of this study (Thomas 2013). The researcher has worked for over 20 years in secondary education and has been involved in the teaching of Music at Junior and Senior Cycle. It is anticipated that this study will provide the researcher with a greater knowledge of the topic as it investigates the factors which influence the uptake of Music as a Senior Cycle subject. The results of this research may benefit not only the researcher, but the wider education and guidance community including school management, music teachers, guidance counsellors, students and parents. Throughout this study the researcher applied rigorous reflexivity to ensure the validity of the research and this will be discussed in subsequent chapters (Thomas 2013).

1.3 Research Aim and Objectives

The main aim of this research was to explore the factors that influence students in their choice of Music as a Senior Cycle subject in the context of providing guidance to students in secondary education. The overall research aim was accomplished by fulfilling the following objectives:

1. Reviewed relevant literature in relation to policy, practice and research concerning the factors which influence student' subject choice including Music and its relevance to guidance counselling practice which are addressed in Chapter 2.
2. Used qualitative methods to capture the voice of TY students and Music teachers in relation to the factors that influence students in their choice of Music as a Senior Cycle subject.
3. Drew conclusions and implications from the primary findings for future policy, practice and research related to guidance counselling in post primary schools.

1.4 Research Methodology

In this study the interpretivist approach was identified as the most appropriate paradigm to investigate the factors involved in student selection of Music as a subject in Senior Cycle in the context of providing guidance. The data collection comprised of two non-sequential phases and involved two data sources. Phase 1: Two focus groups with a sample of 24 Transition Year (TY) students in one secondary school. Phase 2: Semi-structured individual interviews with six Senior Cycle music teachers. All stages of data collection and analysis were underpinned by an ethically sound research design framework (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

1.5 Thesis Structure

The structure of the thesis is outlined as follows:

Chapter 1: introduces the research topic and outlines the primary and secondary research aim and objectives. It describes the context and justification for the study and describes the positionality of the researcher within the study. The methodology used in the research is explained and finally, the plan of the thesis is presented.

Chapter 2: reviews the relevant literature on the research topic to provide a contextual background to the study. The literature is presented in four main sections: Current policy and delivery of education in secondary schools; music as a subject choice in Senior Cycle; career development and decision-making; and guidance counselling in secondary education.

Chapter 3: outlines the methodology and methods that underpin the research design. The research paradigm, methods of data collection and analysis, validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethical considerations used in the design frame are addressed.

Chapter 4: distils the findings of the primary data collected in Phases 1 and 2.

Chapter 5: provides a critical synthesis of the primary findings with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 6: concludes the research with a brief overview of the findings within the context of the overall aim and objectives. It outlines the strengths and limitations of the study and discusses the implications for policy, practice and research. Finally, it discusses reflexivity in relation to personal learning.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

This chapter will review relevant literature to contextualise the research topic (Creswell and Creswell 2018). It will position the research topic within the ongoing discourse, filling in gaps as well as providing a benchmark for comparing the results of this research with other findings through the use of textbooks, journals, policy documents, and reports (Cooper 2010; Creswell and Creswell 2018). This chapter is divided into four thematic sections. Firstly, the review examines education policy in secondary education in Ireland including the Transition Year (TY), which is the site of the research. Secondly, it scrutinises subject choice in secondary school education. The third thematic section examines career development and decision making in adolescence. The final section reviews guidance counselling in Irish secondary education from a whole school perspective.

2.1 Policy on Secondary Education in Ireland

This section examines policy relevant to secondary education in Ireland with a particular emphasis on the Transition Year Programme (TYP).

2.1.1 Current policy and delivery of education in secondary schools

Secondary education in Ireland consists of a three-year Junior Cycle, followed by a two or three-year Senior Cycle depending on whether the optional Transition Year (TY) is taken (DES, 2017). The Senior Cycle, which is the focus of this study, caters for students aged from 15-18 years. During the final two years of the Senior Cycle, students take one of three programmes, all of which lead to a State exam: the Traditional Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) or the Leaving Cert Applied (LCA) (DES 2017).

In contrast to many other educational systems, Ireland offers a relatively undifferentiated upper secondary level system and most Leaving Certificate students are eligible for higher education (Smyth and Calvert 2011). Therefore, Leaving Certificate qualifications represent “an important gateway to post-school opportunities”, and as a result have a central role within

the education system (Smyth 2006 p.11). Discretion at school level in relation to policy and practice means that schools can differ significantly in their approaches to subject choice and provision resulting in very different educational experiences for students (Smyth 2016a). This is an important factor to consider in the context of this study as this variance also applies to the types of subject choice that is offered in schools and the subsequent impact that this disparity can have on future pathways for students.

2.1.2 Transition Year Programme (TYP)

The focus of this study is the subject choice process for students during TY in the Senior Cycle. The TYP was first introduced as a pilot programme in the mid-1970's but was expanded substantially after it was restructured in 1994. Its introduction was motivated by a concern about the overly academic nature of the Senior Cycle educational system and a desire to devise a more holistic educational experience for students (Jeffers 2011; Smyth et al. 2004a). For the first 20 years of the TYP participation rates were quite low, but changes in government policy which provided financial incentives and support for schools and teachers resulted in increased participation from 1994 onwards (Jeffers 2011). In the 1970's and 1980's participants in the programme were predominantly female, but from 1994/95 up to the early 2000's male participants accounted for approximately 45 percent of participants (Smyth et al. 2004a). More recent figures suggest participation rates of 45,916 students, with male students comprising 48% (CSO 2019).

In terms of delivery within the Senior Cycle curriculum TY is a one-year programme designed to act as a bridge between the Junior and Senior cycles. It is available to all schools and is currently on offer in 75% of schools as an optional programme (DES 2019). The current iteration of the TYP is designed to provide students with access to a variety of activities and learning experiences (Smyth and Calvert 2011) and a break from high-stakes examination pressure (Clerkin 2019). However, the decision to offer the TY programme rests with the school (Smyth and Calvert 2011) resulting in a disparity of access to the programme. In fact, smaller schools and schools with a disadvantaged status are also less likely to provide the programme with concerns that an extra year can have a potential negative effect on student retention at Leaving Certificate level (Clerkin 2013; Jeffers 2015; Smyth and Calvert 2011). To counteract exclusion issues and achieve inclusion and parity, it has been argued that schools should be offered financial assistance and other forms of support such as

programmes of professional development for teachers to encourage them to offer the TY programme (Jeffers 2011).

Research, albeit limited, indicates that students, teachers and parents tend to be positive about the TY programme commending aspects such as subject sampling, career education, varied learning approaches, a lack of examination pressure, and an opportunity to mature (Smyth and Calvert 2011; Jeffers 2007; Smyth et al. 2004). Conversely, some parents surveyed expressed concerns that TY students might become less focussed academically or might leave school before completing the Leaving Certificate (Jeffers 2007). Furthermore, evidence points to schools ‘domesticating’ TY by emphasising those aspects that fit with their ethos and sense of identity and thus diluting its overall effect of the programme (Jeffers 2011). Although TY may not be suitable for all students, those who participate in it are found to achieve significantly higher Leaving Certificate grades than those who have not (Millar and Kelly 1999; Smyth et al. 2004a; Smyth and Calvert 2011).

While the transition from primary to post-primary education has been the subject of some research in Ireland and internationally, research on the transition from Junior to Senior Cycle is quite sparse (Smyth and Calvert 2011), leaving policy makers with limited information on which to base future recommendations and policy practice (Clerkin 2019). However, Smyth (2016a) has found that this transition can be difficult for students with increased academic demands being placed on them, coupled with subject choices that may affect their future career options.

2.2 Music as a Subject Choice in Senior Cycle

This second section will address the topic of subject choice in Senior Cycle, in particular the option of Music as a Leaving Certificate Subject.

2.2.1 Subject Choice in Senior Cycle

The issue of subject choice in secondary education is an ongoing debate with different views expressed. The transition between Junior and Senior cycle is a particularly crucial time for students as the decision and choices they make at this stage are likely to have long term implications for post-school education and career pathways (Smyth and Calvert 2011). Millar

and Kelly (1999) found that attitudes formed in the Junior Cycle regarding subject choice tend to influence student's pathways in Senior Cycle with little uptake of new subjects or changes in level, whereas Smyth (2016a) argued that the opportunity to try different subjects before entering the Senior Cycle is seen by some students as facilitating more informed choice with more options. In general, students tend to perform better academically when there is a flexible approach to subject choice (Smyth and Calvert 2011). Consequently, the opportunity to sample new subjects and investigate career options during this transition period is helpful to broaden student perspective before Senior Cycle subject choices are made (Smyth and Calvert 2011).

Subject choice policy in Junior Cycle can vary from school to school and in some cases, students choose their subjects before entering first year without any prior experience of the subject (Smyth 2016a). The subjects taken by students for the Junior Certificate and their experience of them can greatly influence their selection of subjects for the Leaving Certificate. Furthermore, research shows that gender and social class differences in the take-up of Higher-level subjects are also due to choices made at Junior Cycle (Smyth and Calvert 2011). A study on gender differences and subject choice in secondary education in the Netherlands indicates that male students prefer Economics or science subjects, while female students often chose courses such as foreign languages, Biology and the arts (Van der Vleuten et. al 2016). In an Irish context, girl's schools are less likely to offer Physics or technological subjects than boys' or coeducational schools (Smyth 2016a). Bearing these factors in mind it is understandable that the opportunity to sample different subjects within TY can help with a more informed choice for Leaving Certificate subjects (Smyth 2016a).

The key factors that influence subject choice in schools are student perceptions of subjects in terms of ability, interest and relevance to future careers (Smyth and Hannon 2002). Extrinsic factors may also include the influence of a parent or subject teacher (Smyth and Calvert 2011). Additionally, schools have the autonomy to offer specific subjects and modules based on the skills of the teaching staff (Clerkin 2013), which may circumscribe the subject options for some students. A particular benefit of the TYP is the subject sampling process which, combined with the Junior Certificate exam results, assists students to make an informed decision in relation to their subject choices for Senior Cycle (ISSU 2014). Students who have participated in TY have expressed greater levels of subject satisfaction as they get the

opportunity to explore a variety of Leaving Certificate subjects before making their final decisions (Smyth et al. 2011).

2.2.2 Music as a Leaving Certificate Subject

In terms of the topic of this study, Music at Leaving Certificate level has come under increasing focus in media and higher education discourse as an easy option in recent years (Moore 2014). According to media reports, it is viewed as the easiest subject at Leaving Certificate level (Faller 2013; McGuire 2019). The most recent figures from the State Examinations Commission (SEC) show that in 2019, 6,234 Leaving Certificate students took Music at Higher Level, with 97.8% of students receiving an Honours grade (H5 or higher).

Although students perform well in the subject in the Leaving Certificate, the provision of music in secondary schools in Ireland has varied considerably (Moore 2014). In the mid-1990s, before significant changes were made to the Leaving Certificate Music syllabus, the profile of students who took music as a subject for Leaving Certificate were those attending private instrumental lessons and those who intended to study music in higher education (McCarthy 1999). A revised Leaving Certificate syllabus, which encompassed a performing, listening and composing model of music education was introduced in 1996 (DES 1996b). The inclusion of a compulsory performing aspect for all students at examination (which could form up to 50% of the overall grade) and the introduction of music technology made the subject more accessible to all students. At that the time this syllabus aimed ‘to provide a general education in music for all students, whether or not they proceed to further study or a career in music’ (DES 1996b p.1) While these changes resulted in increased numbers of students accessing third level courses in music, anecdotal evidence suggested that standards in musicianship had fallen (Boydell 2001).

Research on the low uptake of Music in the UK at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) level found that student’s perceptions of success in music centred on specialist knowledge and dispositions in music, which contributed to the low uptake (Lamont and Maton 2008). In Ireland, provision for music at Leaving Certificate level is higher in girl’s schools (SEC 2018). Furthermore, schools serving a disadvantaged population are less likely to offer Music at Senior Cycle (Smyth 2016a). As a result of the disparate nature of music provision, the student profile of students accessing third level music courses tends to

be those of economic and cultural advantage (Moore 2012), highlighting the implicit privilege of those with more relevant cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

2.3 Career Development and Decision-Making

This section will examine the literature related to career development and decision-making in the context of this study. It will discuss the evolving nature of career development since the beginning of the early twentieth century encompassing differentialist, development, social cognitive career theory and constructivist theories. The second subsection will discuss education and career decision making in adolescence.

2.3.1 Main Theoretical Perspectives of Career Decision-Making

With regard to the differentialist perspective, Parsons's (1909) view of career development is still considered relevant in current guidance counselling (Inkson et al. 2015; Patton and McMahon 2014). He advocated a three-step paradigm that incorporated self-knowledge, providing occupational information and matching self to job (Savickas and Baker 2005). Parson's theory was later expanded by Holland (1959) in his Person-Environment fit theory, which focuses on the different characteristics that distinguish people (Sharf 2010). Holland proposes that people seek occupations that are congruent with their interests and that individuals can be categorised using a combination of six personality types: Realistic, Artistic, Social, Enterprising and Conventional (RIASEC) (Kidd 2006). However, this theory has been criticised for not considering the processes that lead to a career decision (Kidd 2006) and is described as the "simplest and least sophisticated career development theory and provides few guidelines for guidance counsellors" (Sharf 2013, p.433).

Conversely, developmental career theorists of which Super is the most well-known proponent, argue that career theory relates to life stages (Kidd 2006). Developmental approaches to career counselling introduced in the UK in the 1960's involved educational career support with an emphasis on developing young people's self-awareness and decision-making skills (Kidd 2006). Super's (1957) Life Stages Theory proposes five stages of career development: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and decline. An important concept of Super's theory is *career maturity*, which is described as an individual's readiness to make career choices and decisions (Sharf 2010). A limitation of Super's theory is that it

neglects to consider gender role changes that have taken place in contemporary society, particularly for women (Sharf 2010).

