



An Exploration of the perceptions of Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators in relation to the accessibility of the Whole School Guidance Programme to students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder in Special Classes in post-primary schools.

By

Caroline O'Shaughnessy

18077528

University of Limerick

M.A in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development

Research Supervisor: Dr. Petra Elftorp

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Abstract

The overall aim of this research is to explore the perceptions of Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators in relation to the accessibility of the Whole School Guidance Programme to students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder in Special Classes in post-primary schools.

Within this study the literature review focuses on literature in the areas of Autistic Spectrum Disorder, special classes in post-primary schools, inclusion and the role of the Guidance Counsellor within special classes.

The research was carried out with six participants, three Special Class Coordinators and three Guidance Counsellors. An interpretivist qualitative methodology was used, and semi-structured interviews were conducted.

The findings from this study indicate that not all students in ASD special classes have access to the Whole School Guidance Programme. There is some concern in relation to the lack of knowledge surrounding inclusive practice in relation to ASD special classes in post-primary schools. There is a need for collaboration to occur between the Guidance Counsellor and Special Class Coordinator to ensure students with ASD in special classes are supported throughout post-primary school and into further education.

Finally, with the aim to improve students' with ASD accessibility to the Whole School Guidance Plan a number of policy, practice and research recommendations are made.

Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this submission is entirely my own work, in my own words, and that all sources used in researching it are fully acknowledged and all quotations properly identified. It has not been submitted, in whole or in part, by me or another person, for the purpose of obtaining any other credit / grade. I understand the ethical implications of my research, and this work meets the requirements of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Student Name: **Caroline O'Shaughnessy**

Student Number: **18077528**

Signed

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To my husband, Rory, thank you for your constant support and patience. You have been my rock throughout my two years of studying and have always encouraged me to follow my dreams.

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List of Abbreviations

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EPSEN Act	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
GC	Guidance Counsellor
IGC	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDA	National Disability Authority
PDD	Pervasive Developmental Disorders
SCC	Special Class Coordinator
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SEN	Special Educational Needs
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research topic that will be explored and the context and justification for this study. The positionality of the researcher will be discussed, as well as the methodology used. Finally, a plan of the structure of the thesis will be presented.

1.1 Context and Justification for the Study

This dissertation examines the accessibility of the Whole School Guidance Programme for students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in special classes in mainstream post-primary schools, from the perspectives of both Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators. In 2017 the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) published '*A Whole School Guidance Framework*' to support schools in planning and designing a whole school guidance programme. The framework is a continuum of support model which incorporates 'guidance for all, guidance for some and guidance for a few' (NCGE 2017, p.12). Within this framework, three areas of learning were identified to support student development in post-primary school – 'developing myself, developing my learning and developing my career path' (NCGE 2017, p.16). Outcomes from these three areas of learning "relate to the development of self-awareness and self-knowledge, knowledge of learning and work opportunities, and applying this knowledge to make effective transitions and decision making" (NCGE 2017, p. 16). The importance of students accessing the whole school guidance programme has been highlighted in literature, with a requirement in the Education Act (1998, section 9(c)) stating that students have access to suitable guidance to help them in their school and career choices.

Within mainstream post-primary schools, the opening of special classes for students with ASD is increasing yearly (NCSE 2020). So, what is ASD, and how does it affect students?

The Irish National Autism Charity, AsIAM, uses the following definition:

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition, which means that the way a person communicates, interacts and understands other people and the world, is different to those who do not have the condition. (AsIAM 2020)

Similarly, Moorewood et al. (2011) state that "it is a complex developmental disability that essentially effects the way a person communicates and relates to people and the environment"

(p.62). ASD, or Autism, was categorised in the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, APA, 2004) as being one of the five disorders characterised under the umbrella term ‘Pervasive Developmental Disorders’ (PDD). Three main areas of difficulty which all people with ASD share are sometimes known as ‘The Triad of Impairments’ and are manifested in the areas of socialisation, communication and language, and repetitive stereotyped behaviour patterns, (Wing 1996), and by flexibility of thought (Frith 1989). Each of the impairments are closely linked together when obtaining both diagnosis and in support intervention. Mesibov (1997) and Howley (2003), (both cited in Jordan 2011) explain that there should be a recognition of individuals with ASD degrees of varied intelligence from mild to severe. According to the report by the inspectorate, DES 2006, and the DES Guidelines 2007, the diversity of needs is recognised, but they also note “one type of approach or intervention is unlikely to be effective for all” (p.5). This highlights the individuality of students with ASD.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a condition which affects the way a person communicates and understands other people. These social, communication and cognitive challenges can affect the performance of students with ASD (Leach and Duffy 2009). Students with ASD experience difficulties in communication, reading social situations, and managing anxiety and stress. Within mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland, special classes are provided for students with special educational needs. Most special classes admit only students who have a specific kind of need, in this case, ASD (NCSE 2016). In the 2015/2016 school year, 149 new special classes opened in mainstream schools. (NCSE 2016, Report: 24) The allocating of teachers to special classes is the role of management and can vary from school to school.

In contrast, the integration of students with ASD into mainstream classes depends on the individual needs of each student. Special Class Coordinators have the responsibility of organising the special classes, and this includes the delivery of supports to meet each student’s needs, meeting with parents and teachers and advocating for the students in the special classes. (NCSE 2016)

Exploring the perceptions of both Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators concerning the accessibility of the Whole School Guidance Programme can help create an understanding of current practices in post-primary schools. Contrasting this with literature in the area, the researcher hopes to highlight any issues that arise when students with ASD in special classes try to access the Whole School Guidance Programme.

1.2 Positionality of the Researcher

According to Thomas 2013, the personal values of a researcher can influence the interpretation of the data collected. Therefore, the positionality of the researcher must be stated at the beginning of a study. Positionality is ‘saying who you are and ‘where you are coming from’(Thomas 2013, p.145). The researcher’s interest in researching the area of ASD and guidance counselling stems from fifteen years working as a Special Needs Assistant (SNA), before becoming a teacher. How students with ASD are supported in an inclusive environment, both within the special class and through inclusive practice was of particular interest for the researcher. This was due to her involvement in teaching students with ASD. Also, when training as a Guidance Counsellor, the researcher experienced limited knowledge of what supports are available for students with ASD regarding further education. The researcher also identified a gap in literature involving the role of the Guidance Counsellor within special classes.

The researcher was aware of her positionality throughout the study and how it might influence data. A research diary was kept to mitigate this issue. It was essential for the research that the participants were gathered from other schools with ASD special classes, to provide a more rounded study.

1.3 Methodology

A qualitative research methodology using an interpretivist paradigm was used to conduct this research study. This allowed the researcher to generate themes from the participants’ perspectives and point of views on the topic. (Braun and Clarke, 2013) Six semi-structured phone interviews were carried out with participants, which allowed for the gathering of more in-depth information as the questions were open-ended. (Creswell, 2009) To broaden the scope of the study, two different stakeholders were included, Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher and using Braun and Clarke’s six-step thematic analysis; themes were generated from the data gathered.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis.

The structure of the thesis is as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction.

The first chapter provides an overview of the research topic, outlining the justification and purpose of the research. It discusses the positionality of the researcher and the methods of research carried out.

Chapter 2: Literature Review.

This chapter compiles a critical review of the literature related to Autism Spectrum Disorder, Inclusion in Education and Guidance Counselling. The study highlights relevant literature from a national and international perspective.

Chapter 3: Methodology.

The methodology chapter outlines the methods used to gather and analyse the data for this study. The data analysis method is explained in relation to why it was chosen for this study. Validity, reliability, reflexivity, and ethical considerations are also explored in this chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings.

Within the findings chapter, the results of the findings are presented under three themes: Inclusion, Continuous Professional Development and Collaboration.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings are discussed in relation to relevant literature from chapter two, and issues that arose are highlighted and presented.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The final chapter concludes the research study, summarising the main findings of the research. It also discusses the strengths and limitations of the study while presenting recommendations for future practice.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the topic of this study. It presents the context and justification for the research study while outlining the methodology that will be used within the study. The positionality of the researcher has also been established in this chapter. Chapter two will provide a critical review of the relevant literature in the area.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

This research study aims to explore the perceptions of both Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators concerning the accessibility of the Whole School Guidance Programme to students with ASD in Special Classes in post-primary schools. This chapter aims to present the literature about the areas of guidance counselling, autism spectrum disorder, special classes in post-primary schools and inclusion in education. While literature in the field of ASD and inclusion in education is vast, it was challenging to find literature in addressing the specific topic of this study and the issue of accessibility of the Whole School Guidance Programme to students with ASD in Special Classes.

2.1 Purpose of Literature Review

The purpose of a literature review is to “provide a framework for establishing the importance of the study as well as a benchmark for comparing the results with other findings.” (Creswell, 2009, p25) Within this literature review, previous studies and literature in relation to ASD, inclusion and guidance counselling will be critically examined to identify what is already known about these topics. The researcher has explored sources, both Irish and International including, published books, policies, organisational reports, online articles, and research from academic journals. When conducting online research, keywords used to identify relevant articles included:

‘guidance counselling’, ‘inclusion’, ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder’, ‘Special classes and post-primary schools’, ‘integration’, ‘special educational needs’, ‘role and purpose of special classes’, ‘barriers to inclusion’, ‘whole school guidance policy’, ‘special units attached to mainstream schools’, ‘special class provision’, ‘best practice provision and ASD’.

The literature review is organised under the following three themes:

- (i) Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- (ii) Inclusion in education
- (iii) Guidance counselling in Post-Primary Schools.

These are the main factors involved in the research and will allow the researcher to inform school guidance counselling provision within ASD special classes.

2.2 Autism Spectrum Disorder

This section will present current literature on ASD. It will discuss the prevalence and diagnosis of ASD, and the challenges faced by students with ASD.

