



A case study of a Student Support Team in a Post Primary
School and its role in the provision of a Whole School
Guidance Programme

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DECLARATION

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

Signature

Eileen O'Toole

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Glossary

ACCS	Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
BOM	Board of Management
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CSPE	Civic, Social and Political Education
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DEIS	Delivering equality of opportunity in schools
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IAPCE	Irish Association of Pastoral Care in Education
IGC	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
NACPE	National Association for Pastoral Care in Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
NICE	Network for Innovation in Career Guidance and Counselling in Europe
PE	Physical Education
SEL	Social and Emotional Learning
SPHE	Social, Personal and Health Education
SST	Student Support Team
TUSLA	Child and Family Agency
UL	University of Limerick
WSG	Whole School Guidance

Abstract

The overall aim of this case study was to investigate the nature, scope and function of a Student Support Team in a rural Irish post-primary school and its role in the provision of a Whole School Guidance Programme (DES 2014; DES 2017). This investigation took the form of a single case study that examined the phenomenon of a Student Support Team from the perspective and experience of its members (Yin 2009). In recent years, the personal, social and emotional wellbeing of students has become a priority and this case study is set against a backdrop of national policy and practice (DES 2013; DES 2018; NEPS 2010).

Following a review of literature, an interpretivist paradigm was employed using semi-structured interviews to gather data from six members of the Student Support Team including Guidance Counsellors, a deputy principal and teachers (Cohen et al. 2011). The data was coded and analysed using a six-step thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke 2013).

The research findings identify that the Student Support Team plays an integral role in the Whole School Guidance framework. However, the delivery of a Whole School Guidance programme in a post primary school requires a high level of commitment from senior management and understanding from the wider school community. The findings also highlight the need for a more structured approach to the formation and execution of a Student Support Team. The team primarily supports a small cohort of vulnerable students. Team members require ongoing and relevant Continuous Professional Development to meet the requirements of these students. Finally, a number of recommendations are put forward to inform policy, practice and research.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the research study within the context of relevant policy and practice. It provides a justification for the study and the positionality of the researcher. It outlines the research methodology used, the aims and objectives of the research project as well as a structure for this thesis.

1.1 Context and justification for the research study

The central aim of this research study is to explore the nature, scope and function of a Student Support Team (known as a Care Team or Pastoral Care Team in some schools) in the context of a large Irish rural post primary school and its role in the provision of a Whole School Guidance Programme.

In the last decade, increased awareness has arisen regarding how we respond to and support young people's mental health (Dooley et al., 2019). As such, secondary schools should have "well established systems and processes for promoting the personal, social and emotional wellbeing of their students" (NICE 2009, p.36). Moreover, the holistic development of students, that is the moral, social and emotional development is given priority in recent policy documentation (O'Flaherty & McCormack 2019).

In 2018, the Department of Education and Skills published a wellbeing policy statement and framework for practice with an aim "to promote wellbeing in our school communities to support success in school and life" (DES 2018, p.1). Planning and coherent policy at a whole school level is needed to ensure the successful delivery of wellbeing promotion in schools (DES 2013).

Within this framework, it is expected that the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines will be the focus for implementation. Support structures such as Student Support Teams are central to the success of a whole school approach to wellbeing in post primary schools. The guidelines regarding the establishment of a Student Support Team in post primary schools prepared by the National Educational Psychological Service in 2014 clearly state the area is in "ongoing development...and the document is an evolving one that will need adaption in the light of

future new perspectives and needs of individual schools” (DES 2014, p.3). No further guidelines or recommendations have been produced by the Department of Education and Skills and it would seem that Student Support Teams are organised in an ad-hoc manner in post primary schools. It was in this context the researcher chose to carry out a single site case study of the Student Support Team in a large Irish rural post primary school. This study will explore and examine the complexity and challenges faced by a Student Support Team in a post primary school.

1.2 Positionality of the Researcher

Reflexivity is a process of self-evaluation of a researcher’s positionality and this may affect the research process (Bryman 2016). The researcher, a trainee guidance counsellor, was asked to attend Student Support Team meetings as part of the practicum placement. This instilled an interest in the support structures in a post primary school and how the Student Support Team plays a part of the Whole School Guidance programme. The researcher endeavoured, throughout the study, to apply rigorous reflexivity to ensure validity of the research and this will be outlined in the Methodology chapter. (Thomas 2017).

1.3 Research Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of this case study was to explore the nature, scope and function of a Student Support Team within a large Irish rural post primary school from the perspectives of its members with specific consideration to its role in the Whole School Guidance Programme. The research questions were focused on the perceptions, challenges and experiences as experienced and expressed by members of the Student Support Team.

The research aim was accomplished by fulfilling the following key objectives:

- 1) Review relevant literature in relation to policy, practice and emerging literature relating to the research topic to provide context to the study.
- 2) Use qualitative research methods in the form of six semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences and perceptions of members of the Student Support Team.
- 3) Draw conclusions and identify recommendations for future practice, policy and research in the context of this case study.

1.4 Research Methodology

The researcher was informed by the interpretivist paradigm to conduct this research. Data was collected using semi-structured face-to face audio recorded interviews with six members of the Student Support Team including Guidance Counsellors, deputy-principal and teachers. This was executed in the form of six semi-structured face to face interviews which were 30 to 40 minutes duration and were transcribed and anonymised. Data collection was coded and analysed applying a six step thematic data analysis method (Braun & Clarke 2013).

1.5 Thesis Structure

The structure of the thesis is as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduces the research topic, outlines the context and justification for the case study and presents the positionality of the researcher within the study. It also describes the research methodology used in the study and the aims and objectives of the research project as well as providing a structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the relevant literature on the topic to provide a background to the study. The literature review is presented in three main sections. The first section looks at adolescent development and mental health. The second section examines the historical development of Student Support Teams. The third section examines policy infrastructure and the Whole School Guidance framework.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes the research questions, outlines the rationale behind the selection of the interpretivist paradigm and considers research methodology. The research design frame, sampling of participants, methods of data collection and analysis, validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethical considerations are also addressed.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter distils the findings from the primary data collected and outlines the overarching themes that emerged from thematic analysis of the investigation in the case school.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter synthesises and discusses the primary findings in the context of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. It presents the supports and challenges for the Student Support Team in the case school.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter concludes this research study providing a brief overview of the findings within the context of the aim and objectives of this case study. It outlines the strengths and limitations of the case and presents recommendations for future policy, practice and research. Finally, it discusses the researcher's reflexivity.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter provides an introduction to this research study. It sets out the theoretical context and justification for this research study from relevant literature and presents the position of the researcher in the study. It also outlines the research methodology used, the aims and objectives of the research project and provides a structure for the thesis. The next chapter will review relevant literature related to the research topic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Much has been written on the theme of Student Support Teams in post primary schools in the last fifty years. This literature review establishes the theoretical framework in undertaking this single case study. The review will provide the broader context in relation to an existing Student Support Team in one Irish post primary school. This chapter is divided into three thematic sections. Firstly, the review examines adolescent development and adolescent mental health. Secondly, it examines the historical development of Student Support Teams. The third section scrutinises the policy infrastructure regarding Whole School Guidance and partnership approach through the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

2.1 Adolescent Development and Adolescent Mental Health

This section examines adolescent development and adolescent mental health with particular emphasis on post primary students ranging in age between 13 and 18 years.

2.1.1 Adolescent Development

The important emotional bond that exists between a child and a caregiver forms the basis of attachment theory formulated by John Bowlby, a British psychologist after World War II (Bowlby 2005). According to him, a child must experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with the primary caregiver to grow up having good mental health (Hornor 2019). In adolescence, the form of attachment changes, teenagers on the one hand want to establish autonomy and on the other maintain their relationship with the parent. From a stage development perspective, according to Erikson (1963) adolescents are pre-dominantly in the ‘Identity versus Role Confusion’ stage of development. Michael Marland’s seminal book ‘Pastoral Care’ refers to this crisis of identity in the adolescent, he states “what do I want to make of myself and what do I have to work with is the core of the pastoral need” (Marland 1974, p.2; Best 2014).

Ideally, the student should emerge from this stage with a strong sense of self and no confusion about their identity (Erikson 1963). Post primary students are generally aged between 13 and 18 years and this is a crucial, vulnerable and important stage of development when teenagers begin to form their own identity and create meaningful relationships. Adolescents make decisions or choices regarding various life domains, the combination of overcoming crises and making choices leads to self-identity (Hurrelmann & Hamilton 1996).

Unfortunately, many adolescents find this developmental stage challenging particularly if they are challenged by their own life events which can have profound effects on many areas of their development. Similarly, Jean Piaget hypothesised that teenagers were active agents in their own development, and they go through different stages; adolescents go through the fourth stage, formal operations which develops from age 12 onwards (Boyd & Bee 2012). Piaget believed that adolescents learn to think logically about abstract concepts. He believed that the “formal thought” stage of cognitive development can bring adolescents into conflict with parents and teachers and described adolescence as a time of mild turmoil (Sharf 2013).

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky did not concur with Piaget and believed that complex forms of thinking came from social interactions, usually with an adult who structures and guides the student’s learning experience in what he named ‘the zone of proximal development’ (Boyd & Bee 2012). His theory implies that the school setting is crucial for adolescence development and his theory is backed up by the presence of one good adult being important to a young person’s wellbeing and mental health (Dooley et al. 2019).

Urie Bronfenbrenners’s ecological model of human development stresses the importance of the role played by environmental factors in individual development. He categorises these environments into three layers of influence, the microsystem, ecosystem and macrosystem (Boyd & Bee 2012). The innermost circle, the microsystem has the most influence on the individual, it includes the student’s family, friends, school and community. Students are social beings and in order to thrive need healthy relationships and school has a very important role to play for the developing adolescent. “Young people’s lives and their wellbeing are influenced by educational systems” (Dooley et al. 2019, p.3).