A more recent perspective, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent 2013), relates to individual thought processes in career decision-making and proposes that individuals have the capacity for some degree of personal agency in all aspects of their life, while acknowledging that environmental factors can affect career development (Inkson et al. 2015; Sharf 2010). The theory integrates self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations into a complex model that predicts academic and occupational interests (Inkson et al. 2015). SCCT promotes aspirations and interests, facilitates career choice, helps goal setting and self-regulation and facilitates work performance (Lent 2013).

As career paths have become unpredictable and demand more flexibility from individuals (Krumboltz and Levin 2010), constructive career development theories have emerged which are more applicable in the 21st century (Patton and McMahon 2014). Constructivist theory reflects the view that individuals create their own meanings of events and relationships in their lives and that career development is a process of change rather than a series of vocational decisions (Kidd 2006; Sharf 2013). Cochran's narrative approach and Savickas's Career Constructive Theory represent two different constructivist approaches (Sharf 2013), but both focus on the process of career adaptability across the lifespan (Patton and McMahon 2014). Savickas draws on other theorists such as Super and Holland to present an integrated model with three components: self as actor, self as agent and self as author (Patton and McMahon 2014), while Cochran (1997) proposes a seven-episode counselling method where clients can understand their career story and actively construct their future career (Sharf 2013). Criticisms of constructivism are that it may prove difficult for beginner career counsellors because of a lack of structured techniques and products (e.g., psychometric inventories) that are typically associated with traditional approaches while more advanced practitioners may be dismissive as it has yet to accumulate a measurable body of irrefutable evidence (McIlveen and Patton 2007).

2.3.2 Education and Career Decision Making in Adolescence

The students who are the focus of this study are preparing to enter a world of work that is affected by globalisation at multiple levels in which career choice is a non-linear lifelong process with numerous transitions (Blustein 2008). They will be expected to be flexible and able to cope with unpredictable changes and opportunities (Blustein 2008; Savickas 2011). As they make their way through secondary education they are faced with many educational decisions from subject choice and level to post Leaving Certificate options (Smyth 2016a).

Career theorists have studied those aspects of adolescent development that are applicable to the career choice process, such as aptitudes, interests and values (Sharf 2010). It is suggested that some adolescents by the ages of 15-16 years can take their interests and goals into account when making a career decision and have the necessary building blocks for decision making (Super et al. 1998). However, active engagement in the form of self-exploration and planning for career decision making is crucial for adolescents to reach a congruent career choice while students demonstrating career undecidedness can also benefit from social support in the form of career counselling or job shadowing (Hirschi et al. 2011).

There has been extensive international research in educational and career decision-making with a focus on social class and gender and its impact on post-school expectations and decisions (Smyth and Calvert 2011). The resulting patterns can be divided into two frameworks; one that emphasises rational choice, and one that emphasises socio-cultural reproduction (Smyth and Banks 2012). Rational choice theorists focus on decision making from the point of view of the family or the young person, whereas social reproduction theorists focus on the effect of different economic, cultural and social capital on decision - making (Smyth and Calvert 2012). A limitation of these two approaches is that they devote little attention to the impact of the school environment on the decision-making process of young people (Smyth and Banks 2012).

In the Irish context, decisions about whether to proceed to third level education reflect three sets of processes: individual and familial habitus: the institutional habitus of the school and individual agency (Smyth and Banks 2012). Unequal distribution of economic, cultural and social capital for an individual to draw on also impacts on educational decision-making and students in a working-class school have “very different sets of economic, cultural and social

capitals upon which to draw on in the educational field” (Smyth and Banks 2012, p.21). On the other hand, students in middle class schools take significantly more higher-level subjects highlighting the significant gap that occurs between schools of different socio-economic backgrounds (Smyth 2016a). Research by Smyth (2016a) found that in the Senior Cycle there is a greater decline in aspirations among working class young people as they limit their ambitions to what is perceived to be realistic given the context of their social class. This aligns with Gottfredson’s (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise and with Supers’ crystallizing sub-stage in which reality conditions begin to play an important role in career choice (Sharf 2010).

Smyth (2016a) reports that in Senior Cycle, across all social groups, parents emerged as the most important source of advice and support for students during educational decision-making; in deciding what subjects to take, what levels to study and what future pathways to pursue. Peers, subject teachers and guidance counsellors were also seen as an important source of help in the decision-making process. However, school structures, curriculum policy and an inconsistent approach to whole school guidance can also impact student choices and future pathways (Hearne et al. 2016; Smyth 2016a). This issue will be discussed in the next section.

2.4 Guidance Counselling in Secondary Education

This section examines definitions of the whole school approach to guidance counselling and the specific role of the guidance counsellor in supporting student’s educational and career choices in secondary education.

2.4.1. Definitions of Guidance Counselling

Various definitions of guidance counselling are evident and the terminology used to describe the individuals providing guidance varies from country to country (Sultana 2004). Watts and Kidd (2000, p.489) define guidance as a “range of processes designed to enable individuals to make informed choices and transitions related to their educational, vocational and personal development”, clearly differentiating between three different elements of guidance. From a European perspective, guidance is described as a,

continuous process that enables citizens at any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competencies and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which those capacities and competencies are learned and/or used.

(Council of the European Union 2008, p.2)

This definition is indicative of international views on guidance and advocates for lifelong acquisition of career management skills and access to guidance services for all citizens (Council of the European Union 2008; ELGPN, 2014).

Successive reports from the OECD (1991, 1997, 2002) appear to contribute to guidance policy formation in Irish secondary education and guidance counselling (Hearne et al. 2016). In terms of Irish policy discourse, guidance is described as a “range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence, that assist students to develop self-management skills which will lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives” (DES 2005, p.4). This holistic approach, which includes personal and social, educational and career guidance, characterises the complex role of the guidance counsellor in Irish secondary schools (Hearne et al. 2016; McCoy et al. 2006).

Guidance is defined by the National Centre for Guidance in Education as a “range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence, designed to assist students to make choices about their lives and to make transitions consequent on these choices” (NCGE 2004, p.8). Similarly, the Institute of Guidance of Counsellors (2017) states that,

Guidance counselling involves a collaborative professional relationship to facilitate clients in their unique identification of strengths, skills, possibilities, resources and options at key development milestones through their lifespan in areas relating to personal, social, educational and vocational concerns

(IGC 2017, p.12)

The similarity in these Irish definitions suggests that the integrative and holistic approach to meet the diverse needs of students in secondary schools is strongly advocated (DES 2005; Hearne et al. 2018; IGC 2012; 2017; NCGE 2004).

2.4.2 Whole School Guidance Counselling

A whole school approach to Guidance Counselling first emerged in Irish policy discourse in the *Green Paper on Education* describing student guidance as “all the services, programmes and activities which are aimed at helping students to achieve an understanding of themselves and their potential” (DE 1992, p.107). The removal of ex-quota guidance counselling allocation in schools as a consequence of Budget 2012, and concerns about the provision of adequate guidance prompted four national audits by the IGC from 2011/2012 and 2015/2016 (Hearne et al. 2016; IGC 2016). The findings indicated a reduction in one to one counselling from 12 hours to 5.59 hours per week and an overall decrease in service of 53.3% (IGC 2016). Similar findings in the reduction of guidance provision were reported by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) (2013) and the Association of Secondary School Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) (2013). Consequently, many guidance counsellors had to take on the dual role of guidance counsellor and subject teacher (Hearne et al. 2016). In some schools, non-qualified teachers, support staff and other paraprofessionals were found to be fulfilling the guidance counsellors’ role (IGC 2016).

During the last few years, and in particular since 2012, a whole school approach to guidance counselling has consistently been promoted as a “model of good practice” (DES 2009, p.8). It places direct responsibility on the whole school to deliver a guidance programme across the curriculum with the guidance counsellor leading (DES 2005 2012; Hearne et al. 2016; NCGE 2004). Foxx et al. (2017) suggest that guidance counsellors can become effective leaders by engaging in collaborative efforts to support the academic, career, social and personal success of all students. This unified model of guidance counselling has similarities to guidance provision in other countries such as Hong Kong and the USA (Hui 2002), however it is somewhat unique when compared to guidance provision in other European countries (Vuorinen and Kettunen 2017).

Some challenges have been highlighted with regards to a whole school approach to guidance counselling. In general, the lack of a “clear standardised framework for guidance has led to inconsistencies in guidance provision a guidance counsellors carry out roles of a wide and varied nature” (McCoy et al. 2006, p.190). The participation of all teachers in guidance activities may not generate a whole school approach if teachers do not share a similar belief (Hui 2002), and some teachers regard teaching academic subjects as their main responsibility

(Feheny 1999). Regular teachers are expected to provide “advice and information in relation to their subject discipline” (DES 1996a, p.5), without specific training or support provided to them (Hearne and Galvin 2014). However, the involvement of a large range of staff in pastoral care and support roles can lead to a lack of clarity for students regarding the supports available to them (McCoy et al. 2014). Furthermore, areas such as crisis counselling require specialist training and may be beyond the remit of regular teachers and the pastoral care system (Hearne and Galvin 2014). Another issue is that there needs to be buy-in from management for the whole school approach as found by Hearne et al. (2016).

Finally, Hearne and Galvin (2014) articulate that there appears to be a lack of clear understanding of the roles, functions and outcomes of a whole school approach to guidance counselling. Although the DES has been influential in the evolution of guidance counselling provision it is still unclear as to what constitutes ‘appropriate’ guidance as stated in the Government of Ireland *Irish Education Act (1998)*. Furthermore, although a whole school approach has been endorsed in recent years there is little evidence to support its effectiveness (Hearne et al. 2016).

2.4.3 The Role of the Guidance Counsellor

The role of the guidance counsellor differs from one country to another (NICE 2012). A framework outlining the classification of competencies for career guidance and counselling professionals across the EU was developed in 2012 (NICE). In Ireland, the Network for the innovation in Career Guidance and Counselling in Europe (NICE) (2012) core competencies are generally represented across the three domains of the integrated model of guidance counselling (personal and social, educational and career) (DES 2005, 2012; Hearne et al. 2016; NCGE 2004). The National Guidance Forum (NGF 2007) highlights the complex and varied nature of the guidance counsellors’ role by outlining the following five key areas in which they are expected to demonstrate knowledge and understanding:

1. Theory and practice of vocational educational and personal/social guidance across the lifespan;
2. Labour market education and training;
3. Counselling;

4. Information and resource management;
5. Professional practice

(NGF 2007, p.7)

Additionally, the DES Programme Recognition Framework: Guidance Counselling (DES 2016, p.7) sets out the activities relating to the role of the guidance counsellor:

- Designing, delivering and evaluating guidance learning and development programmes relating to personal and social, educational and career development for individual, group and classroom settings
- Providing individual and group counselling to facilitate personal and social, educational and career development and at moments of personal crisis
- Providing labour market, learning and career-related information through Information and Communications Technology
- Planning and organising workplace learning and establishing links with the wider business community, agencies and voluntary sector
- Using psychometric tests to facilitate career decision-making and personal development and to support learning and educational choices
- Working collaboratively to lead, deliver, review and evaluate the guidance programme and the whole school guidance plan
- Referring students to external agencies and professionals, as appropriate

(DES 2016, P7)

Indecon's (2019) recently published review of guidance indicates that guidance counsellors spend approximately 50% of their time on career guidance, but also a significant amount of time on other areas of counselling and it endorses this practice of the integrated model of guidance counselling (DES 2019b).

2.5 Conclusion

This literature review has revealed the complicated nature of subject and career decision making for adolescents. School type, ethos, policy and the approach to whole school guidance counselling are contributing factors. Research shows that subject sampling in TY for Senior Cycle can help students make a more informed decision. Additionally, TY is widely accepted as a successful educational model in Irish schools, with positive attitudes towards the programme from all the educational partners. However, it remains an optional programme in schools with just over half of the student cohort participating resulting in a disparity in student experiences that would benefit from further research. In the context of this study the particular factors involved in choosing Music at Senior Cycle, some of which appear to be differences in gender and social class will be explored further. The following chapter addresses the research design of this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter addresses the methodology underpinning the research project which consists of theories and practices which form the framework within which this research took place (Braun and Clarke 2013). The chapter addresses the research questions, research design frame, data collection and analysis methods, validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethical issues.

3.1 Research Questions

Research questions form the backbone of research design and should be clearly formulated, researchable and intellectually worthwhile (Mason 2009). Furthermore, they represent the areas of enquiry that a researcher wants to explore and as such is a device for guiding and focusing that enquiry (Mason 2009; Miles et al. 2013).

The research questions for this study evolved from a combination of issues identified in the literature review and the researcher's professional experience working as a Music teacher in post primary education. As research dissertations should have a primary or overarching question (Miles et al. 2013) the primary question of this study was:

What factors influence students in their choice of music as a Senior Cycle subject in post primary education?

In addition, several secondary questions asked:

- 1. How do students consider their future career path when choosing Senior Cycle subjects?*
- 2. What supports are available to Senior Cycle students in the subject choice process?*
- 3. What are the implications for school guidance counsellors in supporting students with their subject choices, including music, in Senior Cycle?*

The next section will address the paradigm used to answer these research questions.