2.2.1 Prevalence and Diagnosis of ASD

According to Fredrikson et al (2010), the occurrence of ASD is continuously rising internationally. The factors impacting this rise are expanded diagnostic criteria, more awareness of the disorder, diagnosis at earlier ages, and the recognition that ASD is a lifelong condition (Matson and Kozlowski, 2010; Ratto and Mesibov, 2015). In Ireland, in the academic year 2011/2012, there was a total of 9,234 students diagnosed with ASD in mainstream primary, mainstream post-primary, special classes, and special schools (Department of Health, 2018). In 2015/2016, this number rose to 16,094 students, confirming the increase (Department of Health, 2018, p.17). In a report by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) 2015, twenty-four per cent of students with ASD were educated in special classes in mainstream schools in 2014 (NCSE 2015, policy advice no. 5). In the context of the rising occurrence of ASD, and according to Leblanc et al. (2009) “there exists a real need within the professional community to understand ASD and the many complexities presented by the various dimensions of the disorder” (p.166).

2.2.2 Challenges for students with ASD

Key areas which can be problematic for students with ASD include transitions, flexibility of thought and behaviour, multi-tasking and self-monitoring (NCSE 2015). This has significant implications in the context of the role of the Guidance Counsellor to provide support for all students throughout their post-primary education. In addition to preparing them for post-school transitions; therefore, carefully planned strategies should be implemented to ensure all students’ needs are met. (Gysbers & Henderson 2012).

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2007) recognise that dealing with the students’ needs is the responsibility of the whole school. Parsons et al., (2009, p. 68) recognise that there is a strong consensus to promote student values and beliefs in their actual success and achievements and that using the students’ perspective, opinion and involvement in the learning

process has been highlighted as ‘good practice’ in inclusive education. Allowing students with ASD have more of an input into the career guidance programme may also keep them motivated to meet targets and also to see what changes need to be made if they are having problems (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012).

2.3 Inclusion in Education

Within the past couple of decades, significant advances have been made regarding inclusion in education. Changes in policy and legislation reflect this, and yet there does not appear to be a consensus about what the term ‘inclusion’ means (Shevlin et al., 2012). Florian (1998) suggests that many definitions of inclusion have been provided from different perspectives, yet no single definition has been unanimously accepted. Many definitions of inclusion highlight various aspects of inclusion; some emphasise a community focus while others accentuate schools’ ability to cater for difference. Within this study, the focus on inclusion will be concerning education.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states that:

...inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities and reducing exclusion within and from education.

(UNESCO 2005, p.13)

Similarly, to UNESCO, and within the Irish context, inclusion is defined as a process of:

...addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners through enabling participation in learning, cultures, and communities and removing barriers to education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements, to enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her attendance at school.

(NCSE, 2010, p. 39)

According to Phádraig (2007), the challenge exists that the policy and legislation devised in relation to inclusion must be put into practice in schools, and this is not the reality at the moment.

Major changes in awareness and attitudes towards those with Special Educational Needs (SEN’s) have driven access to education from isolation to inclusion. (Vickerman, 2012) Over four decades ago, fundamental changes were highlighted in the Warnock Report (1978) in the approaches to the education of persons with SENs in the UK. This report highlighted that all

persons should be educated in mainstream schools unless their educational needs could be met more ‘efficiently’ in a special school. The Warnock committee recommend the abandoning of labels and instead worked with the continuum of need.

Inclusion in education came to the fore with the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994), which sees inclusive educational settings as the most appropriate environments for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN’s). The Irish Education Act 1998 also establishes that all children should receive an appropriate education, regardless of abilities, with the correct supports in place. Similarly, the Equal Status Act 2000 recognised the necessity to provide equal educational opportunities in an inclusive setting. Thus, began the restructuring of mainstream schools to accommodate all students. Likewise, the Irish Education for Persons with Special Needs (EPSN) Act 2004 outlines that children with SEN’s should be educated in an inclusive environment. It states that students with SENs were to be educated with their peers in mainstream schools and a provision requiring Individual Education Plans (IEP’s) is in the Act. However, this legislation has not been fully implemented, and consequently, there is no legal requirement to produce individualised plans for students (NCSE 2006). This lack of implementation can create a barrier to inclusion (NCSE, 2006).

2.3.1 Special Classes in Mainstream Schools

According to Hornby (2015) all children with SEN’s should be provided with an education that achieves the highest possible level of inclusion within the most appropriate setting for the individual. He presents a model of integrating ‘special education’ and ‘inclusive education’, acknowledging the differences of both and incorporating philosophies, policies, and practices to develop a theory of ‘inclusive special education’. Within the Irish education system, students with SEN’s are educated in mainstream class settings, in special classes within mainstream schools and in special school settings (Indecon, 2019).

Although the history of special classes within mainstream schools’ dates to the 1970s, it is with the recent opening of many new special classes/ASD units in mainstream schools’ that research and policy in this area has been growing (Parsons et al. 2009). “Special classes are intended to cater exclusively for students with special educational needs, and most special classes admit only students from a specific category of need (Ware et al. 2009). For this study, the category of need being researched is ASD.

The number of special classes in Ireland for students with ASD has increased considerably in the last decade (Parsons *et al.* 2009). The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) took over the role of special class provision in 2010, and its records confirm this considerable increase. For the school year starting September 2018, the list of Special Classes in Mainstream Post-Primary schools in Ireland shows 48 new special classes opened in schools for students with ASD (NCSE 2018). In 2020, the number of post-primary schools in Ireland with ASD specific special classes attached is 369 (NCSE 2020). In 2016, the NCSE produced three new research reports relating to ASD and special classes. Special classes are part of a continuum of educational provision that enables students with more complex special educational needs to be educated, in smaller class groups, within their local mainstream schools (NCSE 2016). These classes serve as the primary learning environment for the students, and integration to mainstream classes is mostly determined by the Special Class Coordinators and teacher assessments. According to The Education Act (1998), schools should provide all students with “access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices” (section 9c). The Education Act includes students from ASD special classes to “the greatest extent possible, in line with their abilities” (NCSE 2016, p.2). The NCSE (2009) acknowledged that further research is needed to examine how ASD special classes operate in practice concerning inclusion and the curriculum being offered. Within this context, the following section will review literature pertaining to provision of guidance counselling in post-primary schools in Ireland.

2.4 Guidance Counselling in Post-Primary schools

Guidance in schools includes “personal and social, educational and career guidance delivered within a whole school context” (NCGE 2017, p. 7) and guidance is defined 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)

More recently, the findings from a review of guidance in Ireland suggested that “access to career guidance for young people with SEN at all levels and in all educational settings is of critical importance” (Indecon 2019, p. 33). The National Disability Authority (NDA) has also indicated that “career guidance for learners with disabilities should be delivered in an individually focused person-centred way across the learner pathways” (NDA 2017, p. 26). In

2015, the Irish Government published a ten-year comprehensive employment strategy for people with disabilities, to address the barriers to employment (Department of Justice and Equality 2015). Within this strategy, recommendations are made for better support for students with disabilities regarding accessing career guidance in post-primary schools.

2.4.1 Provision of Guidance in Post Primary Schools

Within post-primary schools in the Irish education system, each school receives an allocation in respect of guidance provision. It is calculated in relation to pupil enrolment in individual schools and includes Post Leaving Certificate students. Management in each school then decides how they allocate the hours (DES, Circular 0014/2020). As guidance is perceived as a whole school activity, each school develops a ‘whole school guidance plan’, which involves many staff members. As each school has a variety of needs, the organisation and allocation of hours in respect to Guidance Counselling can be distributed differently in each school (NCGE 2012). However, as no ‘whole school guidance plan’ is the same, the practices may also vary.

In 2016, the NCSE carried out a study in relation to special classes in post-primary schools. The issue of guidance provision within the special classes was not covered. However, while discussing the accessibility of the post-primary curriculum to students within the special class, it was discovered that ‘40% of special class teachers at post-primary level are covering the full curriculum’ (NCSE 2016, p 62). Special class teachers also reported that they did not have ‘the right skills and qualifications to teach in such a setting’ (NCSE 2016, p.62). Many students from special classes are also known to leave school with no qualifications, as there is no substitute certification for those unable to complete the ordinary junior certificate or leaving certificate programmes. (NCSE 2016) According to the report, the special class teachers needed more support from a whole school approach which would point ‘to the importance of teacher collaboration and a whole-school approach to inclusion and meeting diverse student need’ (NCSE 2016, p. 93).

2.4.2 Guidance Counselling for Students with ASD

The role of the Guidance Counsellor within the post-primary school is to help *all* students through different transitions within their lives – primary to post-primary school, post-primary to further education/employment (NCGE 2017). Also, the Guidance Counsellor must provide students with material so they can make informed choices within their lives – subject choices, college choices (NCGE 2017). As guidance counselling in post-primary schools is increasingly

provided in group lessons in mainstream classes, and many students from ASD special classes spend nearly all of the day within the special class, (NCSE 2016). It is reasonable to assume that many students with ASD are not accessing the guidance programme.

There appears to be a lack of policies addressing Guidance Counselling in ASD special classes, which might indicate that provision is dependent on the school management. Furthermore, since the re-allocation of guidance counselling provision in Budget 2012, decisions on the hours allocated to guidance provision are made by school management. (NCGE 2013, IGC 2016). One-to-one sessions have been highlighted as an essential aspect of students' schooling (McCoy et al. 2014). Furthermore, research by ESRI and the National Disability Authority (2015), found that:

72% of children with disabilities attend mainstream education, a further 13% are in special classes in mainstream, and 15% attend special schools. Of those with disabilities, children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be placed in special classes in mainstream schools or in special schools' settings

(ESRI and NDA 2015, p.42)

According to the IGC (2017), it is the more vulnerable students, such as Special Needs, Travellers, non-English-speaking Foreign Nationals, and other socio-economically disadvantaged students that are “disproportionately negatively impacted by the lack of guidance support as there is no substitute service available” (p.6). Budget 2018 provided for a partial restoration of posts including guidance counselling, under a whole school guidance plan.