Students who have experienced developmental trauma are known to have increased absenteeism, difficulty adjusting to school life and lower academic achievement (Treisman

2016). As noted in Ainsworth & Bowlby (1991), attachment issues can lead to substance abuse, eating disorders and early sexual activity. Similarly, any form of neglect during childhood can lead to trust issues, anger outbursts and lack of personal responsibility (Gordon 2013). This may lead to acting-out behaviours such as defiance, verbal abuse, angry outbursts or indeed acting-in behaviours such as extreme shyness, low mood, anxious or withdrawn (NEPS 2010b). Social and emotional problems can manifest themselves in inappropriate behaviour in school (Best 2008). Conversely, if the original attachment is strong then the adolescent will be more mature, socially skilled and able for challenges.

The social and emotional development of adolescents can influence their optimism, satisfaction with life, self-regulation and general self-concept and these attributes when present contribute to responsible decision-making, self-awareness, perseverance, assertiveness, citizenship and social responsibility (Oberle et al. 2018).

These indicators reflect adolescents' social and emotional development and wellbeing as a marker of positive mental health, resilience and thriving during teenage years and sets the stage for positive developmental trajectories throughout adolescence and success in school and life (Thomson et al. 2015).

2.1.2 Adolescent Mental Health

There exists a substantial amount of literature regarding post primary students' mental health. A recent in-depth study of 19,000 young Irish people discovered that teachers are the most common source of formal support accessed by adolescents for information about mental health and wellbeing (Dooley et al. 2019). Schools are increasingly regarded as suitable locations for mental health promotion and teachers are expected to respond to a wide range of student needs but do not receive adequate training to equip them with suitable responses to such needs (Graham et al. 2011). A study carried out of teachers in England using in-depth interviews confirmed that teachers felt there was an expectation of them not only to act as educators but also as mental health professionals (Rothi et al. 2007).

The prevalence of mental health disorders amongst adolescents is an increasing global problem and interventions for mental health promotion in schools have varying degrees of success (O'Reilly et al. 2018). There is a clear need for further work to be done in the field of

mental health promotion in our student population. Emotional regulation, resilience, and psychological flexibility combine to reduce issues of mental health and increase wellbeing. According to Morrish et al. (2018), it remains to be seen if exposure to positive education programmes can improve emotional regulation abilities. A study of 357 adolescents in five Norwegian post primary schools found that coping skills aimed to promote wellbeing had positive effects on their mental health (Bjornsen et al. 2018). Schools have a crucial role in fostering student’s cognitive development but should engage their social and emotional development as well (Corcoran, et al. 2018).

There is both national and international evidence to suggest that improving social and emotional learning (SEL) allows students to connect with others and learn in a more effective way thereby increasing their chances of success both in school and later life.

(Corcoran et al. 2018, p.56)

2.2 Historical development of Student Support Teams

This second section will address the historical development of ‘Pastoral Care’ and Student Support Teams in Britain and in Ireland.

2.2.1 Historical development of Student Support Team in secondary schools

‘Pastoral Care’ is a British concept and has been written about since the 1970’s in books such as Michael Marland’s *Pastoral Care* (1974) and Douglas Hamblin’s *The Teacher and Pastoral Care* (1978). The National Association for Pastoral Care in Education (NAPCE) was founded at Warwick University, England in 1982 (NAPCE 2019). Its aim was to establish links between education professionals and agencies who have an interest in pastoral care and personal-social education and the welfare of students of all ages in schools (NCGE 2019). There was a shift from a fragmented approach to pastoral care to a more integrated whole school approach (Marland 1992).

There was a time when pastoral care was somewhat limited.....it is now proactive and overlaps with whole-school curriculum planning. Indeed, the overarching legislative requirement that “prepares pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life” has proved another stimulus for schools to plan the link between pastoral care and the curriculum.

(Marland 1992, p.24)

In Ireland at this time, the context for pastoral care was in flux and education policy at national level largely because of a human capital focus marginalised pastoral care and personal-social education (Best 1995). The Irish Association of Pastoral Care in Education (IAPCE) was launched in April 1996 by Luke Monahan, a key author on the subject of Pastoral Care in Ireland. He and a group of teachers had attended NAPCE conferences in the 1990s, they were committed to the wellbeing of students in Ireland and established the organisation, the first of its kind in Ireland (Best 2008). IAPCE published books, organised conferences, facilitated courses in the areas of bereavement, suicide, student leadership and parental involvement in education. Thanks to the work of the IAPCE, there is a greater appreciation of the pastoral care approach in supporting “teaching, learning, ethos, identity, behaviour and performance and it is seen as a key element in the development of the whole person of the student” (Monahan 2006, p.2).

2.3 Whole School Guidance Programme

This section will examine the background of the whole school guidance approach in the Irish secondary education system. It will examine policy relevant to whole school guidance with particular emphasis on policy relating to Student Support Teams including referral pathways and confidentiality.

2.3.1 Whole School Guidance Approach

The Department of Education established guidance counselling in Irish second-level schools in 1966 in response to rapid industrialisation that took place in the 1960’s and a reduction in emigration (McCoy et al. 2006). Up until 1983 a full time Guidance Counsellor was allocated to schools with more than 250 students (McCoy et al. 2006). This threshold was raised to 500 students in 1983 with no provision made for schools with less students (IGC 2012; Leahy et al. 2017). In 1991, 0.5 of a whole time Guidance position, otherwise known as an ex quota post, was allocated to schools in the 350-499 enrolment category but the Institute of Guidance Counsellors reported considerable variation in provision of guidance across school types (Hearne et al. 2016). The Education Act stipulated the provision of guidance in schools to “ensure students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in

their educational and career choices and promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students” (Government of Ireland 1998, Section 9). The National Centre for Guidance in Education argued that the vagueness of the term “appropriate guidance” led to a wide variation of the Guidance Counselling services in schools (NCGE 2004). Radical policy changes in Budget 2012 led to the removal of the ex-quota allocation provision and guidance counsellors had to share their time between guidance counselling and subject teaching (DES 2012). School Management can allocate guidance counselling resources at their discretion in order to meet the statutory requirements as stipulated by the Education Act (Government of Ireland 1998). A common theme emerging from policy discourse is the provision of guidance counselling as a whole school responsibility to be implemented in a collaborative approach (IGC 2008). Delivery of a guidance programme involves a range of stakeholders including Guidance Counsellors, school staff, parents and students (Hearne & Galvin 2014; Leahy et al. 2017).

The Whole School Guidance Framework’s aim was to “support schools in the planning and provision of a whole school approach to guidance” (NCGE 2017, p.3). The framework sets out three areas of learning to facilitate post primary students’ development: personal/social, educational and career development. Personal and social development encompasses skills crucial to students’ overall health and wellbeing. Educational development includes areas such as subject choice and level, study skills, psychometric testing and course information. Career development includes career research and information, and vocational education and training. This holistic and integrated approach to guidance counselling provision has been promoted in Ireland for the last forty years (Hearne et al. 2016). The reallocation of guidance hours in schools arising from Budget 2012 resulted in an “ad-hoc and disjointed response from schools in meeting their statutory requirement to provide an appropriate and comprehensive guidance counselling service to post primary students” (Hearne et al. 2016, p.23). The provision of guidance counselling is at the discretion of school management and although the Department of Education has introduced policies to address wellbeing and mental health amongst students and places Guidance Counsellors as a core resource for wellbeing provision (DES 2013; NCCA 2017), it has reduced guidance resources (Hearne & Galvin 2014; Leahy et al. 2017). Personal one-to-one meetings with students is an important part of the Whole School Guidance programme to help students with decision-making, coping mechanisms and problem-solving skills. It also requires the guidance counsellor to carry out personal counselling for students experiencing difficulties in

their personal or school life and at times the guidance counsellor needs to refer to outside agencies. Additionally, it is recommended that the role includes involvement in guidelines for wellbeing, suicide prevention, Student Support Team, timetabled classes, providing support to teachers and students and acting as a contact point for outside agencies and parents (DES 2013; DES 2014; NCCA 2017). There is no doubt that the guidance counsellor's role in a post primary school is varied and challenging, notwithstanding there is a lack of clear understanding of the roles, functions and outcomes of a whole school approach to guidance counselling (Hearne & Galvin 2014).

2.3.2 Policy Infrastructure

One of the main goals of the Action Plan for Education is to increase the resources and improve the services that promote wellbeing in post primary schools which in turn lead to success in school and life (DES 2019). Secondary schools have a clear role to play in promoting personal, social and emotional wellbeing amongst its student body (Indecon 2019). The successful delivery of a wellbeing programme in a school is dependent on coherent policy and planning at a whole school level. "Whole child education or holistic development has been interpreted in a variety of ways and reflects the discourse of moral, social and emotional development" (Tam 2002 cited in O'Flaherty & McCormack 2019, p.124). However, Irish post primary schools embody a tradition of study and book learning in preparation for one final exam and leaves little room for a holistic developmental approach (O'Flaherty & McCormack 2019). "Therefore, wellbeing and positive mental health are important resources for students and teachers in rapidly changing social contexts" (O'Flaherty & McCormack 2019, p.124).

The four areas of wellbeing promotion in a whole school approach are:

1. Culture and Environment
2. Curriculum
3. Policy and Planning
4. Relationships and Partnerships (DES 2017; NCCA 2017)

The development of structures such as reflective practices, School Self Evaluation and Student Support Teams will help schools examine their own systems from within (DES 2018).

The School Support Team sometimes known as a care team or pastoral care team falls into the fourth category which concerns itself with student and staff relationships, peer relationships, student voice and external support. Teachers should have an awareness of wellbeing and should listen to students and refer the student internally to the Student Support Team, they in turn can decide if the student needs to be referred to an outside agency (DES 2018). “At post primary level, the Whole School Guidance Plan sets out how Student Support Teams will operate” (DES 2018, p.36).