3.2 Research Paradigm: Interpretivism

Research methodology involves philosophical assumptions as well as distinct methods and procedures that influence research and need to be identified (Creswell and Creswell 2018). This philosophical stance or paradigm is a conceptual framework within which theories are constructed (Braun and Clarke 2013). Positivism and interpretivism are the underlying paradigms of quantitative and qualitative research (Braun and Clarke 2013; Hennink et al. 2011). A positivist orientation assumes that reality is observable, stable and can be measured scientifically without researcher bias (Merriam 2009; Thomas 2013). Conversely, interpretivist research recognises that reality is socially constructed with multiple perspectives of reality, as opposed to the single truth proposed in positivism (Merriam 2009; Hennink et al. 2011). In addition, the interpretivist paradigm highlights the inherent subjectivity of participants and researchers and acknowledges that the researcher's background and value system are an integral part of the creation of data (Hennink et al. 2011).

In this study the interpretivist approach was identified as the most appropriate paradigm to investigate the reasons why students choose music as a subject in Senior Cycle in the context of providing guidance to them in secondary education. This approach allowed for a deeper, multi-faceted understanding of the phenomenon as participant's experiences were revealed in an open-ended and exploratory fashion through semi-structured interviews and focus groups (Braun and Clarke 2013). As this study was qualitative in nature it investigated the ways in which students and teachers make sense of their experiences (Savin-Baden and Major 2013). It provides detailed descriptions of situations, observed behaviours and includes direct quotations from people about their attitudes and beliefs on the research topic (Patton 1980). However, a limitation of this research approach is that the human instrument can have biases or subjectivities which impact on the study. Therefore, it was important for this researcher as an 'insider acting with participants' (Thomas 2013, p.111) to identify how her own positionality was likely to affect her interpretation and to monitor it through the data collection and analysis phases (Merriam 2009; Thomas 2013; Creswell and Creswell 2018).

3.3 Qualitative Data Collection Methods

This section will outline the data collection methods used. This research was preceded by Ethical Approval received by the University of Limerick Research Ethics Committee on April 4th, 2019. The data collection comprised of two non-sequential phases and took place between April 30th, 2019 and May 14th, 2019. It involved two data sources:

1. Two focus groups with a sample of 24 Transition Year (TY) students in one secondary school.
2. Semi-structured individual interviews with six Senior Cycle music teachers.

3.3.1 Access and Sampling

The sampling strategy was a key factor in the research design. The sample needed to be representative of the population in terms of the “heterogeneity of the elements and the representativeness of the variables” (Flick 2015, p.101). With regards to the student sample, the researcher sought permission from the Principal (Gatekeeper) of the students’ school to collect data from TY students who had experience of subject sampling in the TY programme. The participants were mixed gender and ranged in age from 15-16 years. As this involved participants who were under 18, informed consent was obtained from the students and their parents/carers (Cohen et al. 2007), (*see Appendix D and F*) prior to the two focus groups. The researcher initially used convenience sampling with 95 TY students because the sample was the most accessible to the researcher in the given timeframe (Flick 2015; Braun and Clarke 2013). The response rate was higher than the required number of 24 so random sampling for 24 was carried out using <https://www.randomizer.org/>. The students did not have to indicate if they had selected music as a subject for the Senior Cycle as they were still in the process of making decisions about their subject choices in TY at the time of the focus group. Students were fully informed about the purpose of the study and the voluntary conditions involved (*see Appendix C, D, E, F*).

The second source of data collection was a sample of second level music teachers whose knowledge and experience of the topic offered valuable insights and in-depth understanding (Braun and Clarke 2013). Purposive sampling was used to access post-primary music teachers. On April 10th, 2019 the researcher contacted 15 schools with Music teachers on

staff providing a Subject Information letter and Consent form (*see Appendix G and H*). Nine teachers responded by the deadline and the first six were interviewed. (*See Table 1.1*)

Participants Pseudonyms	Professional Role	Gender	Years of teaching experience	Type of school
Isabelle	Secondary school music teacher	Female	3	City
Fergus	Secondary school music teacher	Male	5	Rural
Lorna	Secondary school music teacher	Female	9	Rural
Rose	Secondary school music teacher	Female	17	City
Hannah	Secondary school music teacher	Female	19	Rural
Caroline	Secondary school music teacher	Female	13	City

Table 1.1 demographic profile of music teachers

Prior to the interview process the participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The interviews took place between April 30th, 2019 and May 14th, 2019 at a time and place convenient to the participant. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher after each interview. A copy of the transcript was sent to each participant for respondent validation and to ensure accuracy of content (Bell 1999). All participants responded and no amendments were necessary.

3.3.2 Focus Groups

A focus group is an interview on a topic with a group of people who have knowledge on that topic and has become entrenched as an increasingly popular method of qualitative data collection (Braun and Clarke 2013; Kreuger 2008). In this study, the two focus groups with TY students elicited a wide range of views, perspectives and understandings of the issue (Underhill and Olmsted 2003). The rationale for this method was that participants were likely to express more and to go further in their statements than in single interviews while listening to each other's responses and making additional comments (Flick 2015; Patton, 2002). It facilitated students to open up in a non-threatening environment, while at the same time

allowing the researcher to probe issues more deeply producing results with high face validity (Kreuger and Casey 2014).

The researcher was aware of the limitations of this method in that individuals can behave differently in groups and participant's responses may be different than in individual interviews (Thomas 2013). There was the risk that a few voices would dominate, and the group dynamics might encourage conformity and silence particular viewpoints (Silverman 2014; Liamputtong 2011; Thomas 2013). To minimise this risk the researcher established ground rules in the form of a verbal contract at the beginning of the focus group discussion (Rogers 2010). Additionally, as focus groups do not allow for in-depth follow-up of individual's views, they can be difficult to manage and can easily get off topic (Braun and Clarke 2013; Liamputtong 2011). Therefore, the researcher assumed the role of facilitator and used a focus group interview guide (*see Appendix J*) to stimulate discussion and encourage the group members to interact with each other while staying on topic (Silverman 2014; Thomas 2013). Notwithstanding these limitations, this method uncovered unique perspectives on the issues due to the group environment (Braun and Clarke 2013; Hennink et al. 2011).

As confidentiality issues among group members can arise (Kreuger and Casey 2014) the students were required to sign a focus group confidentiality form (*see Appendix I*). Each focus group had 12 participants and both genders were represented. The first focus group had 3 male and 9 female participants, and the second focus group had 4 male and 8 female participants.

In the focus groups, some of the participants had studied music at Junior Certificate level, while others had not. The focus groups took place in the secondary school after school hours, to safeguard the identity of the students. They were audio recorded and lasted 45 minutes each. As the aim of the focus groups was to let the group take the lead with the researcher in the role of facilitator a focus group interview guide was used (*see Appendix J*) to stimulate discussion and encourage the group members to interact with each other (Silverman 2014; Thomas 2013). The data collection questions were designed thematically and derived from the research questions and issues that emerged in the literature review.

3.3.3 Individual Interviews

The individual interview method was used in tandem with the focus groups to gain insight into the topic from the music teachers' perspective (Hennink et al. 2011) and involved a meaning-making partnership between the interviewer and interviewees (Hennink et al. 2011). A strength of the interview method was its adaptability in facilitating the researcher to follow up on ideas, clarify and develop responses and investigate feelings or emotions that arose in the interview (Bell 1999). Although there were limitations to using individual interviews in that they were time consuming, highly subjective and susceptible to bias (Bell 1999; Savin-Baden and Major 2013), the researcher considered this method most appropriate for this study as a well-conducted qualitative interview can generate data with rich, detailed and often unanticipated accounts (Braun and Clarke 2013).

The researcher followed a framework of pre-set questions but also posed additional questions in response to the interviewee's comments (Savin-Badin and Major 2013) (*see Appendix K*). It offered enough flexibility for the researcher to respond to the narrative of the interviewee while maintaining a systematic direction in the interview (Cohen et al. 2011). The framework comprised of a number of themes with specific questions: music in a school context, curriculum support for music as a subject, timetabling and its effect on the uptake of music as a Senior Cycle subject and music as a career option (Bell 1999; Merriam 2009). All of the interviews were face to face, audio recorded and approximately one hour in length. The researcher was aware that research interviews require ethical sensitivity and prepared in advance by identifying the types of ethical issues that might arise in the study (Cohen et al. 2011; Mason 2009).

To safeguard against bias, the researcher kept a research diary to record her thoughts and observations, discussed her positionality with her supervisor throughout the study and acted reflexively at all times during the data collection and analysis stages.

3.4 Data Analysis Method

The qualitative data from the interviews and focus groups was transcribed immediately by the researcher to ensure a full analysis. Data was anonymised using pseudonyms and by changing any data that could identify participants. The constant comparative method was applied to

analyse the data by going through the data repeatedly comparing each element, phrase or paragraph with all the other elements (Thomas 2013). During the process of constant comparison, the researcher marked up the data with codes that identified important features, finally emerging with themes that summarised the data content (Thomas 2013).

Coding is the process of classifying features of the data that relate to the research questions and in qualitative analysis there are two main procedures to coding: selective and complete coding (Braun and Clarke 2013). Selective coding is typically used for narrative, discursive analysis and requires the researcher to identify a corpus of occurrences of the phenomenon of interest, which are then selected out (Braun and Clarke 2013). Complete coding on the other hand looks to identify anything of interest or relevance to the research question from the entire dataset. In this study the researcher used complete coding where all data relevant to the research questions was coded becoming more selective later in the analytical process (Braun and Clarke 2013). The researcher employed a model whereby a code was simply a word or label given to a piece of text that indicated why a particular piece of data was relevant to the study as the analysis took place (Braun and Clarke 2013; Miles et al. 2013)

The researcher coded and analysed the data from the focus groups and interviews using Braun and Clarke's six phase Thematic Data Analysis Framework (2012):

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data - following transcription the researcher familiarised herself with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts of the two data sources, which were analysed separately. This provided the foundation for the analysis phase.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes - in this phase the researcher generated codes to identify the most interesting or relevant features of the data.

Phase 3: Searching for themes - phase 3 introduced the beginning of the interpretive analysis, which involved constant comparison to identify patterns in the data.

Phase 4: Reviewing potential themes - here the researcher reviewed potential themes and identified connections across themes.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes - the researcher categorised and named themes linking them to the research questions.

Phase 6: Producing the findings report - integration and interpretation - This final stage is presented in Chapter 4 and involves the integration and interpretation of the results from the primary data collected.

(Braun and Clarke 2012)

3.5 Validity and Reliability

In quantitative research, validity is referred to as a synonym for dependability, consistency and reliability over time, over instruments and over groups of respondents (Cohen et al. 2011) and is essential for effective research (Thomas 2013). It demonstrates whether the research measures what it was intended to measure and how truthful the final results are (Savin-Baden and Major 2013). Reliability ensures that measurements can be consistent and repeatable when used with the same subjects in similar conditions (Savin-Baden and Major 2013).

Conversely, as in this study, qualitative approaches acknowledge multiple realities or context-bound realities which means that reliability is not an appropriate means of judging qualitative work (Braun and Clarke 2013). Here the results tend to be more subjective and less scientific in nature and as a consequence other criteria are required to ensure validity and reliability (Merriam and Tisdell 2015).

The issue of validity was addressed in this study with the application of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) model for validity using four key criteria for validity: credibility (validity), transferability (generalizability), dependability (reliability) and confirmability (objectivity). Rigorous methods, credibility of the researcher and a philosophical belief in interpretivist research are essential for the credibility of this study (Patton, 2002). To ensure credibility triangulation was used by gathering data from students and Music teachers (Braun and Clarke 2013; Lincoln and Guba 1985). This facilitated a more valid and reliable study, as each data source addressed different but complementary questions. Furthermore, the researcher transcribed individual interview data and checked contents for accuracy through respondent validation (Silverman 2014).

Reliability is not an appropriate criteria to judge qualitative work as multiple realities often exist however if we think of reliability more as the dependability or trustworthiness of data collection and analysis then a version of reliability can be applied to this research (Braun and Clarke 2013). Dependability in qualitative research can be defined as the stability of data over time and over conditions (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Transferability in qualitative research assesses the extent to which data results can be applied to other contexts (Braun and Clarke 2013), consequently detailed ‘thick’ description of the time and context of this study is provided to argue for transferability and typicality to other similar contexts (Hearne 2009; Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Finally, confirmability (objectivity) occurs when an appropriate methodology is used that keeps an adequate distance between the researcher and the participant (Lincoln and Guba 1985). While it is acknowledged that it is impossible to be completely objective in qualitative research (Cohen et al. 2011) the contentious issue of objectivity and subjectivity was addressed by the researcher by adopting a neutral stance (Patton 2002). Qualitative research values subjectivity in the same way that quantitative research values objectivity but to use subjectivity as a research tool we must be reflexive (Braun and Clarke 2013). The issue of reflexivity is discussed in more detail in the next section.

3.6 Reflexivity

Functional reflexivity critically evaluates how research tools and processes may influence research, while personal reflexivity evaluates how the researcher can influence the research process (Braun and Clarke 2013). Reflexive researchers reflect about their biases, values and personal background, and how they might shape their interpretations during a study (Creswell and Creswell 2018). McLeod (2010) argues that it is important to describe your professional background and any pre-existing assumptions or experiences to be transparent regarding any potential bias. It is suggested by Creswell (2013), that the process of reflexivity seeks to continually reach points of clarification within the data collection and analysis phases of the study, which sufficiently locates the researcher.

With regard to this study, the researcher acknowledges that she is a part of the social world that she has been researching in her professional capacity as a secondary school music

teacher and trainee guidance counsellor. Thus, she was continuously mindful that her personal background, experiences, attitudes, and belief system might have impacted on the research process (Berger 2015; Gerber et al. 2016). Her past experiences may have caused her to lean towards certain themes or actively look for evidence to support her position (Creswell and Creswell 2018). To counter this, the researcher applied rigorous reflexivity and addressed any concerns regarding bias with her supervisor and through personal reflection.