The Guidance Counsellor “leads, coordinates and delivers the school guidance programme in collaboration with school management and staff and key stakeholders in response to the guidance needs of students” (NCGE 2017, p. 8) The word collaboration is critical in this statement. It will be an important aspect of this research study, to investigate how collaboration takes place between the Guidance Counsellor and special class co-ordinator to support successful access to the guidance programme for students from ASD special classes.

In Indecon's (2019) 'Report of the Independent Review of Career Guidance Tools and Information', an issue arose in relation to students in special needs schools, whereby it is the special school staff that undertake the guidance activities within the school, as there are no Guidance Counsellors allocated to these schools. A recommendation was made for “career guidance training for teachers in special needs schools, and also in enhancing the access of such schools to wider career guidance supports” (Indecon 2019, p. 13). Although this research

study will be focusing on Special Classes within Post-Primary schools that have allocated Guidance Counsellors, and not special needs schools, the recommendations in relation to training for teachers/ guidance counsellors from this report can be useful when implementing a whole school guidance programme.

Leaney (2018) discusses the lack of employment opportunities for people with ASD in the UK, stating that only 16% of autistic adults are in full time paid employment. There does not appear to be published statistics available in Ireland in relation to this. Within the NCSE 2015 policy advice paper, issues were raised in relation to the lack of meaningful post-school placements and options for students with ASD. The advice paper also states that “there is further scope to include transition planning in students’ individualised planning before leaving post-primary education” (NCSE 2015, p.42) The Government report on employment strategies for people with disabilities 2015 states “preparing for work must start at school”(Department of Justice and Equality 2015, p.36)

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined current literature in relation to ASD, inclusion and the role of the guidance counsellor. Through compiling the review, it has emerged that there is a clear gap in knowledge concerning the provision of guidance counselling in special classes within mainstream post-primary schools, even though there is a move towards inclusive education in Ireland. The literature review has highlighted that no two schools are the same when delivering the guidance programme. Therefore, it is challenging to assess best practice concerning providing guidance counselling in ASD specific special classes. Chapter 3 will examine the methodology used for this research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

The main aim of this chapter is to outline the use of the research methodology used in this dissertation. It will identify the primary and secondary research questions that will underpin this study. The chapter will also present the rationale for the chosen methods of data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability and ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Questions

“Research questions are questions you intend to employ systematic research to investigate; they are what is to be investigated” (Hart 2005, p.80). According to Bryman (2008), without clear research questions, a research study can become unfocused and unmanageable. Through compiling the literature review, a knowledge gap was identified in the role of the guidance counsellor in ASD special classes, and the research questions will try to address this gap. Research questions are crucial to help guide a researcher through literature, data collecting and analysing, while keeping them focused on the specific enquiry being made. In this study, the overarching research question asks:

What are the perceptions of both Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators in relation to the accessibility of the Whole School Guidance Programme to students with ASD in Special Classes in post-primary schools?

The secondary research questions are:

- 1. What are the attitudes and opinions of both Guidance Counsellors and Special Class coordinators in relation to inclusion?*
- 2. How do students from ASD specific classes access guidance counselling in post-primary school?*
- 3. What do both these stakeholders identify as the challenges in ensuring that students with ASD access guidance counselling in post-primary school?*
- 4. What are the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) needs for Guidance Counsellors in relation to supporting students with ASD?*

3.2 Methodology

Methodology refers to the structure within which research is conducted. It pertains to the reasons why methods are chosen and reflects on their strengths and limitations. The choosing of suitable paradigms, methodologies and methods is an imperative role for the researcher and should not be undervalued (Hearne 2013).

A paradigm is a system of beliefs and ideas that provide a framework for research (Braun and Clarke 2013). Within research, there are two main paradigms, positivist (quantitative) and interpretivist (qualitative) (Creswell, 2009). Positivist paradigms rely specifically on scientific and quantifiable evidence when studying society. It deals in objective information, such as measurement, and findings are usually quantifiable.

The interpretivist paradigm was chosen for this study as it highlighted words rather than numbers and allowed for a framework that provided an in-depth examination of participants' views. The emphasis was placed on the social interaction between the participants and the topic of the study (O'Donoghue, 2007), whereby the participants have different experiences and describe their individual point of view. The interpretivist method has allowed the researcher to emphasise the personal experience of the participants and to theorise meaning from the data provided (Robson 2002).

In this study, a form of triangulation approach was employed, whereby the views of both Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators was heard. Triangulation can provide a broader perspective on the topic and "becomes a way of capturing the multiple 'voices' or 'truths' that relate to the topic" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.286). This triangulation provided a more comprehensive picture in relation to the perceived role Guidance Counselling is playing within ASD Special Classes. To gain an even wider perspective, it would have been beneficial to include the parents and students with ASD within the Special classes, but this was not possible due to the limited timescale of this study. Limitations to the interpretivist approach must also be acknowledged within this study. There is a subjective nature to this methodology, which means researcher bias can be an issue: "Bias refers to the idea that the researcher might (inadvertently) have influenced the results, so they cannot be trusted." (Braun and Clarke 2013, p.36). Although a researcher brings their own values and perspectives to a research topic, it is important that they must also be reflective and understand what they have brought to the process. Every attempt was made to maintain an impartial position on the topic before, during

and after data collection. For example, questions asked were not leading or prejudiced and the language used in interview was unbiased.

3.3 Data Collection Method

This research study seeks the perceptions and experiences of Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators using the qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews. While these interviews were intended to be conducted face-to-face, the current pandemic, the Corona Virus, has resulted in the interviews being carried out through audio recording. “The goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Creswell, 2009, p.8) in this case using open-ended interview questions to allow participants to include as much information as possible in their answers. When the topic was chosen for this study, the question of who would be the best people to provide the information needed was asked. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they provide “scope for the participants to raise issues that the researcher has not anticipated.” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.78)

The researcher conducted audio-recorded telephone interviews and will transcribe each interview once completed. There are advantages and disadvantages of using telephone interviews over face-to-face interviews. Some advantages include a wider geographic access and they can be cost and time effective. A limitation to telephone interviews can be that it is harder to make a connection with the participant being interviewed. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to prepare a set of questions that they want to cover on the topic being researched. This set of questions does not have to be strictly adhered to and, because of its flexibility, will allow participants to expand their ideas and also allow the researcher to probe deeper or use follow up questions to get more information. “Questions that are not included in the set may be asked as the interviewer picks up on things said by interviewees.” (Bryman 2008, p. 438)

According to Marshall & Rossman, 2006, the most important aspect of conducting an interview is to ensure the participant knows their views are valuable and useful. Throughout the interviews, the researcher used skills learned when training to become a Guidance Counsellor which included empathy, active listening, congruence, and unconditional positive regard. (Rogers, 19; Ali and Graham, 1996)

3.4 Access and Sampling

This study is a small-scale study, and the sample size can be a limitation, as the results may not be transferable to other populations. Time was a factor in this decision, as due to time restraints a total of six participants were recruited to take part in the study. Another factor in relation to sample size was the accessibility to the specific participants needed to provide information rich data, namely Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators in post-primary schools that have ASD special classes. According to Bryman (2008) the larger the sample size the greater the precision. However, Coyne (1997, p.627) states that purposeful sampling is “selecting information-rich cases, that is cases that are selected purposefully to fit the study.” Although findings are harder to generalise, these findings will be accurate to the experiences of each participant and will provide us with valuable information on the topic.

Initially the intention was to identify both a Guidance Counsellor and Special Class Coordinator from the same school and ask three different schools to take part in the study. However, relying on only three schools proved difficult, particularly in the context of the ‘Covid-19 shut down’. Nonetheless, interviews took place between 17th March 2020 and 29th April 2020. These phone interviews were recorded and transcribed once concluded.

The research topic was granted approval by the EHS committee, University of Limerick in February 2020. Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Co-Ordinators were to be included in this study. To access the sample, a recruitment letter was sent out to principals (gatekeepers) of post-primary schools in the south east of the country that had ASD specific Special Classes and Guidance Counsellors. (Appendix A) The letter detailed the purpose and aims of the study, as well as the participants who were required for this study. Once permission was granted, a letter was also provided to the participants to ensure consent was given and that they were willing to partake in the study. (Appendix B) The purpose of the study, and the process of how the interviews would be conducted was explained to all participants, along with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity before beginning the interviews. The researcher ensured that informed consent from the participants was obtained before commencing. (Appendix C) Dates and times were then arranged with participants that would suit them for the telephone interviews to take place.

3.5 Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, the researcher began analysing the data. The researcher audio-recorded and transcribed all six interviews. Thematic analysis was used for analysing data within this study. According to Braun and Clarke, 2013, it is a flexible theoretical framework and the researcher uses the six-phase procedure for data analysis. The six phases are; Familiarisation with data, coding of content description, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and finalising analysis.

When analysing word data, Thomas (2013, p. 235) states “you are seeking understanding and insight, adopting the assumptions of interpretivism.” By applying the constant comparative method, the researcher can identify consistencies within the interviews to allow themes to emerge. While transcribing, the interviews were heard many times. Through reading the interviews over and over, the researcher then placed a phrase in the margin, to explain what it was about. Once this was completed with all six interviews, different coloured highlighters were used to find significant themes within the content which helped to answer the research questions.(Appendix D) Thomas 2013, p.235, explains how eventually the themes that emerge will ‘capture or summarise the contents of your data.’ Once the coding and themes were extrapolated the themes were reviewed, reread and cross checked for associations and connections.