In accordance with the NCGE whole school guidance framework, the Whole School Guidance programme aims to meet the needs of students along a continuum ranging from group to individuals “guidance for all, guidance for some, guidance for a few (NCGE 2017, p.14).

Support for all provides for general needs to students in the classroom through the guise of SPHE classes; support for a few deals with more complex needs and Student Support Teams usually operate at guidance or support for a few (DES 2019).

According to the Department of Education and Skills (2014), a Student Support Team is “part of the student support system in the school and encompasses a range of supports that cater for the learning, social, emotional and behavioural needs of students” (DES 2014, p.6).

The membership of a Team can vary but usually includes:

- Coordinator (member of management either principal or vice-principal)
- Guidance Counsellor
- Social Personal Health Education (SPHE) co-ordinator
- Special Education Needs (SEN) Co-ordinator

- Year Head (if deemed necessary)

Other members of the team where these posts exist will be:

- Chaplin
- School Completion Officer
- Home School Community Liaison teacher (HSCLT)
- Behaviour Support Teacher

Depending on the school, the principal appoints a senior member of staff or the Guidance Counsellor to co-ordinate the Student Support Team (DES 2014). The co-ordinator is tasked with organising and preparing for weekly meetings, liaising with participants, circulation of documents, allocation of tasks to attendees or making appropriate referrals, keeping staff informed of decisions and developing criteria for monitoring the operation of the Student Support Team (DES 2014). It is made clear that the welfare of the student is of the utmost importance and that their wellbeing is supported, this is in line with pastoral care ethos which endeavours to value and develop the young person at every level (Monahan 1996; NCCA 2017).

2.3.3 Referral Procedure

Again, depending on the school, referrals may be verbal to a team member or more formal using a referral from teachers, year heads or management. Students who have been identified by external services or parents/guardians may be referred through senior management (DES 2014).

Schools that are part of the School Support Programme action plan are referred to as DEIS schools 'Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (Dooley et al. 2019). In these schools, the Home School Community Liaison Teacher, the School Completion Officer or a teacher from the Behaviour Support class (National Behaviour Support Service) may have concerns about particular students (DES 2014).

2.3.4 Confidentiality

The role of a student support team involves processing personal and highly confidential information regarding students. Members must comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) which took effect across Europe in May 2018. The seven principles are as follows:

1. Data must be obtained fairly with the consent of the student and where relevant their parents or guardians
2. Data can only be obtained for a specific purpose
3. Data can only be obtained by a minimum range of processing and a team member should only disclose a minimum of data required by third parties.
4. Data must be accurate and up to date
5. Data should only be kept as long as necessary and student records must only be retained for a minimum of seven years after the student has left school.
6. Data must be kept safe and secure at all times.
7. The Co-Ordinator must demonstrate responsibility and accountability towards the personal data for which they are responsible.

(Jones 2018)

As well as GDPR issues, it is important to strike a balance between keeping staff members informed about particular students and unnecessarily disclosing personal information. The interpretation of a 'need to know basis' can vary from person to person or school to school. Issues of neglect or abuse that arise should be followed up by the Designated Liaison Person, usually the principal, and procedures pertaining to the Children First Act (TUSLA 2017).

2.3.5 Outside Referral

Some incidents for students may arise that require more intense and/or long-term support which may involve referral to specialist services. Early identification and intervention are key to ensure the best outcomes (DES 2014). The Student Support Team plays an important role in addressing any difficulties. These problems can be handled by providing in-school interventions or referring out to specialist services such as the designated school psychologist from the National Educational Psychological Service NEPS (DES 2018), TUSLA Child and Family Agency or the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).

2.4 Conclusion

This literature review has revealed key issues in the area of Student Support Teams and their role in Whole School Guidance. These issues include adolescent development and mental health and the role of secondary school in young people's personal development. Pastoral care has been in existence for over fifty years and the delivery in the guise of a Student Support Team in a post primary school depends on the school culture, ethos, policy and approach to Whole School Guidance. The following chapter will outline the methodology underpinning the research study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology underpinning the research project including the underlying research questions, research paradigm and case study design frame. It also addresses access and sampling, data collection method, validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethical issues.

3.1 Research Questions

The formulation of research questions can be challenging for the researcher and the research design (Bryman 2016) but is crucial in selecting a suitable methodology (Blaxter et al. 2010). Furthermore, they form the basis for planning and executing a successful research project (Merriam & Tisdell 2016).

The research questions that guided this study evolved from several issues identified in the literature review and the researcher's own professional experience as a member of a Student Support Team in a post primary school. The primary overarching research question was:

What is the nature, scope and function of a Student Support Team in a post-primary school and its role in the provision of a Whole School Guidance Programme?

In addition, two secondary research questions were asked:

- 1. What are the perceptions of the team members of the nature, scope, function opportunities and challenges of a Student Support Team?*
- 2. What role does the Student Support Team have in the Whole School Guidance Programme?*

The investigation of these research questions was addressed through a single site case study design frame.

3.2 Research Paradigm: Interpretivism

A paradigm is a conceptual framework within which theories are constructed and practices take place (Braun & Clarke 2013). Positivist and interpretivist are the underlying paradigms of quantitative and qualitative research. A positivist theoretical framework assumes the world exists and can be observed and measured scientifically without bias. An interpretivist

orientation recognises that there are multiple perspectives of reality not just one perspective put forward by positivism (Hennick et al. 2011). Furthermore, the interpretivist paradigm involves the inherent subjectivity of the participants and their experience (Hennick et al. 2011).

In setting out a framework for research practice, methodology relies on ontology and epistemology. Ontology refers to the study of being and is concerned with the relationships between the world and our human understanding (Braun & Clarke 2013). Epistemology is the nature and theory of knowledge and epistemological assumptions examine how knowledge is obtained and communicated (Cohen et al. 2011). Paradigms outline differing ontological and epistemological assumptions, and these can be found in the methodology and research methods in a study.

The researcher's approach to study was to use relativist ontology and emic epistemology and to follow an interpretive/qualitative model for approaching this research. The methodology will be a phenomenological study using semi-structured interviews (Killam 2013).

Qualitative or interpretivist research is "conducted in naturalistic settings that generate data largely from observations and interviews" (Thomas 2017, p.31). This approach will allow the researcher to gather in-depth information on the nature, scope and function of a Student Support Team from the perspective of its members within one school site.

It will also allow the researcher to develop an understanding of the research participants and interpret their experiences of being members of a Student Support Team and what is meaningful to them in the context of the questions being asked during interviews (McLeod 2013). The researcher hopes to use their insight to understand the responses and motivations of the interviewees. In this instance, the researcher will be more subjective than objective and will use their insights to understand the attitudes and experiences of the participants.

3.3 Qualitative Approach

Bryman (2016) attests that qualitative research deals with the why and how of decision-making as opposed to the what, where and when of quantitative research. A qualitative investigation endeavours to understand individuals' perceptions of the world, it seeks insights (Bell 2005). The researcher observes the thoughts, feelings and actions of the participants to

gain an insight into their viewpoints (Thomas 2017). Basit (2010) posits that the aim of qualitative methodology is to achieve depth not breadth.

The aim of this research was to gain an understanding of the purpose and structure of a Student Support Team from the perspective of its members; therefore, a qualitative approach was best suited to this inquiry.

3.4 Research Design Frame: Case Study

The three dominant methodologies in educational and guidance research are action research, case study research and evaluation research (Hearne 2013). There are many definitions of case study. Bryman attests “the basic case study entails the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case” (Bryman 2016, p.64). Yin suggests it is an “in-depth exploration of multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project policy, institution program or system in a real-life context” (Yin 2009 p. 18). With a case study, the researcher aims to reveal the unique features of the case, this is known as an idiographic approach (Bryman 2016). The advantage of using a case study design in this project was the structure enabled the interviewees to be open about their experiences and viewpoints and “feel safe enough to make the maximum contribution to knowledge and understanding” (Hearne 2013, p.5).

This allowed the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the participants’ perceptions while remaining unbiased and critically reflexive throughout the process (McLeod 2015).

3.4.1 Methods

Different data collection methods were considered for this case study such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

3.4.2 Focus groups

Focus groups are discussions about a particular subject in a group led by a facilitator (Silverman 2013). Unlike semi-structured interviews, they are not as time-consuming for the researcher and can facilitate disclosure about issues little is known about (Braun & Clarke

2013). Focus groups have limitations in that they are logistically difficult to organise and they can easily go ‘off topic’ and do not allow in-depth follow-up of individuals’ views or experiences (Braun & Clarke 2013). This case study is concerned with a small sample and needs to allow an in-depth investigation of the views and experiences of the participants therefore the researcher decided not to use focus groups for this study.

3.4.3 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interview is the format of interviewing most used by researchers (Thomas 2017). This type of interview was chosen because the researcher did not want to be too rigid during the interview process as valuable information can be lost. The researcher can change the order of the questions and they can be open-ended which allows flexibility, thus allowing participants to explore issues as they occur during the interviews (Bell 2010). “There is scope for the participants to raise issues that the researcher has not anticipated” (Braun & Clarke 2013, p.78).

There are limitations to semi-structured interviews, they can be time-consuming for both participants and researchers and lack breadth because of the small sample size as well as lacking anonymity which may be off-putting for some participants (Braun & Clarke 2013).

There is also a risk of researcher bias when conducting the interviews (Bell 2010). As a safeguard against bias, the researcher needed to be aware of positionality and kept a journal using Driscoll’s reflective model to record thoughts and observations while conducting interviews and analysing responses (Bassot 2013).

