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Case study research on a whole school approach to guidance counselling in the voluntary school sector

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Introduction

This article will provide a synopsis of the key findings of a case study research project carried out by the University of Limerick and Dublin City University. The project was funded by the Irish Research Council (2014-2016). The single case study examined the phenomenon of a whole school approach to guidance counselling (personal and social, educational and career) in one voluntary school during the period of 2015-2016. Whilst it is not the aim of the case study to claim generalisability, it does consider the implications of the findings for the broader post primary sector.

Background

Guidance counselling is vital for the empowerment of citizens within the education and employment system (DES, 2016; ELGPN, 2014; OECD, 2004). A whole school approach to guidance counselling is viewed as a model of good practice (DES, 2012; NCGE 2004). However, it is argued that a whole school approach to guidance counselling is a complex process (Gysbers and Henderson, 2005, 2014; Lam and Hui, 2010) and currently there is limited evidence of its effectiveness within the Irish post primary sector. The diminution of guidance counselling provision in the post primary sector, both in Ireland and abroad, is disconcerting and contradictory to the propositions of policy makers (Hearne et al., 2017; Ofsted, 2014). Since the 2012 re-allocation, the evidence from different organisations suggests unevenness in the response from schools to meet the statutory requirement of providing an appropriate and inclusive guidance counselling service, and specifically the erosion in provision of one-to-one guidance counselling (ASTI, 2013; IGC, 2016; JMB, 2012; NCGE, 2013; TUI, 2014).

This case study research was conducted in the context of the impact of the 2012 mandated changes to guidance counselling provision within the school environment, i.e. reduction of resource allocation. The research took place within the school environment and

includes the perspectives of six key stakeholders' involved in the provision of a whole school approach to guidance counselling, namely; school management, guidance counsellor, school staff, past students, current students and parents.

Methodology

An explanatory single case study design (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014) was used to examine and explain the current reality of the provision of a whole school approach to guidance counselling within the voluntary sector between 2014 and 2016. The unit of analysis was one DEIS voluntary school which is co-educational and has an enrolment of approximately 650-750 students. The case school offers a range of curricular programmes alongside the regular provision of Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate including Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Applied. There is one full time guidance counsellor who has an allocation of 22 hours of guidance counselling per week comprising 16.5 hours for one-to-one guidance counselling and 5.5 hours for classroom guidance. The school has its own whole school guidance programme which is co-ordinated by the guidance counsellor. The programme is delivered to students across the six years with the involvement of a range of internal and external stakeholders. It encompasses three specific strands (Mentoring, Leadership through Service and Pathways to College) and associated guidance activities to support the development of students' self-confidence, self-awareness and aspirations for progression to Further and Higher Education.

A mixed method approach was used to collect data from the six different over ten month period. The fieldwork also included observations of four guidance counselling activities; guidance classes to students and whole school student support meetings. In addition, an examination of primary data sources (school policy documents) relevant to a whole school approach to guidance counselling in the case school provided a contextual background to the case study.

Whole School Guidance Counselling

In the context of the significant impact of the re-allocation of guidance counselling in 2012 (IGC, 2016) there has been a reiteration of a whole school approach as a method for schools to maximise their resources for the delivery of guidance counselling and maintain appropriate provision to students (ACCS, 2012; DES, 2012). Three key themes emerged in the current research study related to a whole school approach to guidance counselling in the

case school; guidance counselling provision in the case school and the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders associated with the delivery of this type of model in the case school. Although these findings are specific to the case study itself and highlight the nuances involved in the delivery of a whole school approach in one particular school context, it is envisaged that some of the key issues that emerged in the study may have relevance to other post primary settings.

In the case school a strong commitment to the delivery of a whole school approach to guidance counselling by the school management and guidance counsellor was evident. School management recognised the important role of guidance counselling in the promotion of an inclusive and collaborative model of education through its tailored whole school guidance programme and the Student Support Teams. There also appeared to be support for guidance provision in various forms from the majority of staff who responded to the staff survey on this issue. In fact, many teachers believe a whole school approach can enhance the provision of a collective staff response to serious issues or problems in schools (McCoy et al., 2006).

Nonetheless, there were variances in perspective amongst some of the stakeholders in the case school, i.e. staff, students and parents, as to the rationale, definition and scope of a whole school approach to guidance counselling. There was some confusion amongst teaching staff about the types of guidance counselling (personal and social, educational and career) provided by the guidance service, as well as the relationship between guidance counselling and pastoral care provision in the school. There was also a level of misunderstanding amongst some teaching staff and parents about what *holistic guidance counselling* means in practice with different understandings of the priorities of guidance counselling to students. Some viewed the concept as predominantly career guidance and related to college course choices and the CAO system, whilst others connected it to supporting student wellbeing and the delivery of personal counselling to students.

In the case school, which has DEIS status, some changes to the delivery of guidance counselling had occurred recently which had impacted on provision. Prior to Budget 2012 there was a 22 hour allocation for the full-time guidance counsellor, with an additional 3 hours for another part-time guidance counsellor. In spite of increasing enrolments, the 3 hours were lost after 2012 while the 22 hours were preserved. Although some students commended the one-to-one guidance counselling received by them there was also recognition by students of the guidance counsellor's high workload. A key issue for the guidance counsellor was the ongoing pressure to achieve a balance between one-to-one and classroom

based guidance counselling across all years of the curriculum. The schools whole school guidance programme, therefore, could be viewed as a both a model of collaborative careers guidance provision and an antidote to the demands on a busy guidance service to meet the diverse needs of students.

An ongoing concern in the post primary sector is the disparity of guidance counselling provision in Junior and Senior Cycle (Hearne et al., 2016; McCoy et al., 2014). A number of stakeholders, i.e. parents, current and past students of the case school, also believed that direct guidance provision and activities were disproportionately directed towards the Senior Cycle. Some of this was due to the lack of timetabled guidance classes in Junior Cycle whilst Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Applied and 6th year students had regular classes. Exposure to the guidance counsellor through classroom based guidance as early as possible was viewed as necessary by students and parents. Such exposure can help demystify what guidance counselling is, establish that career decision making is a developmental process that needs to be addressed from an early age, and also build relationship between younger students and the guidance counsellor to support one-to-one guidance counselling work.

Finally, the complexities associated with the specific roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders involved in the delivery of a whole school approach to guidance counselling in the school system are evident in the case study. In 2002 the OECD referred to the confusion over professional boundaries in guidance counselling provision in Irish schools which over the years has been referred to by other organisations including the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). In spite of policy exhortations (DES, 2012, 2016) that whole school guidance counselling is viewed as everybody's responsibility there still appears to be a policy and practice lacunae where the lines of responsibility remain blurred. This relates to the lack of clear guidelines from the DES since 1998 on the specific roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders as well as training to school staff to support such an initiative. Some attempt was made to address this by the NCCA in 2007 but it did not progress. There is now an obvious need for greater clarification of roles and responsibilities, as well as the provision of relevant and timely CPD to all school staff on the successful delivery of whole school guidance counselling service within the sector.

The UL/DCU research report is available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10344/5389>

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