3.6 Validity and Reliability in Interpretive Research

3.6.1 Validity

It is crucial when conducting a study that it is as accurate as possible and to do this the study must be valid and reliable. The term validity means being able to show that the research study has measured what it was supposed to measure. (Braun and Clarke, 2013) If the research is valid then it will accurately try to answer the research questions posed in the study. The researcher, to ensure validity, provided participants with a copy of their transcripts to ensure that they are accurate representations of the interview.

There are different forms of validity, such as internal validity and external validity. (Creswell, 2009) The risk to internal validity was avoided partly by not including the researcher’s place of work/school to recruit participants; therefore, this reduced personal bias that might have been present. External validity refers to “the extent and warrant we have to make

generalisations from our study.” (Hart, 2005, p. 337) Although the sample size was small, the researcher conducted the study with participants from different schools, thus trying to provide the study with external validity.

Another form of validity – ecological validity is “concerned with the ‘real world’ and the research. It manifests as whether the context of data collection resembles the real-world context and sometimes as whether the results can be applied to real world settings.” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 280) It is the researchers’ ambition to use the results of this study to inform practice and therefore generalise the results to real life settings, namely other post-primary schools with ASD specific classes.

3.6.2 Reliability

Reliability relates to the “the consistency of the analytical procedures, including accounting for personal and research method biases that may have influenced the findings.” (Noble and Smith 2015, p.35) According to Bryman (2012) it considers if the results can be repeated. Reliability is difficult to ensure in interpretivist qualitative methodologies, as no two interviews conducted yielded the same results, but the researcher has based their findings on the interviewee’s accounts and the use of reflexivity will safeguard that the researcher is aware of their own assumptions in relation to the study. The interview questions are clear and concise and are conducted in an ethical manner. The researcher also discussed their positionality within the research, which reduces personal bias throughout the study.

3.7 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an essential aspect of qualitative research. It “refers to the process of critically reflecting on the knowledge we produce, and the role in producing that knowledge.” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 37) Creswell establishes when a researcher uses an interpretivist approach, they must make their own deductions from the data produced. To do this effectively, they must be aware of their own actions throughout the study to ensure there is no prejudice. In relation to the researchers own beliefs about the role of the Guidance Counsellor within an ASD specific special class, although acknowledged, they must be put to one side while conducting this study. The researcher did not offer advice or provide biased comments during the interviews, just allowed the participants to discuss their own perspectives when answering the questions. Data will be analysed thoroughly to ensure all interviews are represented in a precise, clear, and

concise manner. A reflective journal (Appendix E) was kept, recording the researcher's feelings while conducting the study.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The importance of ethical issues in research relates to protecting the interests of the participants. Throughout this research study, many ethical issues had to be taken into consideration. Ethical approval to conduct this study had to be applied for through the EHS Research Committee of the University of Limerick and once approved the researcher adhered to the ethical guidelines of the institution. Ethical approval was granted on the 3rd February 2020 (reference no: 2020_02_38_EHS (ER)). McNiff and Whitehead 2010, state the importance of having a set of ethical principles that include documentation such as ethics statements and letters, the promising of confidentiality and ensuring professional conduct. Braun and Clarke (2013) determines the concept in relation to ethics is of 'doing no harm'. The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) also have a set of ethical standards which all their members must follow. (IGC 2012) The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) has published a research code of ethics with four overall ethical principles which comprise of; respecting the rights and dignity of the client, maintain professional competency, act in a trustworthy and responsible way and promote integrity. (NCGE 2008) These ethical codes and committees supported this study.

The research participants selected for this study were guidance counsellors and special class co-ordinators. When selecting these participants, anonymity and confidentiality was discussed with them, and they understood that their partaking in the study was voluntary. (Appendix B) Anonymity was a critical aspect when carrying out the research, as participants could provide their own personal feelings and experiences of the role of the guidance counsellor in ASD special classes, knowing their identity would not be compromised. Pseudonyms were used in the findings chapter to ensure anonymity. Each participant was also provided with a detailed consent form to clarify the purpose and aim of the study. Also, it highlighted that participants could exit the study at any time. (Appendix C) There was also a time aspect to participants' taking part in the study, with each interview taking approximately forty-five minutes. To relieve some of this time constraint, the researcher ensured that interviews took place at a time that suited each participant.

All storage of data was stored in line with the General Data Protection Regulation and EHS Ethics approval, and this information was also provided to the participants.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the focus and methodology of this study. It identified the research questions and discussed them in relation to the study. The interpretivist paradigm has been outlined as the methodology to access the data, and the strengths and limitations of this form of methodology have been acknowledged. Data collection methods were analysed and outlined in terms of how best they will work for this study. The importance of validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethical issues were addressed, which provided more clarity about this research process. Chapter four will present the findings of the research.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter will present the findings generated from the six semi-structured interviews that were conducted. In total, three Special Class Coordinators and three Guidance Counsellors were interviewed. Through thematic analysis, several themes emerged from the perceptions of both the Guidance Counsellors and the Special Class Coordinators in relation to the accessibility of the Whole School Guidance Programme to students with ASD. The three major themes that emerged are: Inclusion, Continuing Professional Development and Collaboration. Firstly, however, an introduction to the participants is provided.

4.1 Participants

This section will briefly describe the participants, the type of school they are working in and for how long they have worked within ASD Special Classes. Pseudonyms have been used for each participant to ensure anonymity.

The six participants are from five different schools in both urban and rural areas. The participants all had a range of experience in their field of expertise, as can be seen in Table 4.1

Table 4.1 Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Role	School	Length of time working in role
Rory	Special Class Coordinator	Mixed DEIS Urban	8 yrs. as Coordinator. 4 yrs. as teacher in Special Class before becoming co-ordinator.
Katie	Special Class Coordinator	Community School Rural	3 years
Fiona	Special Class Coordinator	ETB Rural	5 years
John	Guidance Counsellor	Community School Urban	1 year

Stephen	Guidance Counsellor	Community School Rural	29 years
Patricia	Guidance Counsellor	Mixed DEIS Urban	11 years

While many questions were asked of the participants, three themes emerged which will be the focus of this study.

4.2 Inclusion

All six participants acknowledged that inclusive practice plays a central role within their schools, but at different levels. Participants have stated that most of their students within the ASD special classes attend mainstream classes with varying levels of support. Katie, special class coordinator (SCC) stated that inclusive practices are inconsistent within her school:

“Inclusive practice plays a role in the school; however, it is not consistent for all students and across all teachers’ subject areas. Unfortunately, not all teachers are willing or experienced enough to put in the extra effort. For some teachers this is simply not having enough time and for others it is em... attitudinal and they do not see it as their job.”

When discussing the inclusion of students from ASD special classes, specifically within the Whole school Guidance Programme, responses were mixed. Rory (special class coordinator) discusses how students are included within his school:

“I must say I am not aware of the whole school guidance programme in my school but students are included in that they have weekly one to one meetings with the school Guidance Counsellor and sometimes the Guidance Counsellor works in our ASD special classes, which is an advantage.”

Similarly, John (guidance counsellor) describes how the Guidance Counsellor is timetabled into the special class:

‘I am timetabled for a 40-minute class once a week within the special class. I work closely with the unit manager (special class coordinator) to put a career programme in

place. Sometimes though, like an issue might come up and I use my time to discuss this with the students – like wellbeing”

These schools show inclusive practice is being rolled out into the Whole School Guidance Plan, as some schools report timetabling Guidance Counsellors into the Special Classes. The issue that was common when conducting the interviews was the different approaches taken by the different schools in relation to inclusion and inclusive practice.

Other Guidance Counsellors did not seem to have much involvement with the students from the ASD special classes. Stephen (GC) said:

“I meet all students in 6th year and try to see all students in 3rd year as well. Under the whole school guidance plan I teach classes in careers, and sometimes students from the ASD unit will attend with their base class. I don’t meet these students individually because they have eh their support people down in the unit.”

It was clear from the interviews that there was a disconnect between the role of the Guidance Counsellor within the special class and the inclusion of students from these special classes. The separation of Special Classes and mainstream post-primary school was reiterated by Patricia (GC) who stated:

“I thought there was separate allocations for the autistic unit and the school? Although I do see these students from time to time in their class groups, when I teach wellbeing once a week.”

In relation to the Guidance Counsellors, two out of the three believed that special classes were allocated hours separately to the main school. They do not feel that they should have any input into the special classes or working with the students.

Although a difference of perspectives has been seen here in relation to inclusion, it is still a strong theme within this study. When participants were then asked if they had received upskilling on inclusive education, only two of the six participants have. Fiona (SCC) states that she has upskilled:

“Since graduating the PME in 2016 I have qualified in the Post Grad Diploma in Special Educational Needs in Maynooth which had a module on inclusion. I’ve also done many in-service days, cause at them I am constantly learning new methods and approaches.”

The three Guidance Counsellors have had no upskilling on inclusive education at all, and within their interviews they have acknowledged this. According to John (GC):

“I have not received any upskilling on inclusive education, in fact I have never received any training on how to work with students with any SEN’s. I am definitely open to doing a course in this area though.”

There was a disconnect between Special Class Coordinators and Guidance Counsellors in relation to inclusive practice. Most Special Class Coordinators have a qualification in Special Educational Needs, whereas Guidance Counsellors have received little or no training in working with students with any form of SEN’s and specifically Autism.