3.4.4 Access and Sampling of Participants

Members of a Student Support Team within a rural post-primary school took part in this single case study. The school has a mixed gender enrolment with over one thousand students and two full time qualified guidance counsellors employed on staff. Following ethical approval from the University of Limerick in Spring 2020, the gatekeeper, in this instance the school principal was sent an information sheet and consent from (Appendices B & C). Written consent was provided by the principal to undertake the case study in the school and six members of the Student Support Team were sent information sheets and consent

forms (Appendices A & D). The six participants, an equal gender mix of three males and three females, were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Participants Pseudonyms	Gender	Professional Role	Years of School Experience	Years in Student Support Team
Gary	M	Post-Primary Teacher	12	5
Isabel	F	Deputy-Principal	22	8
Liz	F	Guidance Counsellor	18	10
Ada	F	Post-Primary Teacher	26	1
Larry	M	Guidance Counsellor	17	1
Victor	M	Guidance Counsellor	9	3

Table 3.1 Profile of participants in research study

The gathering of data involved six semi-structured interviews which took place in June 2020 at a time convenient to the participants. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher after each interview. The duration of the interviews was between 30 and 40 minutes and below are some examples of the questions asked of the participants:

What is your understanding of what a Student Support Team is and how do you perceive its role and function in the school?

What structures and strategies are in place to support the work of the Student Support Team?

Do you think the school's wellbeing programme plays an important role in student's personal development?

What is your understanding, if any, of the 'Whole School Approach' to guidance counselling?

In your opinion, what role does the Student Support Team play in the 'Whole School Guidance'?

(Appendix F)

3.5 Data Analysis Strategy

“Qualitative data analysis involves organising, accounting for and explaining the data; in short making sense of data in terms of the participants' definitions of the situation, noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities” (Cohen et al. 2007, p.461). After the fieldwork took place, the data from the semi-structured interviews was transcribed immediately by the researcher and stored in a password protected file until ready to carry out analysis.

Participants were anonymised using pseudonyms and any identifying information was removed. The constant comparative method was utilised by the researcher to perform data analysis and meaning making (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). This involves moving back and forth over the data repeatedly comparing elements with other gathered data (Thomas 2017). During this process, the researcher identified emerging themes and patterns and used coding to identify and note aspects that related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke 2013).

The researcher coded and analysed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2013) six phase Thematic Data Analysis Framework:

1. *Familiarisation with the data*
2. *Generating initial codes*
3. *Search for themes*
4. *Review of themes*

5. *Definition and naming of themes*

6. *Writing of report*

(Braun & Clarke 2013)

3.6 Validity and Reliability

Research has its value and trustworthiness assessed on two criteria, validity and reliability (Thomas, 2017). In a qualitative case study using semi-structured interviews, the researcher becomes the instrument and their investment and effort gives the inquiry credibility (Patton 2015). Validity is essentially whether research actually shows what it claims to show (Braun & Clarke 2013). It must also demonstrate to the reader that the researcher can be trusted, and the results are truthful (Savin-Baden & Major 2013). In this case study, the researcher wanted to investigate the nature, scope and function of a Student Support Team in a post-primary school. The researcher carried out a pilot interview with a trainee guidance counsellor working in the school to test the questions and make any adjustments before carrying out the real interviews.

Pilot interviews are crucial for trying out questions, not only do you get some practice in interviewing, but you learn which questions are confusing and need rewording and which questions yield useless data.

(Merriam and Tisdell 2016, p.117)

As the researcher proceeded with each interview, a reflection process was adhered to which helped yield a deeper understanding of what was held in the data. This enhanced the validity of the process as well as carrying out an accuracy check with the respondents (Silverman 2014).

Reliability is about the repeatability of the data gathering procedure, it produces the same result for a person each time it is used (Coaley 2010). Braun and Clarke (2013, p.335) define reliability as “the extent to which the results generated could be generated again”.

Information gathered depends on how skilled the researcher is at accessing it and who is giving it, therefore achieving reliability in the traditional sense is impossible (Merriam & Tisdell 2016). Interviews can yield varying results on different days as the data depends on people and multiple realities can co-exist. Thomas (2017) believes reliability is irrelevant as a measure for assessing the rigor of a qualitative study. Replication of a study would not yield the same results, but this does not negate the results. Several interpretations of the same data

can be made but if findings are consistent with the data provided, the study can be considered dependable (Merriam & Tisdell 2016).

3.7 Reflexivity

The importance of reflexivity was a central aspect of this case study. It is incumbent on the researcher to be reflexive “to consider issues such as positionality and insider/outsider stances” (Merriam & Tisdell 2016, p. 64). The researcher must maintain some distance between the researcher and the research project (Van Hilten 2018). Interviewing fellow guidance counsellors and peers under research conditions can present challenges (Hearne 2013). “Reflexivity is essential in all qualitative research, and can be seen as part of ‘quality control’ in qualitative research”. (Braun & Clarke 2013, p. 37).

With regard to this case study, the researcher acknowledges she had to be aware of her own biases and assumptions in this area as they may have influenced her interpretation of the data. She was aware that because she was carrying out research in her placement school, she would have to be mindful of the relationships she had with the staff. The researcher had to endeavour to increase the rigor, transparency, credibility and quality of the qualitative research undertaken. She kept a reflexive research journal to record her thoughts, feelings and reflections throughout the process of the research. (Braun & Clark 2013; Bassot 2013).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Conducting research in an ethical manner ensures validity and reliability in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell 2016). Research in education must adhere to the highest of ethical standards (Cohen et al., 2011). Ethical research practice in this case study was guided by three different levels of ethical regulation; legislative, professional and personal (Cohen et al. 2011). Firstly, ethical approval was sought from the University of Limerick’s Faculty of Education and Health Sciences’ Ethics Committee for the case study including the ethics application and information and consent sheets (Appendices A,B,C,D,E). Secondly, professional codes of conduct including the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE 2008) *Research Code of Ethics* and the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC 2012) *Code of Ethics* were adhered to in the case study design. Finally, the creation of a personal ethical code is important to raise awareness of the researcher’s obligations to the participants,

protect their dignity and wellbeing and bring discipline to the researcher's work (Hearne 2013; IGC 2012).

The researcher has a duty of care to the participants in the case study who have given up their "time, energy and intellectual capacity to the process" (Hearne 2013 p. 6). Equally participants must be fully informed of any potential risk and individuals have the right to discontinue participation in research at any time (NCGE 2008).

McLeod states regarding case study research there "is a higher degree of moral risk than other methodologies" (McLeod 2010, p.54). With regard to this case study, the researcher had four main concerns, avoiding harm to the participants whose work in a Student Support Team is being exposed (Hearne 2013), informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality (IGC 2012; Thomas 2017). The researcher took extra care to manage the interviews and address boundary issues because she had a shared history with some of the research participants (Sikes & Potts 2008). Consent from the school gatekeeper and all volunteer participants was obtained. The researcher ensured the participants of anonymity during the semi-structured interview and all transcriptions were done by the researcher using pseudonyms and codes in the thesis. The data collected was stored in accordance with GDPR and the University of Limerick's GDPR policy (University of Limerick 2018). All data collected belongs to the University of Limerick and will be deleted in December 2020.

3.8 Conclusion

The focus of this chapter was to outline the primary and secondary research questions followed by an explanation of the underlying methodology employed in this case study. Topics such as research paradigm, design frame, access and sampling, method of collection, data analysis were discussed as well as examining validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethical considerations. The next chapter will explore the themes and primary findings gathered from the field work.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the primary findings of the research. The chapter is divided into four sections to represent the four themes that emerged from the data analysis.

4.1 Data Source and Themes

This chapter presents the primary findings from the research data. Confidentiality and anonymity is adhered to through the use of pseudonyms and the name of the post primary school where the research took place is not disclosed. The data was collected from six semi-structured interviews with members of a Student Support Team in a rural post primary school. The researcher identified emerging themes and patterns and then coded and analysed the data using the Braun and Clarke's (2013) six phase Thematic Data Analysis Framework. Four overarching themes emerged:

1. Members' perception of the role and function of a Student Support Team and the role of the school in students' personal development
2. Teachers response to students' personal development
3. The role of the Student Support Team in the Whole School Guidance programme
4. Structure and Strategies to support the Student Support Team

4.2 Members' perception of the role and function of a Student Support Team

The first part of this theme relates to how the members of a Student Support Team perceive the role and function of the Student Support Team. There was general agreement amongst three of the interviewees that the role was to "*identify and help a small group of students*" (Ada). One member went further and described the role as "*addressing the urgent needs of a small group of students*" (Isabel). Another likened it to a traffic light system for students "*all students are in the green, amber or red category with regard to well-being and the students in red need support and early intervention*" (Larry).

Additionally, another teacher, Gary, described the role and function of the Student Support Team as helping students “*deal with emotional and anxiety issues and how they’ve occurred and trying to help the student find the root of the problem*”. Another interviewee observed that the Student Support Team is “*a support system for students who are identified with personal difficulties or challenges and appropriate and supportive interventions are identified and applied*” (Liz). Furthermore, Victor describes the role and function of the Student Support Team is “*to support students and help them at times in which they find themselves in distress*”. In general, there was consensus amongst the members of the Student Support Team that the role and function of the team was to help and support a small cohort of students having problems. These students came to the attention of the Student Support Team by a referral system within the school and these referrals were usually made by a teacher, tutor or year head. These staff members identified students that had acting in or out behaviour in class or students that exhibited radical changes in mood or academic achievement from previous years.