The researcher used a research journal to record thoughts, feelings and reflections about the process (Braun and Clarke 2013) and viewed reflexivity “as a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher’s positionality” (Berger 2015, p.220). When researchers record notes, reflect on personal experiences and consider how those experiences may shape their interpretation of result then sufficient reflexivity has occurred (Creswell and Creswell 2018). This involved identifying any assumptions about the research topic (Braun and Clarke 2013) at the beginning of this study in relation to the research topic which included her expectations about gender balance in the uptake of music, and reasons why students consider music as a future career. In the interviews with music teachers’ the researcher was careful not to let her own experiences as a music teacher shape the narrative with the interviewee. In the focus groups, she was aware of her natural bias towards the value of music as a subject and was careful not to let this subjectivity impact on her role as facilitator.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

“Ethics are principles of conduct about what is right and wrong” (Thomas 2017, p.37). This section will address the ethical approval process and ethical principles’ underpinning this research. Ethical research practice was guided by three levels of ethical regulation: legislative, professional and personal (Cohen et al. 2011).

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Limerick at the outset of the research. Specifically, the principles of competence, conduct, confidentiality and consent outlined in the two codes were applied. Professionally the researcher was familiar with three of the six Music teachers interviewed as a consequence of the small numbers in this specialised field. The researcher was cognisant of the ethical issue that this raised, however these professionals were likely to provide the best information given the research topic and questions (Savin-Baden and Major 2013). Thirdly, on a personal level the researcher applied rigorous

reflexivity and keen decision-making throughout the research process (Cohen et al. 2011) and resolved any dilemmas that emerged with her supervisor.

As a guidance counsellor in training it was the researcher's ethical responsibility to safeguard the participants from being manipulated or taken advantage of in the search for new data (Hearne 2013). Two of the main ethical considerations in this study were ensuring confidentiality and securing informed consent for all engaged in the study (Flick 2015; Hearne 2013; Thomas 2017). The researcher obtained consent from the school gatekeeper, all volunteer participants and parental/carers. The data was collected and stored in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and University of Limerick's guidelines for data storage and destruction. All audio recordings of interviews were transcribed immediately with pseudonyms used and recordings destroyed after data analysis

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodology underpinning the research study. Chapter 4 will discuss the primary findings gathered in the field work.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

4.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the primary findings of the research. The chapter is divided into two sections to represent the two sources of data collection that were utilised in the study.

4.1 Data Source 1: Focus Group Interviews

This section presents the findings from the two focus groups with Transition Year (TY) students. The data from the two focus groups was analysed separately before being combined as a single analysis. Direct quotations are used to support the data analysis. For example, female students are coded as (TYFS) and male students are coded as (TYMS). Four overarching themes emerged related to the topic:

1. Factors that influence students' subject choices
2. Students' experience of the subject sampling process
3. Reasons why students choose Music as a Senior Cycle subject
4. Guidance provision to students

4.1.2 Factors that influence Students' Subject Choices

The first theme relates to the range of factors that influence subject choice in TY which included peer and parental influence, third level courses, interest in the subject and teacher influence. Peer and parental influence emerged as an important factor for students choosing subjects. Early on peers were more influential; *"To be honest if your friends are like in the one class"* (TYFS). Conversely, when students were choosing subjects for the third sampling session, subjects, which they were most likely to take in Senior Cycle, parental influence superseded this. One male student suggested that for the first two sampling sessions *"the parents don't have much influence really, it's your own choice"* but they do influence the *"the final choice"*. On the other hand, one student reported that although she had a

conversation with her parents the final decision was hers “*at the end of the day it’s your leaving Cert... it’s what you want to do ...it’s your future*” (TYFS).

Another influential factor is the impact of the Leaving Certificate and third level courses on subject choices; “*I chose the subjects I chose because I was thinking about university and what would help me the most for the Leaving Cert*” (TYFS). Another student articulated that future career was an important factor “*the subjects that I chose are mainly subjects that I can get high grades in and they are something that you might need for a career*” (TYMS).

A common factor among students was having an “*interest*” or “*passion*” for a subject. One student stated, “*when I’m choosing subjects, I’ll choose something that I enjoy because at the end of the day if it’s my future career I want to do something that I enjoy not just something that I’m good at*” (TYFS). Another factor was the concept of learning styles on subject choice. One student who chose History, Geography and Biology reported “*for me it is the way I learn, I learn something off by heart and then I write it down, so I pick subjects where you are able to do that*” (TYFS). Another liked project work so she “*chose practical subjects like Ag Science and Construction*” (TYFS).

Finally, teacher personality emerged as a factor in choosing subjects. One female student reported that subject sampling gave students an opportunity to have “*different teachers and experience different “teaching styles”*”. Conversely “*having a teacher that you don’t like*” was described as a disadvantage in subject sampling (TYMS). Words used by the students included “*good*”, “*bad*”, “*nice*”, “*mean*” and “*boring*” and students agreed that the subject teacher played a significant role in determining whether a class was interesting or enjoyable.

4.1.3 Students’ Experience of Subject Sampling Process

The second theme relates to students’ experience of the subject sampling process in TY. Students choose three subjects for each sampling session from a range of 20 subjects. At the beginning of Term 1 students must choose their subjects for the sampling sessions 1 and 2. Students are required to choose their subjects for the final term in March and are encouraged to choose the subjects they are considering for Senior Cycle. In advance of this parents meet with subject teachers at a formal Parent-Teacher meeting to discuss options.

The majority of students reported a very positive experience with subject sampling in TY. According to one *“it’s been very relaxed and none of us have been pressured into trying anything specific. It’s all been by choice”* (TYMS). Potentially students can sample up to nine different subjects although *“they recommend that what you think you are going to do for the Leaving Cert you do for the last term”* (TYFS). Students in both focus groups agreed that there were many advantages to subject sampling including variety of subjects, different teaching approaches, learning new things and *“you get to see what you’re good at”* (TYFS). TY afforded the opportunity to try *“something you had never tried before”* (TYFS). Importantly, subject sampling allowed students to make a more informed choice with one stating *“I feel if I was in the Junior Cert and going into fifth year the subjects, I would have picked then are different to the ones I would pick now after doing TY”* (TYMS).

Another issue impacting on the student’s experience is the high demand for subjects such as Biology, Chemistry and Construction. In some cases, students were unable to secure their first choice due to being *“overbooked”* (TYFS) and *“a really high demand”* (TYFS). Additionally, with so many subjects on offer some students found the timetable confusing at the beginning of each term, and while they agreed that there was lots of choice, the amount of time spent studying each subject was limited (8-9 weeks). Furthermore, the large number of subjects on offer was overwhelming with one student reporting that *“there was too much choice, you actually got less opportunity to sample everything you would like to try ... you were already having to narrow it down”* (TYFS).

In relation to gender balance in different subject areas opinions were divided amongst students in both focus groups. One student argued *“all subjects should be able to be tried out by people of either gender”* (TYMS), while another mentioned *“in Junior Cert you could see that it was very gender divided”* (TYMS). This student explained, *“when I did Music and Art there was a high predominance of girls, but then the boys went to DCG and Construction”*. In general students agreed there was a *“reasonable”* balance between genders and in the sampling of technological subjects the balance was *“pretty even”*. However, in Art, Home Economics and Music there were *“more girls”*.

4.1.4 Reasons why students choose Music as a Senior Cycle subject

The third theme that emerged was the reason why students choose Music as a Senior Cycle subject. Many of the students who sampled Music in TY had taken the subject at Junior Certificate and were curious to see if there were any differences between the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate courses. One female student articulated that the main difference at Leaving Certificate level is that *“50% of the course is practical”* referring to a performance-based exam which takes place in advance of the Leaving Certificate written exams. This contrasts with the practical component in the Junior Certificate Music exam, which is worth 25%, although this has recently been extended to 30% with the new Junior Cycle reform.

There was general agreement amongst students that the practical element appeals to students who play an instrument. One student articulated *“if you are good at an instrument then 50% would really impact”* (TYMS), however another pointed out that *“it depends on your confidence playing the instrument because if you really feel uncomfortable playing in front of people then you know not to pick it”* (TYFS). One male student who receives private instrumental tuition said, *“if you play something outside of school and have enjoyment in it and if you can play it for the Leaving Cert then it would be silly not to”* (TYMS).

Several students had sampled Music in TY but had not taken the subject for Junior Certificate. While their overall experience was positive, they did voice concerns in relation to the practical element for students who do not play an instrument or who have not studied Music for Junior Certificate. One male student reported that although he was sampling Music in TY, he would not consider it as a Leaving Certificate subject because he *“would not have enough time to learn an instrument”* or develop his voice to a suitable standard.

Regarding future career opportunities in Music, suggestions from students were limited to becoming a Music teacher or a musician. *“I wouldn’t have thought there would be much to honest to do as a career in the music industry”* (TYFS). On the other hand, one female student who had studied Music in the Junior Certificate had several suggestions: *“you can be a sound technician... a music teacher...you can do therapy with Music...you can be a manager”*. Generally, students felt it was a potentially difficult career that was *“limiting”*, *“unstable”*, *financially insecure* and *“more of a hobby”*. Overall, the students who had

studied Music either in the Junior Certificate or in TY were more positive about future careers suggesting that diverse career opportunities and the flexibility associated with being a musician might suit certain individuals. Nevertheless, the majority of students associated a career in Music with financial instability and insecurity.

4.1.5 Guidance provision to students

The final theme is the deficit in provision of career guidance to students on the TY programme, which is causing confusion in relation to subject decision-making. The majority of students reported a lack of access to one-to-one guidance to discuss their subject choice over the course of the year.

One male student reported that *“it’s kind of hard because most people don’t know how to set up a meeting with the guidance counsellor”*, while another observed *“they kind of need to promote that it is an option for people to go and talk to the guidance counsellor because they are non-biased when they talk to you”* (TYFS). Lack of information on career opportunities is an issue. One student observed *“we’re not really told what our options are...what careers are in the future...we feel that they should go more in depth or talk to us individually...talk to us about what careers we can get out of these subjects”* (TYFS). Although the students were given a presentation on subject choice during a class period this was *“a quick run through”*, *“just the basics of the subjects”* and was not delivered by the guidance service. They also reported not having received guidance about third level courses with one reporting *“if you are thinking of some career in the future you kind of have to look it up yourself and look up the CAO points and the requirements”* (TYFS). Consequently, they appeared to have very little knowledge or inaccurate information in relation to entry requirements for third level courses.

In the absence of formal guidance, the students appear to seek guidance from other sources with the Music teacher as their first point of reference: *“They can give you advice, give you an idea of what it would be like”* (TYMS). There was general agreement that Music teachers are aware of students’ ability, can give advice and information about courses and can suggest a direction or focus to take. On the other hand, one student reported that *“they could be a bit biased because it’s their subject...they’re going to protect it because they love it”* (TYFS). Some students perceived that subject teachers should provide more information on careers or

“even a presentation of all the different courses that you can go into” (TYMS), while others identified the guidance counsellor as the member of staff who should provide information on job paths, career opportunities and college courses.

This concludes the findings from the two focus groups which have explicated student’s viewpoints in relation to subject sampling, subject choice, Music as a Leaving Certificate subject and career guidance provision. Subject sampling emerged as an important factor in student subject choice; however, an obvious issue is the limited provision of career guidance to support students’ decision-making and knowledge of future pathways. Parental influence and future career paths appear to be the main factors influencing subject choice in TY. In relation to choosing Music as a Senior Cycle subject there was consensus amongst the students that the performing element of the course suited students who played an instrument to a high standard.

4.2 Data Source 2: Semi-structured Interviews

This section will present the primary findings from the six interviews with second level Music teachers. The findings revealed various extrinsic and intrinsic factors which influence subject choice for Senior Cycle students. These factors will be distilled through two overarching themes:

1. Extrinsic influences on Senior Cycle subject choice
2. Intrinsic influences on Senior Cycle subject choice

4.2.1 Extrinsic influences on Senior Cycle subject choice

The first overarching theme addresses the extrinsic influences on subject choice. These include subject sampling, timetabling, schools supports, parental influence, teacher influence and career guidance provision. The findings suggest that the provision of subject sampling/tasting in first year (Junior Cycle) and TY (Senior Cycle) and subject choice bands have a significant impact on the uptake of Music in Senior Cycle. School management appears to have a noteworthy level of discretion in the arrangements and provision of subject choice bands and subject sampling.

In the study, Five of the six schools offer subject sampling in first year, while all six schools offer it in TY. In four of the six schools the duration of subject sampling ranged from 2-4 weeks. There was consensus amongst these teachers that subject sampling provides students with “*an experience of something they enjoy, to see if they like it because a lot of the time music isn’t what they think it is*” (Rose) and an “*excellent opportunity for students to try out different subjects*” (Isabelle). However, Caroline described a different process of subject sampling for first year students in her school, “*they have a taster programme for the entire year so in early February, early March they have to choose Music, Art or Technical Graphics*”. Consequently, Music is competing against two other practical subjects and students are limited to picking one practical subject only. This policy “*is detrimental to Music in a boy’s school and my numbers fall ...bigtime*”.

Hannah was the only teacher whose school did not offer a subject sampling for incoming first year students. In her school students choose their subjects pre-entry. Although this can result in a low uptake of Music, school management vary the options in the choice subject blocks to get a good balance in the numbers taking Music. Hannah explained “*we found if you backed it with Latin you get massive classes, if you backed it with Business for a while you get tiny classes. We put Business in two lines and that solved that problem*”.