4.3 Continuing Professional Development and Competency

Within the five schools represented in this study it has been made clear by the participants that there is a definite need for Guidance Counsellors to access CPD in the area of SEN and Autism. The understanding from participants is that the Special Class Coordinator does a lot of the work of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to career guidance for the students in the ASD special class, but without a guidance counselling qualification or training. When discussing CPD in the area of guidance counselling and special classes, Rory (SCC) describes the work he does with students from his class:

“When a student hits 5th year we set aside a class a week or maybe even two at the start of the year to research courses thoroughly because I find sometimes in the guidance classes there’s a lot of students and their teacher might be focusing on one or two in the class and the other guys are not really focused and it doesn’t really benefit students from our class.”

Fiona (SCC) discussed the research she conducts on a regular basis for students from her special class when they are considering their options for further education.

“when we figure out what the student is interested in, I find I have to do a lot of research in relation to courses in that area. We link in with the colleges to see if they have a disabilities officer in the campus and see what supports are available to the student em... like if they need a personal assistant or technology or something like that.”

The third Special Class Coordinator, Katie has a similar experience and she meets with parents and teachers in relation to the accessibility of further education for students with ASD in her class. She would prefer if the Guidance Counsellor was more involved in the process:

“I discuss future options with the parents and teachers of my students and if there is something I don’t understand I will ask the Guidance Counsellor. I do find though that I have to seek him out. He is not accessible to the students on a regular basis.”

While two of the guidance counsellors spoke about having no direct involvement in working with students from ASD specific special classes, John discussed how little understanding he had of what resources were out there for students with ASD. He concluded by stating that CPD would allow him access to resources and this would be very beneficial when providing accurate information to students/parents from ASD special classes about future options. He stated:

“I’m only in the job a year, but I do have a one to one interview with all 6th year students. If a student needs extra support I will ask their SNA to attend the meeting so we can put a plan in place for the student. I don’t know all the outside resources available to the students when they leave secondary school, but eh I have made a few phone calls to try to understand how to benefit the student, once they know what they would like to pursue. I would be interested in doing some CPD in the area of Autism, especially to get resources that would help”

When asked about CPD in the area of Autism, the Special Class Coordinators all stated that they felt that the Guidance Counsellors would benefit from ASD specific courses. The Guidance Counsellors interviewed also acknowledged that they would feel more confident in working with students from ASD special classes if they had more training in what ASD is and how they would support students in this area. Patricia (GC) acknowledged:

“I don’t feel qualified enough to provide career counselling to students from the ASD unit, as I don’t know what is out there for them when they finish school. I also don’t know what their specific needs are, like to be honest I don’t know enough about Autism itself. On the other side of it providing personal counselling to these students also scares me cause I’m not sure what their issues might be.”

Some of the special class coordinators mentioned how encouraging guidance counsellors to partake in CPD in relation to SEN and also Autism would benefit them greatly in their knowledge and understanding. Katie (SCC) said in relation to CPD for Guidance Counsellors:

“I guess any ASD specific CPD would help the guidance counsellor understand the condition better. I think a course that outlines what the challenges are for ASD students and a course in anxiety would be very important. Anxiety is the biggest need kids with ASD have in my experience and it would be good if a guidance counsellor understood this from the get go.”

All participants mention the gaps in knowledge in relation to a Guidance Counsellors’ understanding of Autism, while also the gaps in knowledge for Special Class Coordinators in relation to career guidance. These concerns are echoed by Stephen (GC) who said:

“Special Class Coordinators are not qualified Guidance Counsellors, so should not be solely providing students from the unit with careers information. It would be best if these students joined the careers classes provided and participated in the career guidance programme.”

The difficulty lies in whether a student from the ASD special class can cope in the guidance classes, and if they cannot what is the alternative for them when considering career options and transitioning. Katie (SCC) discussed how some students with ASD have issues when in guidance classes and how they overcome those issues within the school:

“some students in our class already know what they want to do, or if they have attention or behaviour problems then they won’t find that environment (career guidance classes) very useful, then em I would withdraw them (from careers class) once they know what they’re going to do. I would get them a one to one meeting with the Guidance Counsellor just to check in.”

Each school differs in relation to what options they choose for ASD students in special classes accessing the guidance programme. Whether they withdraw students from guidance classes, provide students with one to one sessions with the guidance counsellor, or whether the special class coordinator provides the students’ with career guidance information, each participant has identified that CPD is an important factor when working with students with ASD.

4.4 Collaboration

Each participant was asked about collaboration between Special Class Coordinators and Guidance Counsellors within the schools they worked in. Three out of six participants believed that they worked collaboratively, while the other three participants said they did not collaborate

at all. When asked if there was collaboration between the special class coordinators and the Guidance Counsellors within the school, Rory (SCC) stated:

“Yes. We’d liaise regarding who needs what level of guidance support, strategies or issues that arise, how this may need to be communicated to home etc. It very much helps us that our Guidance Counsellor has worked as a teacher in the ASD special classes before.”

In contrast to this, Fiona (SCC) discussed how she would have to look for contribution from the Guidance Counsellor when working in relation to subject choices or student counselling.

“One of our Guidance Counsellors is very interested in the students in the class and because her office is located next to the unit, she regularly checks-in to see how they are doing. However, in relation to collaboration, the onus has been on me to initiate input from Guidance for either subject option advice or for counselling.”

This rings through when speaking to Stephen, one of the Guidance Counsellors who states:

“I do not collaborate with the special class coordinator, but she knows I am here if she needs information about careers or advice. Sometimes the students are referred through the Care Team and I will organise to meet them if this happens.”

Two of the participants discussed how they are timetabled to work in the ASD Special Classes every week. Both their descriptions of the collaboration process are similar, with them acknowledging that they collaborate well. John (GC) said:

“Before I enter a class, I discuss with the Special Class Coordinator what they feel would benefit the students I’ll be working with. They also give me a run-down of each of the students’ needs and between the two of us, em and sometimes with the input of the SNA we come up with a plan. This plan might not always work, but if we find it doesn’t, we go back to the drawing board so to speak and make another one. It can be a bit of trial and error.”

While this is extremely positive in relation to collaboration it does not happen in all cases. Patricia showed her concern in relation to collaboration when she said:

“I didn’t even know we had to collaborate. I don’t normally collaborate with the teachers, only through the referral system we have. I would usually just work in class groups and haven’t been down to the unit. I don’t know how or if they are being

supported. But you have now made me aware of how important this is, I'll be much more conscious of it next year."

All participants agreed that collaboration should be an important aspect of the Whole School Guidance Plan, with the students of the ASD special classes being supported within this plan. It was also suggested that a positive outcome of collaboration would be the sharing of knowledge between the Guidance Counsellor and Special Class Coordinator when working with these students. According to John (GC):

"sharing of information and resources on Autism, outside supports available and networking with further education centres could provide a knowledge base that will best support each student."

Agreeing with his statement, and supporting collaboration Katie (SCC) also added:

"When there is collaboration at least two heads are better than one! If there is information I don't know I could ask the Guidance Counsellor for help while he could let me explain to him each student's needs, which will help that student, both within the school and when making the transition out of post-primary school. I also think that with the more knowledge we share, we will end up getting accustomed to providing support to ASD students, and it will become easier."

Overall, it seems that each participant believed that linking and collaborative planning is an essential process to allow students from an ASD specific special class to be provided with the best guidance support possible. All participants believed that there was a connection between collaboration and providing the best possible support for the student. Without this collaboration it seems that the responsibility falls on the Special Class Coordinators to provide some sort of support despite not being qualified Guidance Counsellors.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the findings through the three themes that have emerged – Inclusion, CPD/Competency and Collaboration. The findings reveal that there are several issues that emerge within schools in relation to the accessibility of the Whole School Guidance Programme to students with ASD in Special classes in post-primary schools. Inclusion has been highlighted as an issue in that some schools do not timetable the Guidance Counsellor into the ASD special class which leads sometimes to these students not being included. The

Guidance Counsellors are not feeling competent in working with students with ASD or SEN's, as they have no training for this. Additionally, the findings suggest that there is a lack of collaboration between Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators. These findings will be discussed in relation to the literature in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present a critical analysis of the findings in relation to the literature presented in chapter two. The research questions allowed the researcher to explore the perceptions of both guidance counsellors and special class coordinators in relation to guidance in ASD special classes. The primary research question is: *What are the perceptions of both Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators in relation to accessibility of the Whole School Guidance Programme to students with ASD in special classes.*

The secondary research questions are:

1. *What are the attitudes and opinions of both Guidance Counsellors and Special Class coordinators in relation to inclusion?*
2. *How do students from ASD specific classes access guidance counselling in post-primary school?*
3. *What do both these stakeholders identify as the challenges in ensuring that students with ASD access guidance counselling in post-primary school?*
4. *What are the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) needs for Guidance Counsellors in relation to supporting students with ASD?*

From the analysis of the findings, three specific themes emerged: inclusion, continuous professional development, and collaboration. In this chapter, the findings will be discussed under the following three headings:

1. Knowledge in relation to the inclusion of ASD students in special classes in the Guidance Programme.
2. Continuous Professional Development needs for Guidance Counsellors.
3. The importance of staff collaboration when working with ASD students in special classes.

5.1 Knowledge in relation to the inclusion of ASD students in special classes in the Guidance Programme

From the findings of this study, it is evident that post-primary schools in Ireland take different approaches in relation to inclusive practice. Although all schools within this study acknowledge

that inclusive practice plays a significant role within their schools, it is not always consistent. Under the Whole School Guidance Framework it is essential that all students have access to “a range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence that assist students to develop self-management skills which will lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives” (DES 2005, p.4). From the interviews conducted in this study, including students from ASD special classes in the Guidance Plan seem to be ad hoc and dependant on the individual’s abilities. While some schools timetable the guidance counsellor into the special classes, others do not. The schools that have a guidance counsellor timetabled into the special classes speak positively about the role of the guidance counsellor.