4.2.1 Role of the school in student’s personal development

The second part of this theme is the role of the school in student’s personal development. There are two sub-themes within this section:

- *how the Student Support Team supports students*
- *role of the school’s Well-Being programme in student’s personal development.*

Concerning the first sub theme there was a strong general consensus amongst the interviewees that the Student Support Team plays an important role in helping students. Larry was a strong supporter “*I know that Student Support Teams can be a fantastic resource for students particularly in the red category.*” Furthermore, he articulates, in his experience, ninety-nine per cent of students appreciated the intervention maybe not immediately but “*it comes to pass that a student two or three months later will come around to the idea and will readily accept some help in figuring out what issues are going on for them and how they can best proceed.*”

One member argued that it was difficult to quantify as the Student Support Team meets a lot of students and his interpretation of success is noteworthy when he affirmed “*individual success cases for students who were close to dropping out of school, they had school refusal and we brought them back and they completed their Leaving Cert so I suppose I know we have truly helped those individuals*” (Gary). Additionally, the Deputy Principal expressed similar observations and stated there was no doubt that the Student Support Team was of benefit to

students, articulating, *“I think it’s of huge benefit to the students, providing a safe space in which they can express their opinions or their concerns. It is on a one to one basis with a trusted adult and it can be the difference between a child remaining in school or maybe opting out when they realise that this support is available for them.”*

Liz explained that the Student Support Team plays a *“vital role in the support structures in place for our students”* and the fact that a member of the team will *“meet with a particular student who is experiencing personal difficulties or challenges in their present situation and works with them is huge.”*

On the other hand, one of the members in answering the question stated that the Student Support Team gives the students *“a sense of belonging and that they are being looked after and there is somebody looking out for them, that contact and connectivity is really important for vulnerable students”*, however, she expressed concern that the Student Support Team can only deal with a small number of students and the school has a large student population, *“we don’t have the time because realistically you can only deal with a few students at a time”* (Ada). This statement highlights the benefits of the Student Support Team to vulnerable students, however, it suggests one team is not enough and the possible need for two Student Support Teams, one for Junior and one for Senior Cycle students, to deal with increasing demand on the service.

The second sub-theme concerns the role of the well-being programme in student’s personal development. There was general agreement amongst three interviewees that the programme was beneficial and words such as ‘resilience’, ‘mental health’, and ‘coping and life skills’ were mentioned many times. The Deputy Principal stated that the well-being programme in the school is *“designed in the context of the school’s mission statement which facilitates personal growth and the development of the full potential of the individual as central to the work of the school so this commitment to well-being permeates all our school policies, plans and schemes.”* Furthermore, she argued that because well-being *“permeates everything we do, the idea of timetabled classes does not sit comfortably with me”*. Conversely, Liz argued the importance of the well-being programme and stated *“now more than ever students need to be more resilient and the classes support and assist students with essential life skills, well-being is embedded in the school programme from first year right through, it’s of the utmost importance. Gary believes that the programme plays an important role in student’s personal development as it “gives them the tools to be able to identify stressors and how to cope with those stressors, it*

also teaches them responsibility, how to manage their time effectively, decision making and oftentimes the students don't realise they are taking all this stuff in but it's all gearing them towards a holistic developmental approach."

Nevertheless, two members of the Student Support Team were of the opinion that home life was more influential than school life in student's personal development, Larry reported that *"schools overrate themselves in this capacity, I think that really and truly the kind of home environment is probably the most powerful predictor of development rather than the school"*. Victor agreed that the well-being programme plays a role in a student's development but extrapolated that *"not everything is based on what's happening in school, it's based on home as well and what they're learning at home, they are bringing into school."* However, he felt that an influential factor would be having Guidance Counsellors teach SPHE or well-being from first year through to third year so that the students get to know the Guidance Counsellors and can *"build up trust"*.

Finally, Ada concurred the *"well-being programme was very important in the school"* but *"explained that some teachers do not have adequate training and do not want to teach it...they hate to see it on their timetable....and it can be very challenging for subject teachers"*. On the other hand she articulated, when the classes are facilitated correctly, they can be *"a lovely space where student's voices can be heard"*. It is clear from this response that lack of adequate training is a problem for teachers regarding the well-being programme.

4.3 Teacher's response to students' personal development

Throughout the semi-structured interviews, it was clear that members felt that there is an expectation that teachers are expected to respond more to the personal needs of students nowadays. One member stated *"yes, we have to whereas if you go back a number of years, it would have been solely down to marks and grades and what you're doing in class, teachers have to be more aware of what's going on with their students on a personal level"* (Victor). Another member articulated *"society has changed so much, when I started as a young teacher, my main focus was my subject area, now there's much more awareness around the individual you're teaching, the class you're teaching rather than your subject area and that is a big change mainly due to the pressures and stresses in society"* (Isabel). This sentiment was echoed

by another interviewee when she stated “*there are more personal and societal issues experienced by students and families nowadays*” (Liz).

Furthermore, one teacher cautioned that they are more accountable now than they used to be and teachers “*are more cautious in how they approach a student and a casual chat almost needs to be documented*” (Ada). Conversely, Gary was of the view that to be an effective teacher “*you have to respond to the individual needs of each and every single student which can be exhausting at times.*” Additionally, one of the guidance counsellors was of the opinion that too much was being asked of the school and staff when he described “*schools are seen more and more as a place where students can learn every kind of social, public and social skill they may need*”. He goes further and says that the “*presumption that schools and teachers could do this is detrimental to student well-being*” (Larry). This response implies there is a difference of opinion between what is seen as the responsibility of the school versus the responsibility of the home pertaining to students’ personal development.

4.4 The role of the Student Support Team in the Whole School Guidance programme

The third theme concerns the role of the Student Support Team in a whole school approach to guidance counselling. There were some divergences amongst the members relating to their understanding of the whole school approach. One member stated categorically “*to be honest I don’t really know what the Whole School approach to guidance policy is by definition*” (Gary). Another participant described the Student Support Team to be a part of the bigger school support system which includes “*guidance counsellors, subject teachers, year heads, SNAs etc. and we all feed into the bigger system to have a whole school programme ... however sometimes the Student Support Team is misunderstood to be the bigger picture*” (Ada). This statement suggests that some teachers view the Student Support Team as being the only student support structure available in the school and are unaware of the continuum of support model for the Whole School Guidance programme.

There was a general consensus amongst the three guidance counsellors in their understanding of the whole school approach to guidance counselling. Liz viewed guidance counselling provision as a whole school responsibility and was of the opinion that “*all teachers and staff can assist in this process*”. She elucidated further and stated “*the purpose of guidance and counselling services is to assist pupils in self-examination, self-evaluation so that each pupil*

can benefit fully from his or her education and life experiences.” Consequently, she continued, *“this approach to guidance counselling is viewed as a whole school responsibility.”* Victor argued that *“guidance is absolutely a whole school system because it is broken down into the three areas of social/personal, educational and vocational and by default that include the various teachers and staff involved with students”*. He explained that teachers who teach students several times a week and may even have them from first to sixth year *“could have invaluable insight into individual students, how they are getting on, their home life etc.”* The third guidance counsellor Larry was succinct in his understanding of the whole school approach to guidance counselling stating *“essentially, everybody is involved in the personal, vocational and academic aspect of a student’s life.”*

On the other hand, the Deputy Principal was honest in her appraisal describing her view of guidance counselling in the past as ‘*career guidance*’ only but she now views it differently stating *“guidance in school includes personal, social, education and career guidance delivered within a whole school context.”* Furthermore, she alluded to the provision of guidance as part of the Education Act 1998 and argued *“we cannot underestimate the contribution of guidance particularly in the social and personal domain.”*

In relation to the role of the Student Support Team in the Whole School Guidance Programme, there were some divergences amongst the team members. The Deputy Principals’ view was *“our care team includes three guidance counsellors who are specialists and play a key role in planning and delivering the whole school guidance plan”*. She elucidated further by mentioning the continuum of support model, guidance for all, guidance for some and stated *“I see the care team playing a critical role in the provision of guidance for a few”*. She elaborated explaining *“some vulnerable students require more intensive support and this requires the expertise of guidance counsellors and other school staff who have been trained in meeting the needs of students who have additional needs.”* There appears some divergence between views of management and team members with respect to selecting members and their continuous professional development.

Larry described the Student Support Team in terms of the social and personal aspect of guidance provision. He qualifies that statement by using the analogy of a traffic light system stating *“the care team would recognise students moving between green to amber or amber to red, and they would create recognition and then early intervention.”*

4.5 Structure and Strategies to support the Student Support Team

The third theme relates to the structures and strategies in place within the case school to support the Student Support Team. There are two sub-themes within this main theme;

- *selection of members*
- *support from management and access to Continuous Professional Development.*

4.5.1 Selection of Members

Concerning the first sub-theme there was general agreement that Guidance Counsellors automatically became members of the Student Support Team “*as one of the guidance counsellors in the school, it was automatic, I became a member of the team*” (Liz). Another Guidance Counsellor Victor stated “*in this school the Guidance Counsellors are part of the Care Team (the Student Support Team is known as the Care Team or Pastoral Care Team in some schools) and the selection of other team members is made by the representative from senior management, in this case the deputy principal.*” There was a consensus that Guidance Counsellors automatically became members of the team primarily because there is an assumption that they are sufficiently trained in the area of Counselling and Psychotherapy. Gary had experience of being on the team in his previous school when he “*covered for a guidance counsellor, home school liaison officer and school completion officer*” so was asked to be part of the team when he joined the case school. Ada was contacted by the principal and was asked to join the team as the principal noticed that “*she was very approachable and had an awareness of students in her class that were in some kind of difficulty*”. The Deputy Principal stated that “*teachers who express an interest in joining the team are usually facilitated or if a team member suggests somebody they might feel possesses the necessary skills or attributes, they are invited to join.*” There was a slight divergence from one of the Guidance Counsellors Larry who argued that “*in the present context the team is preordained by management and it is somewhat concerning.*” He was of the opinion that “*year-heads should be involved and there should be a voluntary basis for teachers who see themselves enjoying the role of working this way with students outside of the classroom.*” These responses informed the researcher that there was a lack of clarity among the members as to who should be a member of the Student Support Team. According to the policy document regarding Student Support Teams in Post-Primary Schools (NEPS, 2014), core membership should include a management representative, Guidance Counsellor, special needs co-ordinator, Year Head (not all) and SPHE co-ordinator.