Variation was also evident in the provision of subject bands in Junior and Senior Cycle. Two of the schools provided Music in two different bands and both teachers articulated that this contributed to a higher uptake in both Junior and Senior Cycles. “*We’re very lucky here in that we have two Junior Cycle classes and what that would mean is that in the Senior Cycle we would usually have uptake in the twenties*” (Fergus).

Rose described a different experience in her school where Music is only offered in one choice block in the Junior Cycle while all other choice subjects are offered in two blocks. She articulated that this policy places Music at a distinct disadvantage and has a negative impact on Senior Cycle uptake; “*If I had Music in the second block, I would then have forty-eight possible students coming through having done it as a Subject ...I might get a class of twenty-four then in fifth year*”. Lorna reported a similar concern in relation to subject provision in the Senior Cycle. In her school STEM subjects often appear in two blocks or bands on the timetable while Music only appears in one. Lorna explained “*Certain subjects are promoted more, in hidden ways*”. Clashes with other practical subjects such as Art and Home

Economics also impacted negatively on the subject in Junior Cycle while *“in Senior Cycle it becomes very difficult because we are up against subjects like Construction and Engineering”* (Fergus).

There was consensus amongst all six teachers that TY provided ‘a second chance opportunity’ to increase the uptake of Music for Senior Cycle. TY gave teachers an opportunity to discover new musically talented students while at the same time supporting other students to develop their musical skills. In some cases, TY students study Music for the whole year, and in other schools they sample Music in rotation for one school term. Some of the schools staged a musical as part of the TY programme providing opportunities for students to discover and develop their vocal talents. The teachers in these schools agreed that there were many benefits to meeting with all TY students over the course of the year. *“We did Ukulele...song writing, percussion workshops, a musical... it was great”* (Hannah). Consequently, some of these students go on to take Music in Senior Cycle.

Funding for facilities and resources also arose as a factor in two of the schools with a DEIS background. Teachers in these schools reflected that the majority of their students did not have access to private instrumental tuition, and therefore funding is essential to buy instruments and put structures in place to encourage students to perform. Lorna stated that students who can afford private lessons *“will be moving at a faster pace”*. Whilst in Fergus’s school Music technology is well funded so students who cannot afford private lessons on an instrument can opt for the Music technology option instead, *“sometimes students look at it and say 25% technology, 25% performance...I might pass”*.

Parental influence emerged as an important extrinsic factor on students choosing Music. Rose reported that students whose parents have a background or interest in Music are much more likely to take Music as a Leaving Certificate subject. *“Parents, older siblings or their instrumental teacher could be a source of advice of information* (Isabelle). However, Lorna articulated that parents often perceive Music as a pastime and not as an academic subject or possible career path.

The role of the Music teacher as an advocate for the subject emerged also: *“I suppose the last thing would be myself, in the role of the teacher, always encouraging and always being an advocate for my subject”* (Fergus). Lorna echoed this, *“I have a huge responsibility as the*

teacher in the classroom... you are a huge driver of it, you have to love it". Rose spoke of the importance of promoting the subject, *"I always chat to them on TY to see if anyone is thinking of it...explaining that if you like the subject you will do well because you enjoy it"*.

In line with a whole school approach to guidance the teachers discussed their role in providing guidance to students. There was some divergence in relation to the level of guidance support offered by the Music teachers, however, all of them reported having informal chats, emails and cross referral with the guidance service in their schools.

Generally, students appear to refer to the guidance counsellor for specific details on options and application procedures, while the Music teachers interpret information on course details and prepare students for auditions and interview. Fergus described Music teachers as *"the first port of call in terms of advice about going on to further studies"*. In all cases the teachers prepare students for third level interviews and auditions outside of school hours indicating a high level of commitment on their part. In some cases, the Music teacher worked closely with their school's guidance service including arranging visiting speakers and creating subject information booklets for parents and students.

4.2.2 Intrinsic influences on subject choice

The second overarching theme addresses the intrinsic influences on subject choice. These include ability, passion for the subject, subject related gender issues and career options. The Leaving Certificate Music exam places strong emphasis on performance where a student is assessed on their ability to sing or play an instrument for 50% of the marks. All of the teachers acknowledged that this division of marks significantly impacts on whether a student selects Music. Isabelle suggested that confident performers would do *"well in the practical element"*. There was agreement between them that any student undertaking Music at this level needs to be proficient as an instrumentalist or vocalist and students who had not taken Music at Junior level were assessed by the Music teacher to ensure that they met the standard required.

Passion, interest or enjoyment in Music emerged as another important factor in choosing Music as a Leaving Certificate subject. *"In most cases they either have a real passion for performance or they just adore the subject"* (Laura). Fergus stated that the enjoyment aspect

is important for students and suggested that they *“fall in love with pieces by Tchaikovsky and Berlioz...they might never study Music again but will never forget it”*.

The issue of gender and subject choice also arose. In two out of the three co-educational schools more girls than boys take Music as a Senior Cycle subject. Fergus had an interesting perspective, *“I think the fact that I am male has led to a huge increase in gender balance, I have nine boys in my sixth-year class and twelve boys in my fifth-year class”*. Caroline, who teaches in an all-boys school, reported *“it is getting harder every year to try to encourage boys to take the subject...they feel that because you are in a boy’s school you should be doing TG and Art. They have better career choices”*. Hannah described a similar culture in her all-boys school where Music competes with Business.

Future career options also emerged as an important intrinsic factor influencing students in their subject choice. In some schools’ students are *“points driven”* and *“choose subjects that are perceived to be easier for points”* (Hannah). Other students are *“choosing subjects that might lead to a future career path”* (Rose) or *“that they would like to pursue at third level”* (Fergus). Although the numbers of students choosing Music as a career is small, all six teachers had experience of one or two students pursuing further studies in Music each year. Fergal described this as *“very niche”*, while Hannah reflected that students choose to pursue Music because of *“their love of it, a genuine love of performing and listening to Music...they eat, sleep and breathe Music”*.

4.3 Conclusion of Primary Findings

To conclude, there is evidence of convergence and divergence in the views of students and music teachers in the study. There are a number of influencing factors on student’s subject choice including timetabling, subject sampling, parental and peer influence, talent, ability and passion for music, and future career choices. Subject sampling both in Junior Cycle and in TY was emphasised by the teachers interviewed as essential for good uptake in Senior Cycle. Parental influence was recognised by both teachers and students as a significant factor however there was some divergence in relation to peer influence. Although mentioned by students as an influencing factor, this issue was not discussed by the teachers interviewed. Natural talent, ability and a ‘passion’ for the subject were recognised as important qualities for students choosing Music as a Senior Cycle subject by all of the participants. The final

issue is the deficit in provision of career guidance reported by TY students, which is causing confusion in relation to subject decision-making. Regarding a whole school approach, students tend to seek advice from their Music teachers in relation to course type and preparation for interviews/auditions, whereas the guidance counsellor is perceived to offer information on career options in Music. However, it was found that Music teachers do engage with the guidance service in general to support students.

Chapter 5 will discuss the primary data analysis and findings in the context of the literature review.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.0 Introduction

The focus of this chapter is to provide a synthesised discussion and analysis of the overall findings in the context of the literature review and implications for future practice.

5.1 Research Questions of Study

The primary research question set out to examine ‘*What factors influence students in their choice of music as a Senior Cycle subject in post primary education?*’. In addition, secondary research questions elicited the respondents’ views on how students consider their future career path when choosing Senior Cycle subjects; the supports available to Senior Cycle students in the subject choice process; and finally, the implications for the school guidance service in supporting students with their subject choices, including Music, in Senior Cycle. The researcher examined the views of Transition Year (TY) students in one co-educational post-primary school and six post-primary Music teachers through an interpretivist approach using focus groups and one to one interviews.

The chapter is divided into two sections. Section 1 will concentrate on the primary research question and the first secondary research question as they are interlinked. Section 2 will address the remaining secondary research questions by concentrating on the support structures for students in second level.

5.2 Section 1: Factors that Influence Music as a Subject Choice in Senior Cycle

The findings in this section will be distilled through the lens of the extrinsic and intrinsic factors that influence subject choice, and in particular Music, in Senior Cycle. The extrinsic factors include parental, school staff and peer influence, and school policy on subject sampling and selection. The intrinsic factors include ability, talent and passion, subject related gender issues and Music as a career.

5.2.1 Parent, School Staff and Peer Influence

In this study, the findings are that the key influencers of students' subject choice appear to be parents, school staff and peers. The issue of parental influence correlated with Irish research where parents are perceived as one of the most important sources of advice for students during the subject choice process (Smyth 2016a; Smyth and Calvert 2011). Similarly, in the current study, the majority of students consider their parents more influential than peers or teachers when choosing Senior Cycle subjects. Parents also emerged as an important influence on students choosing Music as a Senior Cycle subject. The Music teachers in this study reported that parents with a background or interest in Music tend to be more positively disposed to the subject for their children in Senior Cycle. This finding is in line with the literature, which argues that parents of different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds differ in their values and attitudes towards their child's subject selection (Vidal Rodeiro 2007).

Conversely, the current findings also suggest that some parents hold the view that Music is more suitable as a pastime rather than an academic subject or possible career path and do not encourage their children to take the subject. This was more evident in the DEIS schools than the non-DEIS schools in the current study and aligns with research findings that students of working class families place greater importance on job security and income, whereas middle class students place value on subjects that they are interested in and that hold personal accomplishment (McCoy et al. 2014). Consequently, it can be suggested that when parents place less value on Music as a subject student uptake is affected. Furthermore, it emerged in the current study that when Music teachers are given an opportunity to speak directly to parents to explain the finer details of the Music curriculum, both at Junior and Senior Cycle, parents have a better understanding of the course content and are more likely to consider it as a viable academic option. This highlights the need for schools, and in particular the guidance service, to engage with parents in relation to subject choice in order to dispel misconceptions and provide accurate information through subject choice meetings information evenings, parent-teacher meetings and open evenings.

Teachers can also play an important part in the subject choice process in Senior Cycle, which may be due to them having more contact time and cultivating closer relationships with students (Hearne et al 2016; Smyth and Calvert 2011). It is suggested that Music teachers are

essential in promoting the subject in a competitive academic environment, particularly in light of the fact that Music provision varies considerably in secondary schools in Ireland (Moore 2014). Nevertheless, there was divergence amongst the participants of the current study as to the role of the teacher in the subject choice process. From the students' perspective in this study personality and teaching style was an important factor in determining whether a class was interesting and enjoyable, and students were more inclined to choose subjects where the teacher was 'nice' or 'good'. This is consistent with the literature, which posits that in schools where subject sampling is offered, teachers are seen as a more important influence, indicating that both the experience of the subject and the subject teacher plays a significant role in shaping subject choice (Smyth 2016a). However, this factor is also of concern because students may select certain subjects based on a specific teacher without consideration of other important factors such as aptitude, ability or future career progression (Hearne et al. 2016).

From the perspective of the Music teachers in the current study, the most important aspect of the role of the teacher was to act as an advocate for the subject and to make Music more visible in the school. Teachers in the study were committed to extracurricular work such as choir, orchestra, traditional music groups, school musical, concerts and in providing music for other school events in an effort to promote the profile of music within their school. The teachers prepare students for auditions and entrance exams for third level music courses in their own time. In almost all cases, this extra-curricular work is unremunerated and outside of timetabled hours highlighting the significant level of commitment of Music teachers in the promotion and development of Music within the school. This is consistent with recent findings from the ASTI (2018) indicating that one in every three teachers surveyed, in addition to their teaching hours, carries out additional unpaid work of up to five hours a week.

Formal guidance provision is greater for sixth year students than any other year group and tends to be focussed on giving advice on post-school options and the HE application process (McCoy et al. 2014; Smyth 2016a). Consequently, there appears to be less provision of formal guidance during the transitions to the Junior and Senior Cycle (Smyth 2016a). This issue was evident in the findings of the focus groups in which TY students reported a deficit in formal guidance to support their educational decision-making. Instead they relied on other school staff, such as subject teachers for information and advice. The teachers in the study

were more attuned to the influence of the guidance service in subject choice. There was evidence of collaboration and planning in respect of subject information events for parents and the majority indicated that they refer students to the guidance counsellor for specialised advice and support.

The attitudes of peers can have a significant influence on the perceived value, usefulness and future career opportunities of a specific subject (Jeffers 2007) and students who lack career maturity can be influenced by peer groups to make subject choices that are not associated with the inner-self (Sugarman 2001). In the current study peer influence emerged as the least important influencing factor in subject selection by the TY students. This is consistent with research by Smyth and Calvert (2011) who found that friends appear to be a less important influence in choosing subjects in TY and Senior Cycle with most students focusing on ability and interest in their subject and future college courses.

5.2.2 School Policy on Subject Sampling and Selection

This section will discuss the impact of school structure and policies on subject choice, particularly in relation to subject sampling, subject timetabling and Music selection.