The schools that do not timetable the guidance counsellor into the ASD special class, provide access to the guidance counsellor through the mainstream guidance programme. These students attend with their SNA and their base class. To enable the inclusion of students with ASD, the curriculum plan should involve differentiation of the content (NCSE 2011). A student support plan should be implemented which “should include clear, measurable learning targets, and specify the resources and interventions that will be used to address student needs in line with the Continuum of Support process” (Indecon 2019, p.13). Results of this study show that some schools do not provide a student support plan in relation to the guidance programme. From the perspectives of the guidance counsellors in this study, challenges arise in relation to differentiating work for the students. All three guidance counsellors acknowledge that it would be best practice to differentiate work for ASD students, but as the work is quite individualistic to each student, they believe that it can be extremely difficult to do this. It has also been acknowledged that teachers have reported being under pressure to complete the curriculum and prioritise this over differentiating for students with SENs. (McGillicuddy and O’Donnell 2014).

While literature states that the inclusion of students with SEN in the guidance programme is essential (NCSE 2016), the findings from this study indicate that there is a lack of knowledge on how best to do this. There is no clear role for the guidance counsellor in relation to special classes and each school devises its own Guidance Plan, so there is a lack of structure in place. It is also widely acknowledged that students with ASD have different needs and no two students are the same. (asiam.ie 2020) The difficulty of inclusion in relation to students with ASD is that no one approach to teaching will work for all students. (NCSE 2015) In this study, many students with ASD had no access to the guidance programme because it was deemed not in their best interest to attend these classes. Decisions were made on behalf of the students by special class coordinators and the students’ parents, with no input from a Guidance Counsellor.

The findings from this study suggest that that some students with ASD from special classes are not accessing the guidance programme and that special class coordinators are taking on this role themselves. Implications of this finding may be that the special class coordinator is not a qualified guidance counsellor and would not have the suitable skillset to provide a guidance programme to these students. The findings also suggest that special class coordinators have not got the adequate knowledge to provide appropriate information to students in relation to further education and training. This lack of knowledge can have implications on the students and where they apply to, and there is a risk that they will choose the wrong course for them. While inclusion is an imperative aspect to students in ASD special classes accessing the guidance programme, the best interests of each individual must be taken into account. All participants in this study agreed that one to one sessions or small group sessions between the Guidance Counsellor and ASD students in special classes would have the best impact on learning for this group of students. This can prove difficult though, as one to one sessions are usually only provided to sixth year students in relation to further and higher education. According to the Indecon Report on Guidance (2019), there is currently no policy to support an alternative or separate guidance provision for students with SEN in mainstream post-primary schools.

5.2 Continuous Professional Development Needs for Guidance Counsellors

A key finding in this study is that there seems to be a lack of awareness amongst Guidance Counsellors in how to work with students with any form of special educational needs. This lack of knowledge for guidance counsellors in working with students with SEN, including ASD can lead to a risk of the guidance counsellor avoiding working with these students as they are not confident in this area.

“Many post-primary teachers consider their initial teacher education has not prepared them to teach students with ASD and they are not adequately equipped to work with these students either in mainstream or special classes”

(NCSE 2014, p.47).

The three Guidance Counsellor’s within this study mentioned that they had no experience in working with students with ASD. Similarly the NCSE 2014, states that “teachers require access to ongoing CPD in assessing and identifying the needs of their students and in selecting and implementing appropriate educational interventions” (NCSE 2014, p. 58) In their longitudinal study in 2015, the NCSE also indicated that many teachers lacked the skills, knowledge and understanding that is needed to offer effective curricular access for students with SEN (NCSE 2015).

The issue of CPD was raised by both Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators and this suggests that there is a concern that students from ASD special classes are not receiving adequate Guidance Counselling, and also that neither Guidance Counsellors nor Special Class Coordinators are confident enough in providing the students with a comprehensive programme. When discussing CPD needs for Guidance Counsellors in relation to working with students from ASD special classes, all three Special Class Coordinators believed that all Guidance Counsellors should have some sort of basic knowledge of ASD. Similarly, the NCSE “considers it essential that all teachers have a knowledge and understanding of students with ASD and of how general teaching principles can be applied to teaching these students” (NCSE 2015, p.8).

The NCSE provides a CPD database in relation to CPD in the area of inclusion and special educational needs delivered by different providers. Workshops and CPD training for teachers and staff of students with SENs is provided throughout the year, yet none of the Guidance Counsellors in this study had participated in any courses. Another area that was mentioned in relation to CPD for Guidance Counsellors was that of ‘anxiety’. Two of the three Special Class Coordinators spoke about anxiety being one of the most pressing issues for students with ASD and that if Guidance Counsellors were supporting students from ASD special classes they would need to upskill in this area. Leblanc et al., (2009) conducted a study which examined how the provision of autism training influenced student teachers. They discovered that even some degree of CPD can both significantly increase participants’ views and knowledge of ASD and can reduce the stress and anxiety for both teachers and students. This can be applied to Guidance Counsellors also, as findings within this study has highlighted the fear Guidance Counsellors have in working with students with ASD, as they have no knowledge of the needs the students may have.

The National Disability Authority’s (NDA) 2015 Comprehensive Employment Strategy for persons with disabilities 2015-2024, advises that the Department of Education, the NCSE and post primary schools should “work together to consider how Guidance Counsellors can effectively support students with disabilities in guiding them on further education and career options” (p.49). It also stipulates that guidance and training should be provided for Guidance Counsellors so they would have the skills to work with students with disabilities. The NDA also notes students with disabilities would learn better if individualised, person-centred supports are in place. However, the findings in this study suggest that this is not always happening. The NCSE 2014 are “calling on the Teaching Council to develop, as a matter of

priority standards in relation to the knowledge, skills, understandings and competencies that teachers require to enable students with complex SEN, including ASD, to receive an education” (NCSE 2014, p.8).

Although this study has not explored practices in special schools, literature states that there are no Guidance Counsellors allocated to special schools, so teachers here are taking on this role, like some ASD special class staff in this study do. There has been a recommendation made in the Indecon (2019) Review of Career Guidance, that a specific career guidance module for these teachers is developed as part of their teacher training. While the three Special Class Coordinators in this study have SEN qualifications, they all agree they don't have the resources or skills to adequately provide the guidance programme to the students. Perhaps if this career guidance module was implemented for teachers in special schools, then it might also be made available to Special Class Coordinators of special classes in mainstream post-primary schools. The NDA (2015) has suggested that there is a need for both Guidance Counsellors and Special School teachers to be provided with CPD in relation to providing a comprehensive guidance programme for students with disabilities. This will allow for more effective strategies to support students with ASD and increase Guidance Counsellors' knowledge and understanding of ASD which will help them to meet the needs of these students.

The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024 discussed the need to provide “better guidance on types of courses/employment opportunities that are suited to particular conditions” (p.11). Similarly, within this study, Guidance Counsellors discussed their lack of knowledge of what post-school courses were available for students with ASD. The NCSE 2015, agrees that schools need to develop outside links to specialist services and employment agencies to facilitate students transition from post-primary school to further education. The significance of providing students with a disability career advice from a younger age was discussed within the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for persons with disabilities 2015-2024 which also highlights the importance of CPD for Guidance Counsellors in this area.

5.3 The importance of staff collaboration when working with ASD students in special classes.

Under the Whole School Guidance Framework (NCGE 2017) it is stated that

“it is established policy that guidance is a whole school activity and under existing arrangements each school develops collaboratively a school guidance plan as a means of supporting the needs of its students”

(DES 2004; 4.3).

From the findings of this study there has been some collaboration between Special Class Coordinators and Guidance Counsellors in the schools where the Guidance Counsellor is timetabled into the special class. Where this is not the case there has been no collaboration on how best to provide the Guidance Plan to ASD students from special classes. The Department of Education and Skills has supported the NCGE in a pilot project in which fifteen schools will examine best practice in implementing the whole-school approach to guidance. However, the outcomes from the pilot study have not been published to date. The findings from this study suggest that there may be no collaboration between the Special Class Coordinator and the Guidance Counsellor in some schools. While Indecon (2019) identified instances of career guidance counsellors working in collaboration with the special education needs coordinator, Special Class Coordinators were not mentioned in relation to such collaborations. Similarly, within the findings of this study, the Special Class Coordinators believe that the Guidance Counsellors make no distinction between the two roles, that of special class coordinator and special education needs coordinator. This has a negative impact on collaboration, as the Guidance Counsellors within this study feel they only have to collaborate with one of these in relation to a student. Other issues emerged in the findings that hindered collaboration taking place. While participants believed collaboration to be a positive strategy in implementing the Guidance Programme, factors such as time constraints, lack of knowledge of ASD, timetable issues (staff not available to meet), allocation and roles within the school impacted collaboration negatively. In literature it is suggested that the most effective way for a student to reach their full potential is when a collaborative model of working is used (NDA 2015).

The NCSE 2014 acknowledges that there is some confusion about the purpose and role of special classes for students with ASD (NCSE 2014). Likewise, within this study, there was a lack of understanding about special classes, as two out of the six participants believed that special classes in mainstream schools had a separate allocation to the main school. When mentioned to them that this is not the case, both participants discussed the fact that they would

become more aware of what happens with the ASD students in relation to Guidance and that collaboration with the Special Class Coordinator was the best way for this to happen. This is a positive step in developing a collaborative approach to supporting ASD students when accessing the Guidance Programme.