4.5.2 Support from Management and Continuous Professional Development

The second sub-theme highlights the crucial role of school management in supporting the work of the Student Support Team and continuous professional development. The Deputy Principal reported that senior management were very much behind the team *“we meet weekly and the meeting is part of the timetable, for us as senior management, it’s an indication of the value and the worth we place in our Pastoral Care Team and the extremely valuable work that they do”*. Liz reported that the school has a *“well established Pastoral Care system that includes representation from senior management”* while another stated *“we have a member of management on the team which is good”* (Ada). On the other hand, one of the teachers when asked about supports articulated *“in terms of supports, it has changed a lot over the years, some people have stepped down, and maybe they were finding it a bit difficult”* (Gary). This highlights the importance of having sufficiently trained members in the Student Support Team as the work can be quite demanding.

With regards to continuous professional development, there were some divergences amongst the participants. One of the Guidance Counsellors stated that *“all members of the team have access to continuous professional development, in particular in areas that support their work on the care team, it’s encouraged and supported by management”* (Liz). Another participant argued that *“access to professional development was limited enough”*(Victor), while another stated *“any in-service I’ve ever wanted to go to I’ve been allowed especially in an area that I have been interested in.”*(Gary). Another member of the team articulated *“as a teacher, it is difficult to go out on CPD for a day especially if you have Leaving Cert classes”*(Ada), she goes further and states *“it is difficult for a subject teacher to be part of the Pastoral Care compared to somebody who has ongoing Pastoral Care training, because that is kind of their role, subject teachers don’t have that continuous training ”* (Ada). This interviewee sees the role of subject teacher as being very separate to the role of Student Support Team and she feels that she does not have adequate training to deal with the vulnerable students.

Finally, the Deputy Principal recognised the importance of Continuous Professional Development and articulated *“the team can access any appropriate professional development which they feel might be a benefit to their work and our members are actively encouraged to upskill and this is very much in keeping with the spirit of the our school and that is something that we place a very high value on”*. This response from the Deputy Principal is at odds with

the opinions of some of the other members of the team. This informs the researcher that clarity it needed in relation to team members access to Continuous Professional Development.

4.6 Conclusion

This concludes the findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with six members of a Student Support Team. The findings suggest that the Student Support Team focuses and supports a small group of students is held in very high regard by its members and senior management. However, there were divergent views regarding access and availability to Continuous Personal Development. The findings also suggest that the selection of members does not follow recommended practice and policy. Finally, there was also a lack of understanding amongst some members of the Whole School Guidance approach and the role of the Student Support Team in the programme.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

This chapter provides a synthesised discussion of the case study findings drawn from the data through the lens of the research questions and in the context of the literature review in chapter two.

5.1 Overview of Research Findings

This case study was carried out in a large rural post-primary school and the primary research question set out to examine *‘The nature, scope and function of a Student Support Team in a post-primary school in Ireland and its role in the Whole School Guidance Programme?’*

The secondary research questions elicited the respondents’ views on the opportunities and challenges of the Student Support Team and the role it has in the Whole School Guidance Programme. The researcher used a qualitative/interpretivist approach to examine the perspectives of six members of a Student Support Team using semi-structured interviews.

With regard to this single case study, the key findings suggest similar and sometimes different understandings of the nature, scope and function of a Student Support Team amongst members. There was general agreement that the role of the team is to support a small group of students. In the context of the nature of the support, there has not been sufficient evolution from a focus on academic achievement to supporting students’ personal, social and emotional development. Furthermore, the participants in this study had divergent views regarding access to relevant Continuous Professional Development. The literature suggests relevant, timely and ongoing training for team members to engage with students struggling with personal issues (Hearne et al. 2016). There was a divergence of opinion regarding the composition of a Student Support Team and how members are selected compared to the guidelines from the Department of Education (DES 2014). Another key finding was the lack of clarity amongst members with regard to the Whole School Guidance approach, the function of the Whole School Guidance Programme and consequently the role of and contribution to the Student Support Team within the Programme.

This chapter provides an analysis of the primary findings in the context of the literature review and is divided into two sections. Section 1 will focus on the Supports and Challenges

for the Student Support Team and Section 2 will address the role of the Student Support Team in the Whole School Guidance Programme.

5.2 Background to policy

Since its inception in 1996, the Irish Association of Pastoral Care in Education (IAPCE) has been influential in developing support mechanisms in schools to develop the student holistically (Monahan 2006). Currently, two key elements of these support structures are the wellbeing policy framework which aims to promote health, wellbeing and personal development of students and the Student Support Team which caters for their social, emotional and behavioural needs (DES 2014; DES 2019). Furthermore, these two elements are fundamental elements of the Whole School Guidance Programme (Hearne et al., 2017; NCGE 2017).

In a post primary school, the values and awareness of senior management can influence how pastoral care is delivered within the school (Best et al., 1995). One of the specific aspects of the policy regarding Student Support Teams in post primary schools is that it is a 'guidance document' and should evolve and adapt in light of "future new perspective and needs of individual schools" (DES 2014, p.3). Consequently, differences in how Student Support Teams operate is a factor across the post primary sector.

5.3 Supports and challenges for the Student Support Team

The case school has a coherent Student Support Team structure. The meetings are chaired by the Deputy Principal and take place once a week for a duration of forty minutes. The other members are three Guidance Counsellors and two subject teachers. With regard to membership of the team, as well as a management representative and three Guidance Counsellors, the literature recommends the inclusion of a Special Education Needs co-ordinator, year heads and the SPHE co-ordinator, more specifically, not all year heads need to attend every meeting or all of a meeting (DES 2014). In the case school, the Guidance Counsellors automatically become members, but the selection of the remaining members is executed in an ad-hoc manner. Notably, if the principal or other team members felt a certain teacher possessed the necessary attributes, they would be asked to join the team. This is not in line with the literature which emphasises the importance of having a Special Education Needs representative sit on the Student Support Team. In addition, Special Education Needs students have a higher level of mental health issues which highlights the necessity of the two services to be connected (NEPS 2010).

There was consensus amongst Student Support Team members that they provided an integrated support structure for a small group of students' personal, social and emotional needs. This involves referral of students by year heads or subject teachers to appropriate members of staff. This is consistent with the literature which posits that schools may use a variety of referral pathways. However, the recommended model of referral is a subject teacher informs the class tutor who then informs the year head who may then, depending on the agreed intervention, may refer to the Student Support Team (DES 2014).

5.3.1 Continuum of Support

In the context of supporting a small cohort of students, this echoes literature on the continuum of support model approach to guidance which stipulates a three-pronged approach described as support for few, support for some and support for all (NEPS 2010; NCGE 2017). However, the findings from this study suggest that the Student Support Team in the case school provide 'support for a few'. From a policy perspective, the Student Support Team is involved at all three levels. Support for a few is individualised, targeted interventions for students with more complex and enduring needs and often requires referral to outside agencies. Support for some involves identification and early intervention for students that may present with behavioural difficulties or who may be at risk. Support for all is more universal and includes wellbeing promotion and development of social and emotional coping skills (NEPS 2010).

Furthermore, the literature stipulates that Student Support Teams should move away from dealing with only individual students and have a broader scope particularly for more preventative work (NEPS 2010). The findings indicate that the case school has an individual approach to how the Student Support Team is managed concentrating on support for a few. Given the size of the student population at over one thousand students, it is evident that the Student Support Team is already stretched and undertaking the three-pronged continuum of support would overburden an already over strained resource.

Literature highlights the importance of the school setting for adolescence development and the importance of having high levels of support from one good adult leads to life satisfaction which is linked to positive wellbeing (Boyd & Bee 2012; Dooley & Fitzgerald 2012). This was evident amongst some participants who looked out for vulnerable students and established a strong connection with them. This finding echoes the literature which indicates that teachers view student wellbeing and pastoral care as an important part of their role within

the school (Hearne & Galvin 2014). However, there was a concern that the number of vulnerable students is continuously increasing but the capacity of the support structure remains the same. Additionally, from the team member's perspective a forty-minute class at the end of a school day was not enough time to adequately deal with the number of vulnerable students in a large school. Furthermore, there is an increased reticence amongst staff members to approach vulnerable students because of GDPR and increased bureaucracy resulting in some students not accessing the support structures they require.

5.3.2 Support at home

Interestingly, two of Guidance Counsellors suggested that home life is more influential than school life in a student's personal development. This finding is in line with the literature which argues that a child who experiences a warm, intimate, continuous relationship with a primary care-giver goes through the developmental stages normally and grows up having robust mental health (Bowlby 2005; Hornor 2019). This is also consistent with recent policy documents from the Department of Education that students learn more effectively if they are happy in their work, believe in themselves and are supported at home and at school (DES 2018).

Furthermore, it emerged in the findings that some teachers and senior management consider a student completing their Leaving Certificate a successful outcome of an intervention with a vulnerable student. Recent studies argue that an ideology with emphasis on a high stakes final exam does not provide a holistic developmental environment for students (O'Flaherty & McCormack 2019). Additionally, the literature shows that positive social and emotional development as distinct from academic achievement influences self-regulation, prosocial behaviour and general life satisfaction (Thomas et al., 2018).

Additionally, the findings showed a degree of tension between what some teachers viewed as a conflict between teaching their subject and being active members of the Student Support Team. Participants in the study are committed to their work as subject teachers and are conflicted in their role as Student Support Team members as they feel they need Continuous Professional Development to equip themselves with the adequate skills but are reluctant to leave their subject classes to access relevant training. In some cases, it appears that team members have stepped down from the team as they found the work too challenging. This is consistent with the literature which posits that the nature of the work can be very demanding and exhausting for team members (McCoy et al., 2006). This factor is a concern as the

literature elucidates the prevalence of mental health disorders amongst adolescents is an increasing global problem and there is a clear need for further work to be done in the field of mental health promotion in our student population (O'Reilly et al., 2018).