Despite sharing a common curriculum framework, the historical legacy from which second level schools evolved continues to act as a factor in school choice (Smyth 2016a). Additionally, student selection processes influenced by social class also effect the composition of schools with a greater concentration of working class students attending vocational schools, and a disproportionate number of middle-class students attending voluntary secondary schools (Darmody et al. 2014; Smyth 1999). These factors combined with discretion at school level in relation to policy and practice can result in very different educational experiences for students (Smyth 2016a). This study gathered the views of students and teachers across a range of school types and included middle class students and students of socio-economic disadvantage. However, the majority of schools in this study had similar policies in relation to subject sampling. Additionally, all seven schools offered TY as a programme despite the fact that smaller schools and schools with a disadvantaged status are less likely to provide the programme (Clerkin 2013; Jeffers 2015; Smyth and Calvert 2011). The impact of school arrangements regarding subject sampling and subject provision and its effect on subject choice was an important issue to emerge in the current study. There was

consensus amongst the TY students in the study that there are many advantages to subject sampling, which include the opportunity to experience a variety of subjects, different teaching approaches and new learning experiences, all of which enable them to make a more informed choice in relation to subject selection. This has already been found in previous studies, which indicates that students, teachers and parents advocate subject sampling as an important aspect of the TY programme (Jeffers 2015; Smyth and Calvert 2011; Smyth et al. 2004a). More recently, Smyth (2016a) reported that the opportunity to try different subjects before entering the Senior Cycle often facilitates a more informed choice with a wider range of options, which converges with the findings in this study. This phenomenon also needs to be considered in the context of schools that do not offer the TY programme as long term educational and vocational implications may arise for students who do not have an opportunity to sample subjects in TY. From the teachers' perspective in the current study, the provision and nature of subject sampling in first year (Junior Cycle) and TY (Senior Cycle) can have a significant impact on the uptake of Music in Senior Cycle. There was a general consensus that uptake improved when students were given the opportunity to sample the subject in advance.

It is evident that subject choice policy can vary from school to school and in some cases, students choose their subjects before entering first year and without any prior experience (Smyth 2016a). This was consistent with the findings in this study with an example of one school where incoming first year students choose their subjects pre-entry, without any prospect of sampling subjects. The implication for Music selection is that an absence of subject sampling can result in a relatively poor uptake in Music unless subject blocks are adjusted to improve the balance at the discretion of school management. Interestingly, when students make subject choice decisions before entry to school there is a marked difference in their ability to make a choice that is informed by knowledge and experience of the subject (Smyth 2016a). Therefore, it could be inferred that when Music competes with other timetabled subjects in the absence of sampling the uptake is lower because students have little knowledge or experience of what the subject is really like.

Another important factor for consideration is that schools have discretion over the number and type of subjects they provide (Smyth 2016a). This issue was evident in the current findings where a variety of approaches to subject sampling and provision was reported. For example, sampling sessions at Junior and Senior Cycle ranged from several weeks to up to

one year. There was also a sizeable difference in the number of subjects on offer in the schools. In schools where Music is offered in two blocks, the uptake appears to double, suggesting that good provision across subject bands improves selection. As schools have the autonomy to offer specific subjects based on the skills of the teaching staff (Clerkin 2013) this policy may circumscribe subject options for some students. In one particular school in this study, inadequate resources to employ an additional Music teacher was one of the reasons given for restricting Music to one choice block. Additionally, it can be suggested from the findings that school policy in relation to subject sampling and timetabling has a direct and significant impact on the numbers of students studying Music. The findings highlight the need for an increase in the provision of music in more than one subject block, particularly in cases where there is an obvious demand for the subject and where uptake is impacted because of a lack of provision or clashing of subjects.

5.2.3 Ability, Talent and Passion

This section will discuss the influence of intrinsic factors such as ability, talent and passion on the uptake of Music as a Senior Cycle subject.

A revised syllabus encompassing a performing, listening and composing model of music education introduced in 1996 aimed to provide a general education in music for all students (DES 1996b). The inclusion of a compulsory performing elective, which could form up to 50% of the overall grade, was intended to make the subject more accessible to all students (DES 1996b). This is in line with the findings from this study where there was consensus amongst the TY students and the different Music teachers that the performing aspect of the exam is a significant factor for students choosing Music as a Leaving Certificate subject. Furthermore, students with an inherent ability, interest or passion for music are those students who tend to take private instrumental lessons and for whom the performing element appeals. Consequently, Leaving Certificate Music which has a performance based exam worth 50% of the overall marks is an attractive option for those students with an aptitude or talent for it. Conversely, students in TY who did not have a high level of instrumental or vocal experience or who had not taken the subject at Junior Cycle did not choose the subject for Senior Cycle because of the emphasis on performance.

Research by Smyth (2016a) found that schools serving a disadvantaged population are less likely to offer Music at Senior Cycle. However this was inconsistent with the findings in this study where both of the DEIS schools involved offered music at Senior Cycle with a good uptake. In fact, one of the DEIS schools had the highest uptake of Leaving Certificate Music students of the seven schools in the study. In these schools, Music maintained a high profile within the school culture and was well funded and resourced. However, both music teachers articulated that many of their students, although musically talented, do not have the means to take instrumental lessons outside of school and consequently progress at a slower pace. Additionally, a percentage of the students in these two schools take music at ordinary level. Conversely, in the non-DEIS schools involved in the study, the teachers reported that the majority of music students in their classes receive extra-curricular instrumental or vocal lessons. In most cases, these students take music at higher level which is consistent with the research which demonstrates that middle class students tend to take more subjects at higher level (Smyth 2016a). It can therefore be suggested that, notwithstanding the revised music syllabus, students in DEIS schools who cannot afford to take instrumental lessons remain at a disadvantage to those students of economic and cultural advantage who can afford to take lessons. This finding relates to equitable access of students to subjects and underlines the implicit privilege of those students with more relevant culture capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

5.2.4 Subject Related Gender Issues

This section will discuss the implications of gender differentiation which influences the subject choice process in second level education.

In the Irish context, commonalities are evident across schools in the way that technological subjects are perceived as ‘male’ (Darmody and Smyth 2009). For example, girl’s schools are less likely to offer Physics or technological subjects than boys-only schools or co-educational schools (Smyth 2016a). In the current study it emerged that some students, both male and female, challenged these labels in line with the literature (Smyth 2016a). However, there was consensus amongst other students that gender-stereotyped subject selection is more obvious in the Junior Cycle. One student described a high percentage of girls in Art and Music and a predominance of boys in Design and Computer Graphics (DCG) and Construction, which is consistent with the literature (Smyth 2016a). During their experience of subject sampling in

TY, many of the students agreed that the gender balance in some subjects was more even, particularly in the technological subjects as students were encouraged by teachers to sample new subjects. However, in subjects like Art, Home Economics and Music they reported a higher number of girls, which demonstrates that these subjects in particular still hold a gender specific bias. This has been argued previously, whereby in co-educational schools' social construction and occupational segregation are associated with specific subjects (Darmody and Smyth 2009).

Currently, the State Exam Commission (SEC) statistics (2019c) indicate that the provision for Music at Leaving Certificate level is higher in all-girls' schools. Additionally, Smyth (2016b), from her research on the cultural participation among young people, found that there is a marked gender difference in take-up rates for Music where Music is highest in all-girls' schools and lowest in all-boys' schools. Furthermore, girls from professional backgrounds are more likely to take Music. As the current study was limited to co-educational and boys-only schools a comparison is not possible, however the findings show that the uptake of music was similar in both the co-educational and boys-only schools with an average of 12-15% of students taking the subject in the Leaving Certificate in 2019.

In the co-educational schools in the current study, it emerged that the uptake of music is predominantly female, which is consistent with the most recent figures from DES (2019c). The teachers in these schools reported that Music uptake is impacted, particularly amongst boys, when more value is placed on STEM subjects by parents, students and school management. This culture was also evident in the boys-only schools where there was more demand for Business and Technical Graphics rather than Art and Music. The findings support the claim that school policies regarding subject provision and timetabling can either reinforce or challenge existing patterns in the gender take up of subjects (Darmody and Smyth 2009). Therefore, greater consideration by schools in fostering gender balance across subject bands is required as the perpetual gendering of subjects has implications for student engagement, skills acquisition and future career options (Darmody and Smyth 2009). Gender bias in subject selection, and in Music in particular, has implications for guidance counsellors as they are required to be unbiased and objective as they advise both genders on subject choice.

5.2.5 Music as a Career

This section discusses the influence of students' intrinsic career options on subject choice including Music. Students in secondary school are faced with many educational decisions from subject choice to post Leaving Certificate options (Smyth 2016a) and by the age of 15-16 years some of them have acquired the necessary skills to make career decisions and can take their goals and values into consideration (Sharf 2013). At the same time students are preparing to enter a world of work that is affected by globalisation and in which career choice is a non-linear lifelong process with many transitions (Blustein 2008). Consequently, students will be expected to be flexible and able to cope with unpredictable changes and opportunities (Blustein 2008).

Super's (1957) Life Stages Theory proposes five stages of career development: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and decline. The exploration stage (ages 14-24) is particularly relevant in the context of adolescent decision-making in Irish second education as students examine their interests, capabilities and how they fit with career preferences (Super, 1957). At age 17-18 years students begin the first of three career developmental tasks; the crystallization of a career preference. This substage has implications for the guidance counsellor as students begin to make decisions about future pathways and occupational choices (Sharf 2010).

Equally relevant is Super's concept of *career maturity*, which is described as an individual's readiness to make career choices and decisions (Sharf 2010). Students in the current study were aged between 15-16 years but appeared to demonstrate a certain level of *career maturity* as they discussed the impact of future career options on subject choice, especially Music. There was a convergence of opinions amongst the students and the Music teachers that most students who choose Music do so because of potential CAO points, particularly if they have an aptitude for the subject. However, there was consensus that students often dropped Music after Junior Cycle because other subjects were perceived as being of more value for third level or future career. This issue appeared to be most prevalent in relation to STEM subjects. In the two DEIS schools, although there was evidence of musically talented students choosing Music in Senior Cycle, the teachers in these schools acknowledged the challenges in encouraging boys to choose Music at Senior Cycle over more practical subjects such as Construction studies, DCG and Technology.

This aspect of the findings is consistent with recent research by Smyth (2016) who found that in the Senior Cycle there is a greater decline in aspirations among working class young people as they limit their ambitions to what is perceived to be realistic given the context of their social class. This aligns with Gottfredson's (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise and with Supers' crystallizing sub-stage in which reality conditions begin to play an important role in career choice (Sharf 2010). Overall, the findings are in line with literature which outlines the extent to which young people's occupational aspirations, social class and gender can frame choices as they prepare to leave school (Smyth 2016a).

5.3 Section 2: School Supports for Students in the Subject Choice Process

This second section will address the role of whole school guidance in supporting student decision-making in relation to subject choice and future career paths. Additionally, it will address the implications for the guidance counsellor in leading a whole school approach. A fundamental element of supporting students' subject choice in secondary school is the support they receive from the school itself (Smyth 2016a). This is especially related to the provision of career guidance to students. A holistic and integrated approach to guidance counselling incorporating personal, social, educational and career guidance, which advocates the involvement of the whole school community has evolved in Ireland over the last four decades (DES 2019b; DE 1992; Hearne et al. 2016; Hearne and Galvin 2014; NCGE 2004). Following the Budget 2012 re-allocation of guidance hours (DES 2012) a diminution of guidance provision occurred which has impacted on guidance delivery across the curriculum years (IGC 2016). However, in light of the partial restoration in guidance provision in the last five years this deficit in resources may be slowly improving (DES 2019a).

A whole school approach to guidance counselling is viewed as a "model of good practice" (DES 2009, p.8) placing direct responsibility on the whole school to deliver a guidance programme across the curriculum with the guidance counsellor in a leadership role (DES 2005, 2012; Hearne et al. 2016; NCGE 2004). With regard to the provision of guidance to the participating TY students in this study it appears that some element of guidance is delivered through the school's whole school guidance programme. There was also evidence of classroom guidance delivered by regular teachers that focussed on CV preparation and work experience and a presentation on subject choice delivered by subject teachers in the first week of term. However, the absence of detailed formal guidance can result in students receiving

misleading information (Smyth 2016a) which was consistent with the findings in the study. Some students reported a lack of access to one to one guidance to discuss their subject choices over the course of the year, which inevitably led to confusion in relation to subject decision-making. There also appeared to be a deficit in the provision of formal educational and vocational guidance in the classroom resulting in misconceptions and inaccuracies among the students in relation to third level options and processes. This finding is significant in the context of the literature, which supports the view that access to career guidance classes during TY provides students with additional information on the requirements for future course and career options (Smyth and Calvert 2011). The implications for Music selection are that students may not opt for Music in the absence of this additional information and support and may close off future course and career options in Music. The implication for the guidance counsellor is that early decisions made in the absence of formal guidance may have long term consequences for students' future opportunities.

In the absence of formal guidance, the students in this study appear to seek guidance from other sources including the Music teacher and parents. Inferences can be drawn from the focus group discussions to suggest an inconsistent approach to whole school guidance in TY in the particular school. This phenomenon is also evident in the literature where the absence of a clear standardised framework for whole school guidance leads to inconsistencies in provision (McCoy et al. 2006; Hearne et al. 2016; Hearne and Galvin 2014). These findings have implications for guidance counsellors and highlight the importance of extra provision for one to one guidance in TY to assist students in their educational and vocational decision-making in Senior Cycle. The NCGE (2017) whole school guidance framework, designed to support schools in the planning and implementation of a whole school guidance programme to meet the needs of all students, may be used as a measure to address this issue.

Disadvantaged students in particular tend to be more dependent on the school guidance service for support in relation to post-secondary education (Smyth and Banks 2012). This was evident in the current study where the Music teachers in the DEIS schools reported a more collaborative relationship with the guidance service, than the schools with middle class students. The teachers in the DEIS schools actively engaged with the students to assist them in their educational and vocational choices and worked closely with the guidance service to provide information on higher education options in Music. In contrast the Music teachers in the non-DEIS schools described their communication with the guidance service as informal.

They appeared to offer less guidance and were more inclined to refer students to the guidance counsellor for accurate specialised support.