Collaboration not only contributes to the improvement of student learning, but it also enhances the staffs' own professional development. (DES, 2016) All six participants of this study have agreed that collaborating can be of benefit to them. Similarly, the NDA (2004) argues that there must be collaboration between a variety of individuals if the needs of the individual child with special educational needs are to be met effectively. This collaboration process can help teachers learn when they work together and will help change teacher practice for the better. The NCSE 2016 supports the idea of collaboration as being an important tool in providing the best teaching and learning experience for both students and teachers.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the main subthemes that emerged from the interviews conducted in this study and examined them in the context of the literature. The researcher has been provided with insights into the accessibility of the Guidance Programme to students with ASD in special classes and a clearer impression of the perceptions of both Special Class Coordinators and Guidance Counsellors in relation to the topic. The findings demonstrate a gap in the knowledge of guidance counsellors as to how best to support students with ASD, due to a lack of CPD taken by guidance counsellors in the area of SEN. Issues still remain around inclusive practice, as all schools differ in how they provide a guidance programme. Some ASD students are still not included within the programme, as they still have no access to the guidance counsellor. This chapter also highlighted the importance of collaboration in relation to providing the best support to ASD students accessing the guidance programme. Chapter 6 will present the overall conclusions of this study with recommendations for policy and practice and will outline the researcher's personal learning from conducting this study.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide conclusions in relation to the aims and objectives of this research study. Strengths and limitations of the study will be discussed, as well as recommendations for future policy, practice and research in this area.

6.1 Overview of Key Findings

The main aim of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of both Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators in relation to the accessibility of the Guidance Programme to ASD students in special classes in main-stream post primary schools. A number of objectives were recognised so that the overall aim could be accomplished, which included: the research and review of relevant literature, the gathering of data from significant practitioners, analysing the data and highlighting the perceptions, and discussing the relevant data in relation to literature. This study used a qualitative approach, which involved six phone interviews taking place. When the data was analysed three key themes emerged which became the main focus of the study:

1. Inclusion
2. CPD needs for Guidance Counsellors
3. Collaboration

6.1.1 Inclusion

The findings of the study suggest that the inclusion of ASD students from special classes in the Guidance Programme does not always happen. Nonetheless, examples of inclusive practice included the timetabling of the Guidance Counsellor into the special class. Guidance Counsellors feel more confident when they are in the special class and are with a smaller group. They feel the student does not get enough time when they are in a class of thirty students. The literature is consistent with the opinions of the Guidance Counsellors advising that career guidance be delivered in an individually focused person-centred way. (NDA, 2014; DES, 2005) Special Class Coordinators in this study also agree that it is beneficial to students when the Guidance Counsellor comes into the special class, as they perceive the students to be more focused and less anxious. Additionally, the findings suggest, that more knowledge is needed in

relation to inclusion, and how to ensure that all students are included in the Guidance Programme. Special Class Coordinators must make decisions in the best interest of the student and in some cases these decisions are for the student not to attend guidance classes. The role of the Guidance Counsellor then falls to the Special Class Coordinator, if the Guidance Counsellor is not timetabled into the class. It is clear here that Special Class Coordinators are not qualified Guidance Counsellors and should not be taking up this role. Although, according to the Indecon Report 2019, “there is merit in policy providing enhanced opportunities for career guidance training for teachers in special needs schools” (p.15) Perhaps this policy could include special class coordinators in mainstream post-primary schools also.

6.1.2 CPD Needs for Guidance Counsellors

The findings suggest that Guidance Counsellors may have no training in working with students with ASD, but that such training would be beneficial in allowing them to gain insights in how to best support students with ASD. Special Class Coordinators also stated that CPD would help increase the Guidance Counsellors awareness of ASD. Literature has suggested that training and guidance be offered to Guidance Counsellors, so they are provided with the skills needed to work with students with disabilities. (NDA, 2014) The research also found that some students are being provided with career guidance from the Special Class Coordinators, who are not qualified Guidance Counsellors. This can have implications for both the student and the Special Class Coordinator. For example, post-school courses and the job market are constantly changing, and students can become bogged down with information. This is where the role of a qualified Guidance Counsellor is important, and the significance of providing accurate information in relation to careers and colleges to students cannot be emphasised enough. If incorrect information is given by an unqualified person, students could miss deadlines, become increasingly anxious and ultimately make an incorrect decision on the information that they are supplied with. Recommendations were made in the Indecon Report (2019) to provide appropriate training in guidance to teachers in special schools. Perhaps if a module was introduced in guidance, this could also be made accessible to Special Class Coordinators, who could then liaise with the Guidance Counsellor to allow students with ASD to access the Whole School Guidance Plan.

6.1.3 Collaboration

The findings from the research recognised that all participants agreed that collaboration is an important feature of working with students with ASD. Collaboration appears to work better when the Guidance Counsellor is timetabled into the special class. While not all schools were engaging in the collaboration process there were reasons behind this. For example, some guidance counsellors perceived the allocation for Special Classes and mainstream post-primary as separate and so felt they had no role in the special classes. Another reason why collaboration was not taking place was an overlap of the role of the Special Class Coordinator and SEN Coordinator and neither role was clearly defined. This being said, it did emerge that participants were willing to work more collaboratively together. The DES (2016) concluded that teachers must engage in collaborative practice to “improve student learning and enhance their own professional development” (p.20). The benefits of collaboration between the Guidance Counsellor and Special Class Coordinator were discussed in this research and included a deeper knowledge and understanding of how best to provide a guidance programme for students with ASD. Timetabling could be a challenge for management, but findings from this research suggest that it would be beneficial for Guidance Counsellors to have at least one class a week in the ASD special class. This would enhance the collaboration process.

6.2 Strengths and limitations of the study

The study has highlighted some of the perceptions of Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators of how students with ASD access the guidance programme. It has also demonstrated some practices that have the potential to better support students with ASD.

A key strength of this study was getting the perspective of both the Guidance Counsellor and the Special Class Coordinator, which provided a more balanced view of the accessibility of the guidance programme than it would if only one of these participant groups was interviewed. The researcher found that the use of thematic analysis allowed common themes to be identified within the interviews. This was another strength of the study, as the participants provided rich content and in-depth accounts of their perceptions of accessibility to the guidance programme. A thorough thematic analysis can create trustworthy and insightful findings. (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

A limitation to this study was that this was a small-scale study and only six participants were interviewed – three Guidance Counsellors and three Special Class Coordinators. These

participants represented different types of schools also, so there are issues in relation to applying the results of the study to the wider population (generalisability) (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Another limitation was that interviews were conducted over the phone as opposed to face-to-face, due to the Covid 19 epidemic. This restricted the researcher in observing participants body language and facial expressions, which may have had an impact on the interview. Nonetheless, the interviews went well, and I ensured to ask questions to clarify points of information throughout, to mitigate the limitation. While a lot of rich data and information was gathered from the two stakeholders interviewed, the researcher would also have liked to include the students voice within the study as they are the absolute key stakeholders. Time restraints and ethical considerations impeded this. Further research on the student perspective of the accessibility of the Guidance Programme could address this limitation.

6.3 Recommendations

If students with ASD have access to the guidance programme it may enhance their knowledge and skills and aid in their personal, educational and career development (Indecon 2019). To ensure all students with ASD in Special classes have access to the guidance programme, and resulting from the findings of this study the following are recommendations for policy, guidance practice and future research:

1. To timetable Guidance Counsellors into ASD special classes at least once a week.
2. To raise awareness amongst Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators about supports, education and career options available to students with ASD when they complete post-primary school.
3. To ensure Guidance Counsellors partake in CPD in relation to Autistic Spectrum Disorder and Special Educational Needs, so they can provide the best support to these students.
4. That the Teaching Council ensures that a module in career guidance is made available for Special Class Coordinators to help further their knowledge in this area.
5. That school management ensures collaboration takes place between the Guidance Counsellor and the Special Class Coordinator, so guidance planning for students with ASD can take place.
6. That further studies be conducted in relation to ASD special classes and the guidance programme to help bridge the gap in literature and identify 'best practice'. Bringing in

the voices of students with ASD would be essential in informing policy about best practice.

6.4 Reflection on Personal Learning

Before conducting this study, the researcher had some preconceptions about the accessibility of the guidance programme to students with ASD in special classes. This was based on experiences of working as an SNA for fifteen years, then a teacher and finally a student guidance counsellor. The researcher believed that no students with ASD in special classes were accessing the guidance programme in schools. However, through this study the researcher discovered that this was not the case, and that some schools actually timetable the Guidance Counsellor into the special class. Throughout the study the researcher kept an awareness of this personal bias, and to ensure the data gathered would not be influenced the Braun and Clarke (2006) six phase model was followed.

When conducting the interviews, the researcher personally felt that face-to-face interviews would have been a better option. It is more difficult to get an overall picture of what a person is trying to say when their facial expressions are not accompanying their words.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter provides a conclusion to the research study. The chapter provided an overview of the findings and also addressed the strengths and limitations of the study. A number of recommendations for future policy, practice and research were made and the personal learning of the researcher was discussed.

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Appendices

Appendix A- Recruitment Letter (Principal)



Date:

EHS REC no.

Research title:

Dear Principal,

I am a student of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr. Petra Elftorp. I am undertaking a research study on guidance counselling provision in ASD specific special classes attached to mainstream post-primary schools.

In order to recruit participants (Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators) I would appreciate your support by disseminating the Volunteer Information Letter and Consent Form to suitable Guidance Counsellors and Special Class Coordinators. If they wish to take part in the study they can contact me directly to make arrangements.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Interviews will be audio tape recorded and the data will be destroyed after analysis according to UL guidelines.

Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to data analysis phase. The results from this research study will be reported in my final dissertation and may also be disseminated through other professional publications.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. It is important to note that the school's name and the name of the individual participants will not be used in the research and the school will not be identifiable to anyone other than those directly involved.

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

Researcher: Caroline O'Shaughnessy
Email address: 18077528@studentmail.ul.ie
Principal Investigator: Dr. Lucy Hearne
Telephone number: 061-202931
UL email address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (*need to insert EHSREC no. here when approved*). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

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

Appendix B- Information Letter (Participants)



Date:

EHS REC no. 2020_02_38_EHS (ER)

Research title: An exploration of Guidance Counsellors' and Special Class Coordinators' perceptions of the accessibility of the Whole School Guidance Programme to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in special classes in post-primary schools.