5.4 The role of the Student Support Team in the Whole School Guidance Programme

An integrated and collaborative approach to guidance counselling incorporating educational, social, personal, emotional and vocational guidance involving the whole school community has evolved over the last number of decades (DES 2005; DES 2019; Hearne et al., 2016; Hearne et al., 2017). Responsibility for the delivery of a guidance programme lies with the school. The wellbeing policy document for Post Primary Schools is clear that a Whole School Approach to student wellbeing links in with both the guidance service and the Student Support team in the school (DES 2018; Hearne et al., 2016).

It is a truism that Post Primary Schools have an important role to play in students' wellbeing and the fostering of healthy relationships with teachers and school staff is essential for a young person's cognitive and emotional development (DES, 2013). Dooley et al. (2019) stress how much educational systems influence young people's lives and wellbeing in the My World Survey. The findings of this case school suggest that the wellbeing programme plays an important part in students' personal development and that it is an integral part of school policy. Teachers in the study mentioned the importance of resilience and life skills being embedded in the curriculum as early as first year. This corresponds with policy which informs school management of the importance of responding to the needs of the school community (DES 2016). Furthermore, teachers believe that the students may be unaware that they are learning essential life skills such as decision making, dealing with anxiety and responsibility which leads to a holistic development of the student. This finding is in line with the literature which promotes health, wellbeing and personal development for all students (DES 2018).

5.4.1 Support for Wellbeing

From the perspective of the Deputy Principal, the well-being programme is interlinked with school policy and facilitates personal growth and the development of the individual. Furthermore, the Deputy Principal perceived the principle of time tabled classes for wellbeing as unnecessary because it was part of the culture in the school. However, the

findings suggest that some teachers do not feel sufficiently trained to teach wellbeing which implies that they require Continuous Professional Development to equip them with the necessary skills.

Inherent in the literature that was reviewed for this case study is the social and emotional development of adolescents and how it can influence their general wellbeing and success in school and life (Thomson et al., 2015). The findings highlight the inconsistent approach to the wellbeing programme in the case school and perhaps is indicative of the system at large. Some teachers comprehend the importance of wellbeing classes and how they can facilitate personal growth in students. In contrast, other teachers do not understand the potential benefits and are uncomfortable teaching the subject. The finding indicates a need for Continuous Professional Development for planning and delivering wellbeing hours effectively. This is consistent with the literature which found that teachers are expected to respond to a wide range of needs but do not receive adequate training to respond to such needs (Graham et al., 2010).

An integral element of the Whole School Guidance Programme is the Student Support Team. It is part of the student support system in a school that “encompasses a range of supports that cater for the learning, social, emotional and behavioural needs of students” (DES 2014, p.6).

The findings indicate that there was a distinct lack of clarity amongst some members with regard to their understanding of the Whole School Guidance approach and consequently the role of and contribution of the Student Support Team within the Programme. There was general consensus amongst the Guidance Counsellors that this approach involved the whole school community and incorporates the wellbeing programme, the professional activities of the Guidance Counsellor and the Student Support Team. This finding concurs with the literature which states that Guidance in schools includes personal and social, educational and vocational delivered within a whole school context (DES 2016; NCGE 2017). However, from the Guidance Counsellors’ perspective in the current study, they do not see the students as regularly as subject teachers who would consequently have better insight into their behaviour and needs. This highlights the importance of teachers being fully on board with the Whole School Guidance Approach and indicates a requirement for in-house training on that subject. It suggests that teachers are essential in looking out for students’ wellbeing.

The findings reveal that some teachers in the study had no knowledge of the meaning of the Whole School Approach to Guidance but were unknowingly playing an important role within

the programme. They are teachers who keenly observe their students and are approached regularly by them with learning, behavioural and emotional needs. This phenomenon needs to be considered in the context of staff being informed of the role they are playing in the Whole School Guidance Programme. Interestingly, in the findings, some teachers understand the Student Support Team as being the only Support Structure in the school and are unaware of the important role they can play in supporting students' wellbeing. This is in line with literature which points to divergent perceptions amongst staff regarding a Whole School Approach to guidance counselling (McCoy et al., 2006; Hearne et al., 2016).

From the perspective of the Deputy Principal, the paradigm shift from 'career guidance' to 'guidance counselling' has taken some time to implement in the school and it is clear the Whole School Guidance approach is not fully in place and it takes time to deliver within the whole school context. Schools are dynamic, complex organisations with many challenges on a daily basis and this is consistent with the literature which indicates that the awareness, culture and values of management can have an impact on how guidance is delivered within a school context (McCoy et al., 2006).

Another finding from the perspective of the Deputy Principal is the apparent over reliance on the Guidance Counsellors who are viewed as specialists in planning and delivering the Whole School Guidance plan. There is an assumption that Guidance Counsellors have the necessary training and consequently are relied upon to deliver the Whole School Guidance Programme with minimum participation from the wider school community. This finding is consistent with previous research that there is a lack of understanding of the demanding role of the Guidance Counsellor and the time constraints and demands put on the guidance services within a school (Hearne et al., 2016; IGC 2016; Leahy et al., 2016; NCGE 2013).

5.5 Conclusion

In summary, the findings of this single case study indicate there are supports and challenges for the Student Support Team in the case school and its role in the Whole School Guidance Programme. Specifically, there is a commitment by school management to providing supports and structures to the Student Support Team notably allocated time for weekly meetings and access to Continuous Professional Development. These initiatives provide a framework for team members to work collaboratively to deliver support structures and by default, play a part in the Whole School Guidance Programme. However, a number of challenges also emerged: the lack of following policy procedures with regard to members

selection and understanding of the role of the Student Support Team in the continuum of support; different levels of understanding amongst members about access to Continuous Professional Development; an overemphasis on academic achievement versus the holistic development of the student and the importance for the wider school community to understand their role in Whole School Guidance provision.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

This chapter will conclude the research study and provide an overview of the findings in the context of the aim and objectives of the study. It will also present the strengths and limitations of the study, identify some recommendations and conclude with a personal reflection from the researcher.

6.1 Overview of the Research Findings

The overall aim of this single site case study was to provide an in-depth view of the nature, scope and function of a Student Support Team in the context of a large rural post primary school in Ireland and its role in the Whole School Guidance Programme. Additionally, a critical examination of the relevant literature on policy and practice explored the issues related to the research study. A qualitative approach was adopted which involved a phase of data collection to explore how a Student Support Team is experienced by participants in the case school. Semi-structured interviews provided a contextual understanding of the inner workings of a Student Support Team from the perspectives of six team members. In particular, this case study provides meaning and understanding of a Student Support Team in a post primary school and the supports and challenges encountered by team members. A number of conclusions can be drawn in relation to the research study from the analysis of the overall findings.

Firstly, the commitment of school management to having an established Student Support Team in conjunction with access to Continuous Professional Development led by senior management is to be commended. Nonetheless, the emphasis on academic achievement can prohibit teachers who are members of the team from accessing Continuous Professional Development due to time constraints.

Furthermore, the research findings would indicate that the ‘whole school approach to guidance counselling’ is not strongly positioned within the case school and this results in an imbalance between the student’s educational needs versus their personal, social and emotional needs.

It is evident from this study that the delivery of Whole School Guidance in a post primary school requires a high level of commitment from senior management and understanding from the Board of Management, teaching and support staff, students, parents and the wider school community. The provision of relevant Continuous Personal Development and explanation of the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders is essential to meet the requirements of the approach to Whole School Guidance programme.

A critical examination of policy and procedures regarding members selection and understanding of the role of the Student Support Team points to a lack of adherence to recommended policy guidelines. It is recommended in policy that the Special Education Needs coordinator, SPHE co-ordinator and year heads should be core members of the team in conjunction with a representative of senior management and the Guidance Counsellors (DES 2014). This is particularly relevant as many students with Special Education Needs present with mental health difficulties and are more likely to be referred to the Student Support Team (NEPS 2010). This approach would be more co-ordinated, structured and efficient and would encourage the two support services to work together.

6.2 Strengths and Limitations of the Research Study

One of the strengths of this research study was that a single case study design was used to explore how a Student Support Team is experienced by its members and it created an opportunity for them to express their perceptions on the nature, scope and function of the team (Yin 2009). It is evident that the findings of this single site case study cannot be applied to other post primary schools and differences in how Student Support Teams operate is a factor across the sector. However, the findings may represent issues that are reflected in other post primary schools. Additionally, this case study researched an aspect of student support structures that has a limited amount of attention in research studies to date.

There are limitations to this case study. It captures the situation in the case school which is a large rural mixed gender post primary school community school. However, further research would be necessary to investigate Student Support Teams in DEIS, single gender, private schools, city and comprehensive and other school types. Another limitation is in relation to the scope of the study, more data would have been generated if other participants were involved for example, the SEN co-ordinator, the SPHE co-ordinator, year heads, tutors and perhaps students who have availed of support. These are areas of potential further study that

could add depth and clarity to the role of Student Support Teams in the Whole School Guidance programme.

6.3 Recommendations

The recommendations in terms of policy, practice and research based on the findings are as follows:

6.3.1 Policy

- An updated policy document from the Department of Education and Skills containing firm recommendations regarding member selection, co-ordination with the Special Education Needs department and appropriate Continuous Professional Development for members would contribute to a more homogenous approach to Student Support Teams across the post primary school sector.
- The NCGE (2017) Whole School Guidance provision framework and the continuum of support (NEPS 2010) should be embraced by all schools to cater for the learning, social, personal, emotional and behavioural needs of all students.
- The Department of Education and Skills should resolve to impress upon the teaching community the importance of wellbeing hours and endeavour to get buy-in from staff through a rigorous programme of Continuous Professional Development.