Inherent in the findings of the current study are the complexities of a whole school approach to guidance counselling, and while the whole school model is strongly encouraged in Irish secondary schools, many guidance counsellors report low levels of collaboration amongst school staff (Hearne and Galvin 2014). Furthermore, attitudes to collaboration and appreciation of guidance counselling among the principal stakeholders are based on values, knowledge and competencies indicating the need for school guidance counsellors to be proficient and competent in order to gain support from other collaborators in whole school guidance provision (Hearne et al. 2018; Foxx et al. 2017). An associated issue is the need for education and training of school staff in order to for them to understand and embrace a whole school model (Foxx et al. 2017; Hearne et al. 2016).

To conclude, the findings highlight the inconsistent approach to guidance provision in some of the schools in the study and is perhaps indicative of the system at large. It also brings into focus the need for all schools to adopt a standardised framework for the provision of guidance in schools to ensure a consistent and equitable service for students of all school type (NCGE 2017). Furthermore, the success of a whole school approach to guidance calls for greater transparency of the stakeholder's involvement, and clear identification of roles and responsibilities for all involved (DES 2005 2012; Hearne et al. 2018).

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the overall findings of this study. The findings indicate that parental influence and the value that parents place on Music as an academic subject and future career option has a significant impact on whether a student chooses Music in Senior Cycle. The design of the Music curriculum, with an emphasis on performing, is also an important factor for students opting in or out of Senior Cycle Music.

The findings also point out that subject sampling at Junior and Senior Cycle is essential for good uptake in Music in Senior Cycle as it affords students the opportunity to experience all the elements of the Music curriculum before making an informed choice. School structures and policies that support and promote Music are also essential to ensure good uptake. These

can include good provision and visibility on the timetable and funding for extra-curricular musical activities such as choir, orchestra and school musicals, which foster a culture of music performance. Finally, the provision of guidance counselling to support informed decision- making in relation to subject choice for students, and especially Music, is a central factor that emerged in this study.

Chapter 6 will present an overview of the findings, highlight the strengths and limitations associated with this study and outline any recommendations for policy and practice.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to conclude the research study by providing an overview of the findings of this study in the context of the aim and objectives set out in Chapter 1. This chapter also presents the strengths and limitations of the study, identifies several recommendations informed by the findings and concludes with a reflection on the personal learning of the researcher.

6.1 Overview of Research Findings

The overall aim of this research study was to examine the factors that influence students in their choice of Music as a Senior Cycle subject in post primary education. Additionally, a number of objectives were addressed to expand the primary aim. Firstly, an examination of the relevant literature on policy, practice and research critically explored the issues related to the research topic. Secondly, in order to explore the research topic in greater detail a qualitative approach was adopted, which involved two phases of data collection. Phase 1 gathered the views of TY students in one secondary school through two focus groups. Phase 2 elicited the perceptions of six Senior Cycle Music teachers through semi-structured individual interviews.

Thirdly, from an analysis of the overall findings a number of conclusions can be drawn in relation to the topic explored. This study revealed a number of extrinsic factors which influence students in their choice of Music as a Senior Cycle subject, the most significant of which is parental influence (Smyth 2016a; Smyth and Calvert 2011). The findings indicate that parents with a personal interest in Music often place more value on the subject and are more positively disposed to Music as a Senior Cycle subject. Additionally, differences in parental educational and socio-economic background can influence values and attitudes towards subject selection (Vidal Rodeiro 2007). This issue emerged in the study where parents of middle class students in non-DEIS or fee-paying schools appear to place more value on factors such as interest and personal fulfilment during subject selection. Conversely, the parents of working class students, in DEIS schools for example, often place greater

importance on job security and income (McCoy et al. 2014). In the current study it was discernible that parents who may have less cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) in relation to educational and career choices may hold the view that Music is more suitable as a pastime rather than as an academic subject or future career.

Nonetheless, teachers can also play an important part in students' selection of Music in Senior cycle which may be due to them having more contact time and closer relationships with students (Hearne et al. 2016; Sichivitsa 2007; Smyth and Calvert 2011). Additionally, music teachers can occupy a unique place in students' lives because of the opportunities they provide to create meaningful musical experiences by combining in-class and extra-curricular musical activities (Sichivitsa 2007). The current findings indicate that Music teachers are essential for the promotion and uptake of Music at Senior Cycle. Teacher personality, teaching styles and teacher's role as an advocate for the subject in a competitive academic environment was revealed as important influencing factor. Furthermore, when Music teachers are given an opportunity to engage directly with parents to provide them with detailed information about the Music curriculum, parent's misconceptions can be dispelled and subject uptake improves. However, this type of engagement with parents has implications in terms of teachers' time.

In the current study, the impact of school arrangements regarding subject sampling and subject provision and its effect on the selection of Music as a Senior Cycle subject was an important issue that emerged. Importantly, the findings show that when schools offer subject sampling in first year and in TY uptake in Music improves, as students are given an opportunity to experience the subject in advance of selection. Furthermore, in schools where Music is offered in two subject choice blocks the numbers selecting the subject doubles signalling the need for an increased provision for Music on the timetable to meet demand.

This study also revealed some intrinsic factors related to the uptake of Music as a Senior Cycle subject, including musical ability, gender differentiation and Music as a career. Historically the Leaving Certificate Music curriculum has included a compulsory performing elective, which forms up to 50% of the overall mark, making the subject an attractive option for students with an aptitude or talent for Music (DES 1996b). According to the current findings, students with musical ability often take private instrumental or vocal lessons to a

high standard, therefore, the performing aspect of the Leaving Certificate Music syllabus is appealing. Indeed, there was consensus amongst the participants in the study that the majority of students with musical ability receive top grades in the final State exam. Conversely, students of lesser economic and cultural capital are less likely to avail of private lessons, and as a consequence of not having extra support often progress at a slower pace and perform less well overall in the subject.

With regard to gender differentiation, commonalities are evident in the way that some subjects, e.g. Technology, are perceived as ‘male’ and subjects such as Art, Home Economics and Music are perceived as ‘female’ (Darmody and Smyth 2009; Smyth 2016a). There is a marked gender difference in the profile of Music students with selection highest in all-girls’ schools and lowest in all-boys’ schools (Smyth 2016a). In this study, although some of the participating students challenged these labels, there was consensus that gender-stereotyped subject selection is evident in schools, particularly in the Junior Cycle. Furthermore, in the co-educational schools in this study the uptake of Music is predominantly female. The implications are that there is still a necessity to foster gender balance across subject bands in second level schools.

Finally, a core issue in terms of Music as a subject choice is the amount of authentic information and career guidance support students receive. The findings reveal that there is some level of guidance provision to the TY students who took part in the study through the whole school guidance programme. However, there appears to be shortfall in one to one guidance provision leading to confusion for students in relation to their subject choices and understanding about their future career pathways. Thus, the students appear to seek guidance from other sources including parents and teachers, thus highlighting an inconsistent approach to guidance provision amongst the schools in the study. These findings bring into focus the general need for a blended approach of classroom guidance with one to one guidance to assist educational and vocational decision-making, and

6.2 Strengths and Limitations of the Research Study

A key strength of this study is that it created an opportunity for TY students and Music teachers in urban and rural schools to express their perceptions on the topic of choosing

Music as a Senior Cycle subject. The use of the interpretivist paradigm provided an opportunity to investigate the issues through focus groups and semi-structured interviews, while simultaneously providing data triangulation in the study (Braun and Clarke 2013). Finally, this study researched an area of the curriculum that has had limited attention in research studies to date.

There are some limitations in the study. Firstly, the research was located in one school with a particular cohort (TY). It cannot be generalizable to other schools, but the findings might be typical of schools that offer TY and Music as a subject. Another limitation in relation to interpretivist research is the scope of the study. In a qualitative study more data would have been generated, however, the researcher wished to learn about multiple realities and provide thick description (Braun and Clarke 2013).

Finally, this study did not garner the views of guidance counsellors in second level schools in relation to the topic. Further research with guidance counsellors would add more depth to the study and more clarity around the implications for guidance provision in supporting students who select Music as a Senior Cycle subject.

6.3 Recommendations

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

6.3.1 Policy

- Discretion in educational policy at local level in schools regarding subject sampling and subject provision can circumscribe the element of ‘choice’ for students. A policy of internal and external review of subject sampling and subject provision would contribute to a more equitable experience for students of all school types.
- The DES should continue to restore the allocation that was removed in 2012 and ring fence a proportion of those hours for one to one guidance and Junior Cycle guidance.

- Schools should be encouraged to embrace the NCGE (2017) framework for whole school guidance provision to deliver consistent and equitable whole school guidance to all year groups.

6.3.2 Practice

- School practice in relation to subject provision and timetabling should take into consideration the issues that impact on the uptake of Music as a Senior Cycle subject such as gender differentiation and socio-economic considerations. For example, in all-boys or co-educational schools, Music should have equal provision on the timetable as technological subjects to counter any gender or socio-economic bias.
- Parents play a significant role in the subject choice process, therefore, from a whole school perspective schools should engage with parents throughout the subject sampling and choice process and encourage a more collaborative relationship through subject information evenings and one to one meetings with subject teachers especially.
- Music teachers, as specialists in their field, are well placed to offer subject related guidance and support to students in the context of a whole school approach to guidance therefore specific training and resources should be provided to support their role in this context.
- School management should engage in ways to support the guidance service to provide one to one support for first year and TY students during times of important educational and vocational decision-making.

6.3.3 Research

- Further research on gender differentiation in Music as well as the impact of students' socio-economic background on the uptake of Music in second level schools in Ireland is recommended.

- Further research on the distribution of guidance provision to all students during subject selection in first year and in TY/ fifth year is recommended.

6.4 Reflexivity and Learning from Study

Reflexive research acknowledges my role as researcher in the production of knowledge and recognises how my positionality may have shaped the collection and analysis of my data (Braun and Clarke 2013). Throughout the study I reflected on my assumptions, values and personal background and how they might shape the design of the study and the interpretation of the findings in a qualitative study. It was important for me as a researcher to identify how my own positionality as a Music teacher and trainee guidance counsellor was likely to affect my interpretation and to monitor it through all stages of the research study (Creswell and Creswell 2018; Merriam 2009; Thomas 2013;).

At times, my assumptions were in line with both my findings and research literature, however, there were times when my assumptions were challenged. For example, my professional experience as a second level Music teacher had led me to believe that more girls than boys take Music in Senior Cycle, which aligns with research literature. However, the current study revealed two schools where this was challenged with examples of a higher percentage of male students in some classes. Furthermore, I was of the belief that Music has a higher uptake in schools of socio-economic advantage, however I became aware of some DEIS schools which contradicted this belief. This experience was insightful and highlighted the importance of setting aside my assumptions and biases to review the data impartially and remain curious about exceptions to the norm.

In the interviews with the Music teachers I was careful not to let my own experiences as a Music teacher shape the narrative with the interviewees, particularly when these narratives diverged from my own experience and beliefs. In the focus groups, I was aware of my natural bias towards the value of music as a subject and learned not to let this subjectivity impact on my role as facilitator. I was struck by the honesty and openness of the TY students who engaged in the process and became aware of the importance of the student voice in understanding the complexities of subject choice. I am more aware of the negative effects of a deficit in formal guidance in TY for students from an educational and vocational

perspective. Finally, I have a deeper understanding of the extrinsic and intrinsic influences on Senior Cycle subject choice, and on Music selection in particular, which will inform my future practice as a guidance counsellor.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a conclusion to the research study by providing an overview of the findings in the context of the primary research aim and objectives. The strengths and limitations of the study were addressed and a number of recommendations for policy, practice and research were outlined. Finally, the chapter concludes with the researchers' reflexivity and learning in the study.

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Appendix A



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Subject Information Letter (Principal)

Date:

EHS Rec No:

Research title: An examination of why students choose Music as a Senior Cycle subject and the implications for guidance counselling practice.

Dear Principal,

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

In my research I aim to examine why students choose Music as a subject in Senior Cycle. In order to gather this information, I would appreciate if you would give consent for me to carry out the research study with a sample of 24 Transition Year (TY) students from the total population of TY students in your school. Students will be invited to participate in two audio-recorded focus groups. The focus group interviews should take no longer than 45 minutes each to complete and will take place in the school outside of normal school hours. It should be noted that as focus groups are conducted within a group a group setting, each participant's contributions will be heard by the other participants within the group. However, each student will be asked to sign an agreement to keep all opinions expressed during the focus group interview private.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and student's identities will not be disclosed. The data from the recorded focus groups will be destroyed after analysis according to UL guidelines. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis stage. The results from the research study will be reported in my thesis.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. The information will be stored for seven years and will then be safely destroyed according to UL guidelines. It is important to note that the school name and the names of individual participants will not be used in the research.

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

Researcher: Sinéad O'Sullivan

Supervisor: Dr. Lucy Hearne

Phone number: 087225487

Phone number: 061 202931

UL email address: 17125731@studentmail.ul.ie

UL email address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. If you consent to your students participating in the study, please sign the consent form and return it to Sinéad O'Sullivan by the deadline.

This research has received Ethical 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 23410**

Appendix B



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

O L L S C O I L L U I M N I G H

Consent Form (Principal)

EHS Rec No:

Research title: An examination of why students choose Music as a subject in Senior Cycle and the implications for guidance counselling practice.

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

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

I hereby give my consent for Sinéad O'Sullivan to carry out this research in the school.

Signature: _____

Printed name: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

This research has received Ethical 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 23410**

Appendix C



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Subject Information Letter – Parent/Carer

Date:

EHS Rec No:

Research title: An examination of why students choose Music as a Senior Cycle subject and the implications for guidance counselling practice.