Dear Guidance Counsellor,

I am a student of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr. Petra Elftorp. I am undertaking a research study on guidance counselling provision in ASD specific special classes attached to mainstream post-primary schools.

In order to gather this information, I would appreciate if you would agree to participate in a face-to-face audio taped interview. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be held in a location agreeable to you. If a face-to-face interview is inconvenient, arrangements can also be made for a telephone or Skype interview.

The particular benefits of the study will be that it will identify current provision of guidance counselling in ASD specific special classes which can inform guidance counsellors, school management and special class co-ordinators in post-primary schools.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. It is important to note that the school's name will not be used in the research and the school will not be identifiable to anyone other than those directly involved. Participation in the study is voluntary and you can withdraw from the research at any time prior to data analysis phase. The results from this research study will be reported in my final dissertation and may also be disseminated through other professional publications.

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

Researcher: Caroline O'Shaughnessy
Phone number: 087-9385743
Email address: 18077528@studentmail.ul.ie

Supervisor: Dr. Petra Elftorp
Phone number: 0857034972
Email address: petraelftorp@live.com

Principal Investigator: Dr. Lucy Hearne
Phone number: 061-202931
Email address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

Yours sincerely,
Caroline O'Shaughnessy

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (2020_02_38_EHS (ER)). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

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

Appendix C – Participant Consent



EHSREC Approval Number: 2020_02_38_EHS (ER)

EHS RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Title of Study: “An exploration of Guidance Counsellors’ and Special Class Coordinators’ perceptions of the accessibility of the Whole School Guidance Programme to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in special classes in post-primary schools.”

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

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

This study involves audio/video recording. Please tick the appropriate box

- I am aware that my participation in this study may be recorded (audio) and I agree to this. However, if I feel uncomfortable at any time I can ask that the recording equipment be switched off. I understand that I can ask for a copy of my recording. I understand what will happen to the recordings once the study is finished.

- I do not agree to being audio recorded in this study.



After considering the above statements, I consent to my involvement in this research project.

Name: (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Investigator's Signature _____

Date: _____

Appendix D - Highlighted Themes

An example of collating the themes for the study.

we have separately.

Inclusion
 Yes - Central Role
 ↓
 All students attend mainstream
 Student dependant
 ↓ Individualised

Interviewer: Ok thank you. Does **inclusive practice** play a central role in your school? If so what types of inclusive practice are being used? If not, what types of inclusive practice is lacking?

Interviewee: Absolutely, em all our students in our special classes **bar one**, due to acute anxiety issues, **attend mainstream class**. They have varying levels of support from the special class resources. I have to say they are active members of the school community in every way any other student of our school is.

Interviewer: OK and have you received **upskilling** on inclusive education?

Interviewee: Yes through Continuing Professional Development Courses, I've also done the Postgraduate Diploma in Special Studies in Special Educational Needs. (SEN)

Interviewer: Have your students' access to Guidance Counselling in relation to the Whole School Guidance Programme? If so, how? If not, why?

Interviewee: I must say I am not aware of the whole school guidance programme in my school, but students are included in that they have **weekly one to one meetings with the Guidance Programme**.
 Weekly One to one with GC 1
 GC is timetabled into SC
 ✓ Guidance Programme Works Well +

Special Class Co-Ordinator
 ↓
 Provides guidance classes themselves

Special Class Co-Ordinator
 Provides Guidance classes themselves - Individualised + for Research.

school Guidance Counsellor and **sometimes the Guidance Counsellor works in our ASD special classes**, which is an advantage. The career guidance counsellor and school counsellor would **liaise** with me regarding these students.

Interviewer: Ok so accessing guidance works well in your school?

Interviewee: Yes for the most part - sometimes I find that when ours students hit 5th year we **set aside a class a week or maybe even two at the start of the year to research courses thoroughly because I find sometimes in the guidance classes (mainstream) there's a lot of students and their (guidance) teacher might be focusing on one or two in the class and the other guys are not really focused and it doesn't really benefit students from our class.**

Interviewer: Yes I understand. So, what types of guidance activities do you feel students within ASD specific special classes will benefit from? Personal, Career or a combination of both?

Interviewee: Although both I think that personal is really important by a huge margin and **the person giving the guidance needs at the very least, some basic theoretical grounding in autism**.

Interviewer: OK, if you don't mind I will come back to eh this in connection with CPD needs.

Interviewee: Yep no problem.

Interviewer: So who chooses what subjects the students' study? Parents, Teachers, Special Class Coordinators, Guidance Counsellors or a combination?

Interviewee: Well the students and their parents choose the subjects that the students will be studying. They do I think take on board em the advice myself and other teachers in the ASD special classes give. The advice does primarily come from me and I suppose there's very rarely any disagreement on this. Em on the few occasions there is, then the student and parent have the final say unless there are health and safety concerns. Mainstream teachers also have an input into this if they are teaching the students, but it is **rare for guidance counsellors to unless they em happen to be the mainstream teacher or teaching in the ASD special class as well.**

Interviewer: Oh I see, so the guidance counsellor wouldn't be consulted in relation to subject choice?

GC CPD
 theoretical grounding in ASD.

Guidance Programme
 ↓
 Place for GC to have input into students subject choice !!!

if down the line the student is interested in a

Appendix E - Reflective Journal

Excerpt from Reflective Journal

07/04/2020

Interview with 'Stephen' – Guidance Counsellor

Before Interview

Today I have an interview with 'Stephen'. As this is my second interview, I feel that I am a bit more confident with the procedure. I have checked over the questions, so I am less anxious, and I know what direction I want the interview to go. I also become more familiar with the questions if I look over them.

I set up a space upstairs, so I am not interrupted by the kids. I have the phone and the Surface Pro ready for recording. I would still rather have a face-to-face meeting with the people I am interviewing, as the phone seems so impersonal. With the Covid-19 lockdown, this is out of my hands. I have everything ready and the interview is in 15 mins.

After the Interview

'Stephen' was very nice, and I found he had a lot of experience as a Guidance Counsellor – 29 years. He made me feel comfortable and able to ask questions with ease.

When I was going through the questions, I realised that some of my terminology was not understood – like Special Class Coordinator and ASD. I must be mindful of this fact for future interviews, in case other participants don't quite understand. I will use the full words and not the abbreviations in future. Through using the semi-structured interview approach, I was able to rephrase the questions and clarify the information provided.

I feel that this particular interviewee provided excellent Guidance Service within the school he was working in. However, this school is only in their second year of having special classes in their school. I think the school as a whole is only learning how special classes in mainstream schools operate, and the role of the Guidance Counsellor working with students with ASD from the special classes has not been implemented yet.

Appendix F- Interview Guide for Special Class Coordinators

1. Tell me a little bit about this school – how long are you working here? How long have you run the ASD specific classrooms? What is your role on a daily basis?
2. Does inclusive practice play a central role in your school? If so what types of inclusive practice are being used? If not, what types of inclusive practice is lacking?
3. Have you received upskilling on inclusive education?
4. Have your students’ access to Guidance Counselling? If so, how? If not, why?
5. How are students being provided with Guidance Counselling in Special Classes?
6. What types of guidance activities do you feel students within ASD specific special classes will benefit from? Personal, Career or a combination of both?
7. Who chooses what subjects the students’ study? Parents, Teachers, Special class coordinators, Guidance Counsellors, or a combination?
8. What is the criteria for students with ASD from special classes to attend mainstream classes?
9. Are their classes chosen with their future in mind? (FET, HE, or work)
10. Do you believe the needs of accessing the guidance counsellor have changed over the years for students with ASD in special classes?
11. Is there collaboration between the special class coordinators and the guidance counsellors in relation to students with ASD in special classes?
12. Do you know of areas of CPD that would assist a Guidance Counsellor when working with students with ASD in special classes?
13. When transitioning from post-primary school, what are the options some of your students take? How are they supported in making such transitions?
14. What are the biggest challenges in relations to supporting the personal/educational/career progression of students in special classes?
15. In an ideal world, how would you like to see students’ in special classes being supported in terms of their personal/educational/career progression?

Appendix G - Interview Guide for Guidance Counsellors

1. Tell me a little bit about this school – how long are you working here? How long have you had ASD specific classes?
2. Does inclusive practice play a central role in your school? If so what types of inclusive practice are being used? If not, what types of inclusive practice is lacking?
3. Have you received upskilling on inclusive education?
4. Do you provide guidance counselling to students with ASD in special classes? How? Why not? Who does?
5. What are the prevalent needs of students when you first meet them?
6. Have your students access to Guidance Counselling? If so, how? If not, why?
7. How are students being provided with Guidance Counselling in Special Classes?
8. What types of guidance activities do you feel students within ASD specific special classes will benefit from? Personal, Career or a combination of both?
9. Who chooses what subjects the students' study? Parents, Teachers, Special class coordinators, Guidance Counsellors, or a combination?
10. What is the criteria for students with ASD from special classes to attend mainstream classes?
11. Are their classes chosen with their future in mind? (FET, HE, or work)
12. Do you believe the needs of accessing the guidance counsellor have changed over the years for students with ASD in special classes?
13. Is there collaboration between the special class coordinators and the guidance counsellors in relation to students with ASD in special classes?
14. Do you know of areas of CPD that would assist a Guidance Counsellor when working with students with ASD in special classes?
15. When transitioning from post-primary school, what are the options some of your students take? How are they supported in making such transitions?
16. What are the biggest challenges in relations to supporting the personal/educational/career progression of students in special classes?
17. In an ideal world, how would you like to see students' in special classes being supported in terms of their personal/educational/career progression?