6.3.2 Practice

- School management should introduce a system of two Student Support Teams, one for Junior cycle students and one for Senior cycle students to provide support for the growing needs of students, particularly in large post primary schools.
- School practice in relation to selection of members for Student Support Teams should take into consideration the recommended policy procedures regarding the inclusion of certain essential members for example the SEN coordinator and year heads when necessary.
- Guidance counsellors, as specialists in their field, are well placed to offer basic training at the beginning of each academic to other team members in the context of one to one meetings with students experiencing personal difficulties.

- School management should actively encourage team members to attend relevant and timely Continuous Professional Development to support their role in this context.

6.3.3 Research

- Further research on Student Support Teams in other school settings is highly recommended.
- Further research of the role of Student Support Teams in adolescent mental health and wellbeing post primary schools is necessary.

6.4 Reflexivity

“Reflexivity is vital for reflecting on, learning from, and moving beyond the discriminatory practices we almost all unintentionally engage in” (Braun & Clarke 2013, p. 67).

Throughout the research for this case study I reflected on my assumptions, biases, values and personal background and how my positionality may have influenced the interpretation of the findings in the study (Bell 2010). To counter this, I kept a journal and applied Driscoll's reflective model to record my observations and thoughts while conducting the research (Bassot 2013). As a trainee guidance counsellor and a member of a Student Support Team, I endeavoured to see the participants stories without looking through the lens of my own personal experience.

There were times when my assumptions were in line with the findings and literature and times when my assumptions were challenged. My training as a Guidance Counsellor furnished me with skills that enabled me to deal with challenging scenarios in a school setting. This aligns with the literature which refers to the specialist role of the Guidance Counsellor. However, I was of the belief that Continuous Professional Development was readily available for teachers who felt they needed training to fully engage with being a member of the Student Support Team. This is not always the case and highlighted the importance of my own training and supervision that enables me to carry out my work in a professional manner.

I was vigilant, when interviewing participants, not to let my training as a Guidance Counsellor shape the narrative of the interviewees particularly when they diverged from my own beliefs and value systems. I was impressed by the honesty of the participants who engaged in the process and shared their experiences very openly. Finally, I have a deeper understanding of the supports and challenges of a Student Support Team and its role in the

Whole School Guidance programme and this will inform my future practice as a guidance counsellor.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter brings this research study to a conclusion by providing an overview of the findings in the context of the primary research aim. It also outlines the strengths and weaknesses of the study and addresses a number of recommendations for policy, practice and research. The chapter ends with the researcher's reflexivity and learning outcomes.

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Appendix A



VOLUNTEER INFORMATION LETTER

Research title

A case study of a Student Support Team in a Post Primary School and it's role in the provision of a Whole School Guidance Programme.

Date:

Dear Participant,

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

Research Aim:

The main aim of this study is to explore the nature, scope and function of a student Support Team from the perspective of its members within one school site.

Who have I requested to participate?

Members of a Student Support Team in a school.

What is the study about?

In my research I aim to carry out a study of a Student Support Team in a Post Primary School and it's role in the provision of a Whole School Guidance Programme.

What do you have to do ?

I would appreciate if you would agree to participate in an audio-recorded face to face interview.

When and where will the research take place?

The interviews will take place during the Spring term 2020 outside of normal school hours.

How long the focus group discussion will last?

The interview will take no more than 20 to 30 minutes.

What happens to the information?

The information that is collected will be kept private and stored securely and safely on the researchers' computer. The computers are protected with a password. Your name will not appear on any information. You will be assigned a fictitious name when the information is being written in a report by the researcher. The information that is gathered in the study will be kept for seven years. After this time, it will be destroyed.

What are the risks?

You might decide that you don't want to answer a question. If this happens, you do not have to answer any question you do not wish to.

What if I do not want to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose not to take part or to stop your involvement in this study at any time.

Who else is taking part?

Other members of the Student Support Team from the school.

What if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely event that something goes wrong during the interview session, it will immediately stop until the researcher and participant are ready to restart the session or the session would be stopped completely.

What happens at the end of the study?

At the end of the study the information will be used to present results. The information will be completely anonymous. No participant's name appears in any of the results. All data gathered from the research will be stored securely and safely by the researcher Eileen O'Toole in her office for 7

years. Information that is stored on computer will be stored by Eileen O'Toole on a computer that is password-protected.

What if I have more questions or do not understand something?

If you have any questions about the study you may contact the researcher. It is important that you feel that all your questions have been answered.

What happens if I change my mind during the study?

At any stage should you feel that you want to stop taking part in the study, you are free to stop and take no further part. There are no consequences for changing your mind about being in the study.

Contact name and number of Project Investigators.

Principal Investigator

Dr. Joanne O'Flaherty, Lecturer in Education, School of Education, University of Limerick, Tel (061) 234 841

Email: Joanne.OFlaherty@ul.ie

Other investigator

Eileen O'Toole

Postgraduate Student

School of Education

086 299 6240

8446873@studentmail.ul.ie

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

Yours sincerely,

Faculty Member

Student Name

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (quote approval number).

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone, please contact: EHSREC No:



Appendix B

PRINCIPAL LETTER

A case study of a Student Support Team in a Post Primary School and its role in the provision of a Whole School Guidance Programme.

Date TBC

Dear Principal,

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

The dissertation aims to develop a greater understanding of the nature, scope and function of a Student Support Team and the role it plays in the Whole School Guidance programme. I would be grateful if you would consider allowing me to seek consent from members of the Student Support Team to allow them to participate in this study.

The staff's involvement in this project would be during their timetabled school day- e.g. lunch time. The participating staff would be invited to take part in an audio-recorded face to face interview. The interviews will take approximately twenty to thirty minutes. The participants would be asked to

answer some questions in these interviews regarding their participation in the Student Support Teams. I hope to recruit 6 members of the team.

While some of the questions asked may be sensitive, the participants would not be required to answer any question they do not wish to. The information they do give would be kept confidential and stored on the researcher's computer with a protection password. The information will be anonymised and kept for a period of seven years, after which it will be deleted and/or disposed of sensitively. The same project is also being carried out in three other schools in the country.

Participation in this study would be entirely voluntary and the participants may chose not to consent or to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this study at any time. If you have any concerns or questions about the study, please contact me or my project supervisor Dr. Joanne O'Flaherty. Please find enclosed information sheets for participants which explains the exact details of the study.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Student Name

Principal Investigator

Dr. Joanne O'Flaherty, School of Education, University of Limerick, Tel (061) 234 841

Email: Joanne.OFlaherty@ul.ie

Other investigator

Eileen O'Toole

Postgraduate Student

School of Education

086 299 6240

8446873@studentmail.ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (quote approval number).

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

Chair Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee

EHS Faculty Office

University of Limerick

Tel (061) 234101

Appendix C



EHSREC Approval Number:

EHS RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Principal CONSENT

Name of Research Project: A case study of a Student Support Team in a Post Primary School and it's role in the provision of a Whole School Guidance Programme.

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

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

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

Name: (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Investigator's Signature _____

Date: _____

Appendix D



EHSREC Approval Number:

EHS RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

PARTICIPANT CONSENT

Name of Research Project: A case study of a Student Support Team in a Post Primary School and it's role in the provision of a Whole School Guidance Programme.

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 letter.
- 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 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 E



EHSREC Approval Number:

EHS RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Data Protection Consent Section: Individual Interview

I, the undersigned, declare that I am freely giving specific, informed and an unambiguous consent to the University to process my Personal Data for the purposes of undertaking the research project entitled:

Name of Research Project: A case study of a Student Support Team in a Post Primary School and it's role in the provision of a Whole School Guidance Programme.

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">I declare that I have read and fully understand the contents of the Research Privacy Notice, which is appended at Appendix 1 of this Consent form and I explicitly consent to my personal data being processed in line with this Research Privacy Notice. | Yes

<input type="checkbox"/> | No

<input type="checkbox"/> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">I explicitly consent to the University contacting me as part of current or similar future research and holding my contact details on its database for the purpose of contacting me. | Yes

<input type="checkbox"/> | No

<input type="checkbox"/> |

Signatures

1.

Name of participant [IN CAPITALS] Signature Date

For participants unable to sign their name, mark the box instead of signing

2. Note: The form only needs to be witnessed in very specific circumstances e.g. if the person giving consent is unable to sign their name. The witness section may be omitted if this does not apply.

I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form with the potential participant and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the individual has given consent freely.

Name of witness [IN CAPITALS] Signature Date

3.

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

Name of researcher [IN CAPITALS] Signature Date

Appendix F



Interview questions

EHS REC no.

Research title: “*A case study of a Student Support Team in a Post Primary School and its role in the provision of a Whole School Guidance Programme.*”

General research questions:

What is the nature, scope and function of a Student Support Team from the perspective of its members?

What role does this team have in the Whole School Guidance Programme?

Interview questions have been structured into separate themes identified using headings

Professional background

Would you like to tell me about your professional background in education?

How did you become a member of the Student Support Team (SST)?

How long have you been a member of the team?

Is this the first SST you are a member of? (If No ask supplementary question at the end).

Student Support Team

In the context of being a member of the SST, what is your understanding of what a SST is?

How do you perceive its role and function in the school?

To what extent do you think it helps students?

Schools role in Adolescent Mental Health

Do you think Post Primary students are more challenged nowadays by issues such as mental health?

What role do you think the school has in the context of student's personal development?

Do you think the SPHE programme plays an important role in student's personal development?

Do you believe school should be more responsible for mental health promotion?

In your opinion, are teachers expected to respond to more personal needs of students nowadays?

What knowledge, skills or training, if any, might you require to effectively manage the needs of students as a member of a SST.

Whole School Guidance

What is your understanding, if any, of the concept of a 'Whole School Approach' to guidance counselling?

In your opinion, what role does the SST play in the 'Whole School Guidance' Programme?

Conclusion

Is there anything you would like to add to what we have discussed today?

How do you experience the SST in this school compared to other schools you have been a member of in the past, what are the similarities and differences?