Dear Parent/Carer,

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

In my research I aim to examine why students choose Music as a subject in Senior Cycle. In order to gather this information, I am requesting your permission to consent to your son/daughter taking part in a research study. This would involve them participating in an audio-recorded focus group with a group of their peers. The focus group interview will take no longer than 45 minutes and will take place outside of normal school hours.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and student's identities will not be disclosed. The data from the recorded focus groups will be destroyed after analysis according to UL guidelines. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis stage. The results from the research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. The information will be stored for seven years and will then be safely destroyed according to UL guidelines. It is important to note that the names of individual participants will not be used in the research.

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

Researcher: Sinéad O’Sullivan

Supervisor: Dr. Lucy Hearne

Phone number: 087225487

Phone number: 061 202931

UL email address: 17125731@studentmail.ul.ie

UL email address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

I would like to thank you for taking the time to read this letter. If you consent to your child participating in the study please sign the consent form and return it to Sinead O’ Sullivan by the deadline.

This research has received Ethical 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 23410**

Appendix D



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Parent/Carer Consent Form (Focus Group Participation)

EHS Rec No:

Research title: An examination of why students choose Music as a Senior Cycle subject and the implications for guidance counselling practice.

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

- i. Participation is entirely voluntary. Even if I consent to my child taking part, he/she still has the right to refuse to take part.
- ii. All participants are free to withdraw at any time in the process prior to data analysis of the focus groups interviews.
- iii. The focus group data will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the researcher and supervisor. Contributions during the focus group, however, will be heard by all other participants in that focus group.
- iv. While excerpts from the focus group data may be made part of the final research report, under no circumstances will any names of students or the school, nor any identifying characteristics be included in this report.

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

Parent/Guardian Name: _____

Students Name: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

Researcher's Signature _____

Date: _____

This research has received Ethical 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 23410**

Appendix E



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Volunteer Information Sheet (Focus Group)

EHS Rec No:

Research title: An examination of why students choose Music as a Senior Cycle subject and the implications for guidance counselling practice.

Research Aims:

The main aim of this research is to investigate who or what influences students in their decision to study Music as a Senior Cycle subject.

Who have I requested to participate?

Transition year students in one co-educational boarding school are being requested to take part in this study.

When and where will the research take place?

The focus group discussion will take place during the Spring term 2019 outside of normal school hours.

How long the focus group discussion will last?

The focus group discussion will take no more than 45 minutes.

What are the benefits?

The findings of the study will be used to inform and enhance future guidance counselling practice in post-primary education with regards to assisting students in their subject choices and in particular those students opting to take Music as a subject at a Senior cycle.

What are the 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 happens at the end of the study?

At the end of the study the data collected will be analysed to present results and findings in the final dissertation. All data collected will be entirely anonymous, and participants will not be identified nor associated with the results. All electronic data collected will be stored on a password protected computer. All data and information obtained will be stored securely and safely in University of Limerick for seven years.

What if I cannot answer a question or have other questions about the Focus Group Process that need to be answered?

If at any point during the research, you have any questions about the study you can contact the researcher. It is imperative that you feel comfortable and knowledgeable about the research and that all questions have been answered.

Contact details of project researcher and supervisor

Researcher:	Sinéad O'Sullivan	Supervisor:	Dr. Lucy Hearne
Phone number:	087 2254887	Phone number:	061 202391
UL Email address:	17125731@studentmail.ul.ie	UL Email address:	lucy.hearne@ul.ie

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Yours sincerely,

Sinéad O'Sullivan

Researcher

This research has received Ethical 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 23410**

Appendix F



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Consent Form - Volunteer Participant

EHS Rec No:

Research title: An examination of why students take Music as a subject at Senior Cycle and the implications for guidance counselling practice.

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

I hereby agree to take part in a focus group in this research study:

Signature: _____

Printed name: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

This research has received Ethical 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 23410**

Appendix G



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Subject Information Letter – (Interview - Volunteer)

Date:

EHS Rec No:

Research title: An examination of why students take Music as a subject at Senior Cycle and the implications for guidance counselling practice.

Dear Participant,

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

In my research I aim to examine why students choose Music as a subject in Senior Cycle. In order to gather this information, I would appreciate if you would agree to participate in an audio-recorded interview, either face to face, by telephone or Skype). The interviews will take approximately one hour.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and your identity will not be disclosed. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis stage. The results from the research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences. The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick for seven years. It is important to note that your name will not be used in the research.

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

Researcher: Sinéad O'Sullivan

Supervisor: Dr. Lucy Hearne

Phone number: 087225487

Phone number: 061 202931

UL email address: 17125731@studentmail.ul.ie

UL email address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

I would like to thank you for taking the time to read this letter. If you consent to participating in the study please sign the consent form and return it to Sinéad O' Sullivan by the deadline.

This research has received Ethical 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 23410**

Appendix H



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Interview Consent Form - Volunteer Participant

EHS Rec No:

Research title: An examination of why students take Music as a subject at Senior Cycle and the implications for Guidance Counsellors.

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

I hereby agree to take part in an interview as part of this research study:

Signature: _____

Printed name: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

This research has received Ethical 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 23410**

Appendix I



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Confidentiality Agreement for Focus Group Participants

EHS Rec No:

Research title: An examination of why students take Music as a subject at Senior Cycle and the implications for guidance counselling practice.

I agree to keep everything that is said in this group confidential.

That means that I can talk about anything that I say or the interviewer says outside of the group BUT I will not talk about anything that was said by any other students in my group.

I agree to keep other people's opinions and contributions to the group private. If I feel that this is something I cannot agree to, then I should reconsider my participation in the group and notify the researcher [*insert name*] that I will be no longer taking part.

I understand that I do not have to answer any questions that I don't feel comfortable answering and that I can decide at any stage that I don't want to take part anymore.

I agree I don't agree

Participant Name: Participant Signature:

Researcher's Signature.....

Date:

This research has received Ethical 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 23410**

Appendix J



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

O L L S C O I L L U I M N I G H

EHS Rec No:

Focus Group Outline

This focus group framework is concentrating on thematic areas. Additional probes and questions may be employed to facilitate the narrative.

Introduction: Establish ground rules and outline ethical considerations including confidentiality. Initiate Discussion.

Subject sampling

1. Tell me what TY has been like for you so far this year?
2. Can you describe how subject sampling works?
3. Tell me why you chose the subjects you did for subject sampling?
4. Some subjects are more suited to boys or girls. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Let's discuss your opinion on this.
5. What are the advantages/disadvantages to subject sampling?
6. Describe your experience of subject sampling.

Key influences in Subject choice

7. You have recently chosen your Senior Cycle subjects. Can you tell me who or what may have influenced you in your choices?
8. To what extent did subject sampling influence your decision making in relation to choosing subjects for Senior Cycle?
9. Are some subjects more valuable than others in the Senior Cycle?
10. Have you thought about your future career? Who would you go to for advice?

Music as a choice subject

11. Some of you picked music as a subject in the sampling sessions. What were your reasons for choosing the subject?
12. Having sampled music during the sampling session are you choosing to study it at Senior Cycle? If so, what or who influenced you in your decision?
13. Did you study Music at Junior Cycle? Did this experience affect your decision to take Music at Senior Cycle?
14. If you as a student needed guidance and advice on studying Music, who would you go to for advice?
15. If you were thinking about your future career would you consider a career in Music? What types of career might you have if you choose Music?

This research has received Ethical 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 23410**

Appendix K



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

EHS Rec No:

Music Teacher Interview Outline

Introduction: Establish ground rules and outline ethical considerations including confidentiality. Initiate interview.

School Context

- Q1. Could you describe the type of secondary school in which you teach?
- Q2. Can you describe your experience teaching Music at Senior Cycle in relation to uptake and gender balance?
- Q3. How does that experience compare with your experience at Junior Cycle?
- Q4. What challenges does the subject face as part of school curriculum?

Support for the subject

- Q5. Does the subject get support in relation to facilities, funding etc.?
- Q6. Does the school support musically gifted students? And if so in what way?
- Q7. How do you promote student uptake of your subject in your school?

Timetabling of Music as a subject

- Q8. How is Music timetabled at Senior Cycle?
- Q9. If your school offers TY, is Music offered as a sample subject?
- Q10. Are students precluded from taking Music at Senior Cycle if they did not take it at Junior Cycle?
- Q11. Why do the students choose Music as a subject?
- Q12. What are the reasons for students dropping the subject after Junior Cert?

Music as a career

- Q13. Do you have an insight into how many students pursue further study or a career in this area after the Leaving Cert?
- Q14. In the context of a whole school approach to guidance do you offer guidance and advice to your students in relation to third level and further career opportunities in music?
- Q15. Does the Music teacher have links with the Guidance service in the school in supporting students who wish to study Music as a career option?
- Q16. Is there anything you would like to add that I have not asked you about in relation to this topic?

This research has received Ethical 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 23410**

Appendix L



UNIVERSITY *of* LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Acceptance of the University of Limerick Child Protection Guidelines

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

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Print Name: _____

Department: _____

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

Appendix M

Subject sampling disadvantages

- Some subjects oversubscribed
- Too much choice/overwhelming
- May not get on with teacher

Music as a Leaving Cert subject

50% practical exam is the main difference

Important to be good at performing

Career advice from Music teacher or online, 5th or 6th year students or professional performer

Perceptions around career options

Unstable

Unrealistic

Not guaranteed – 1% successful

Subject Value

1. CAO requirements
2. Future courses and career path
3. Interest in a subject
4. Subject of benefit in the future

Gaps in Career Guidance

No 1:1

No subject specific guidance

Work experience/CV focus

No careers events or external trips to visiting speakers



Focus Group 1

Influences /factors for choosing sample subjects

Peers

Being in same class with friends

Trying new subjects out of curiosity

Interest

Subject Value

1. CAO requirements
2. Future courses and career path
3. Interest in a subject
4. Subject of benefit in the future
5. Stable career options of subject

Influences for Senior Cycle Subject Choice

1. Leaving Cert
2. Parental Influence
3. Interest in subject
4. Learning styles (Ability & aptitude)
5. Junior cert subjects
6. Subject sampling

Experience of subject sampling

- Positive
- Try up to 9 subjects
- Can they try subject more than once
- Different teachers and styles
- New subjects
- Variety
- Seeing what you are good at
- Swap if you don't like it

Gender factors

Not an issue in the sampling but agreed that in senior cycle there are imbalances in certain subjects e.g. Music, Home Ec and Art are mostly female

Appendix N

Experience of subject sampling

Advantages same as Focus Group 1

Disadvantages

Procedure confusing - decisions made in year group passing sheet around

Scheduling confusing at beginning

High demand for some subjects not all students got their first choice

Factors influencing subject choice

Future careers

Points – high grades subjects/levels

Requirements for CAO

Parents

Previous JC results

Teacher quality

Interest, passion

Gender factors

Similar to Focus Group 1

Tech subjects – male dominated

Arts - female

Focus
Group 2

Career advice from Subject teacher

Depends on teacher

Bias towards subject

Knowledge can suggest direction or focus to pursue

Would encourage you if you are good even if it is not what you want

Gap in Career guidance

No 1:1 or classroom guidance

Students showed confusion in relation to CAO 3rd level process and subject entry requirement

Conflicting opinions observed

No idea how to access CG

Career guidance in music

No. 1 Music teachers, Know your ability, Can give advice, basic info, tell you about courses

No. 2 C G Job path, Career Opportunities, College courses

Music as a career

Hard career, limiting, difficult to move from later, unstable, more a hobby, financially insecure

Other options

Diverse Career opportunities

Sound technician

Teacher

Music therapy

Management

Flexible – no set working hours

May suit some personalities

Music as a LC subject

50 % practical

Enjoyment of performing

If you already play well 50% done

Depends on confidence playing

If you are doing it as enjoyment outside of school already

Appendix O

Uptake and gender related to the type of school

Co-ed Schools – more girls
All boys – numbers are low
One DEIS school with male teacher – numbers of boys are much higher
Uptake and gender fluctuates year to year in the same school
Timetabling has the greatest impact on uptake in schools
Boys tend to take music outside of school as well

Parental preconceptions of music very important yet not all teachers were able to explain the nature of their subject to parents

GC usually presented briefly

Promotion of subject

Subject information booklet
Parent information nights
Tasters for 6th class students (1 class)
Tasters for 1st years (4-6 weeks)
Sampling for TY's
Choir, Orchestra, Musical
Noticeboards, with career information

Institutional challenges, timetabling

Music offered only in 1 band in Junior Cert where many other subjects have 2.
Clashes with other practical subjects like Home Ec., Art
Emphasis on STEM, Tech subjects particularly in ETB schools
Some schools regularly review, adjust timetable to improve and balance numbers

Support for Subject

5/6 school had an annual budget allocation
Big well-resourced music rooms
All teachers felt well supported from a facilities point of view and resources
Music making showcased at school events – extracurricular (choir, orchestra)
Supported school musicals

Extra-curricular like musicals had a big impact on Senior Cycle uptake

Why students choose music or not

Musical, interested, enjoy it, play an instrument
Background in music
Member of choir, orchestra, trad group or band
Did JC music
Parent supports the idea
Difficult to get a H1 (for results driven students) – 50% half the marks
Role of the teacher as an advocate for the subject.
Facilities funding very important in DEIS schools



Interviews

Private tuition or exceptional vocal talent is important for uptake of LC music

Career Guidance

Diverse perspectives in relation to links with Teacher and Guidance Service. Informal emails, chats mostly others, good links or no contact.
Role of teacher paramount. Prepares students for auditions, entrance tests, give info and advice about different courses.
Refer to GC for also for specific details on application procedures.
Teacher interprets info given to student by GC but knows "limits"
Info nights on subjects, mostly delivered by GC, no opportunity for teacher input

Music as a career

1 or 2 per year mostly teachers very proud encouraging music as a pastime or for points