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A whole school approach to guidance counselling in the Irish post primary sector: findings from a holistic single case study.

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A Whole School Approach to Guidance Counselling in the Irish Post Primary Sector: Findings from an Explanatory Single Case Study

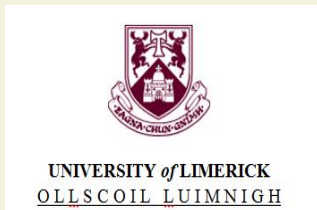
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Contextual Background: Definitions

- In Europe, guidance counselling and nature of provision varies from country to country with an increasing emphasis on **guidance policy linked to evidence based practice** (Hooley, 2014).
- In Ireland, model of a holistic and integrated approach to guidance counselling:
 - holistic approach incorporates **personal/social, educational and career guidance**
 - an **integrated approach** advocates the involvement of the whole school community in guidance provision, including the wider community (DES, 2005. Similar to the Hong Kong model of guidance (Hui 2002)
 - a **whole school approach** attributes responsibility to the Board of Management and school management team for overseeing the provision of guidance by working collaboratively with the guidance counsellor and school staff who manage guidance planning and ensure its consistent implementation (NCGE, 2004).
- Evidence of decrease in service provision since change to allocation in Budget 2012 (TUI 2014, IGC 2016) and three dimensional approach to guidance counselling provision (personal/social, educational, vocational/career) is inconsistently applied across schools (IGC, 2016; NCGE, 2013).

Contextual Background: Provision

- Pre 2012 an ex-quota allocation was provided for guidance counselling above the standard general teacher allocation in post primary schools based on the level of student enrolment (e.g. enrolment of 500-599 students = 22-24 hours of ex-quota hours).
- Budget 2012 resulted in a change in the nature of allocation re. guidance counselling – no longer ex-quota provision but from within *existing* general teacher allocation* leading to:
 - (i) evidence of diminution of direct guidance provision (ASTI, 2013; IGC, 2016; JMB, 2012; NCGE, 2013)
 - (ii) redefinition of the role of the guidance counsellor within the school context (Hearne and Galvin, 2014).
- * Schools within the DEIS classification retained their guidance allocation *not by ex-quota* but indirectly via an increase in general teacher allocation.

Contextual Background: Provision

- After Budget 2012, a number of studies (ibid.) did provide evidence on the quality and quantity of guidance counselling in schools but they did not, by design, capture the *lived realities* of guidance provision within the school environment.
- In addition, very little evidence (apart from Inspectorate Reports) is available as to how schools in Ireland practically fulfil the requirement of the 1998 Education Act, to “ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices” (Section 9c).
- Furthermore, despite the advocacy and endorsement of a whole school approach (WSA) to the delivery of guidance counselling in the post-primary sector (ACCS, 2012; DES, 2012) evidence of this approach is also lacking.

Aim & Objectives of Research

Overall aim:

Critical examination of a whole school approach to guidance counselling in voluntary post-primary sector in the context of holistic model of guidance counselling (personal/social, educational and career).

Key Objectives:

1. Systematic literature review on topic;
2. Investigate delivery of a whole school approach to guidance counselling in one school (case school) with six key stakeholders: school management, guidance counsellor, teaching and support staff, current students, past students and parents;
3. Use mixed methods design for data collection and analysis within an explanatory single case study framework;
4. Produce a case study report that explicates the findings from this single case;
5. Inform guidance researchers and practitioners on the necessary protocols involved in carrying out case study research in the guidance counselling profession.

The Case School

- Voluntary sector school, Co-educational, DEIS status
- Enrolment of 650-750
- Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP), Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA).
- Mixed-ability groupings in first and second year
- Staffing: Principal, Deputy Principal, Assistant Principal, Posts of Responsibility, Year Heads, Teaching and Support Staff, Full-Time Guidance Counsellor
- Progression from LC to HE increased from 20% to 70% in a decade
- 93% progression rate to 'further education' inclusive of University, Institutes of Technology, private Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses.
- Recent DES *Whole School Evaluation - Management, Leadership and Learning* (WSE-MLL)

The Case School: Guidance Provision

- Guidance allocation of 22 hours (25 hours prior to Budget 2012)
 - 16.5 hours to one-to-one guidance counselling (15 hours comprise personal guidance counselling and 1.5 hours to vocational/career guidance counselling).
 - 5.5 hours to classroom guidance.
- DES Subject (Guidance) Inspection prior to 2010 – positive in general but disparities in provision between JC & SC (“top-heavy”)
- School Guidance Policy, Guidance Plan, School Anti-Bullying Policy and School Handbook.
- Involvement in Student Support Teams (SST’s) in both Cycles
- Whole School Guidance Programme (WSGP): Strands and range of activities across curriculum years: *1. Mentoring, 2. Leadership through Service, and 3. Pathways to College.*

Research Questions

Primary question:

How is a whole school approach to guidance counselling delivered within the post-primary voluntary sector in Ireland?

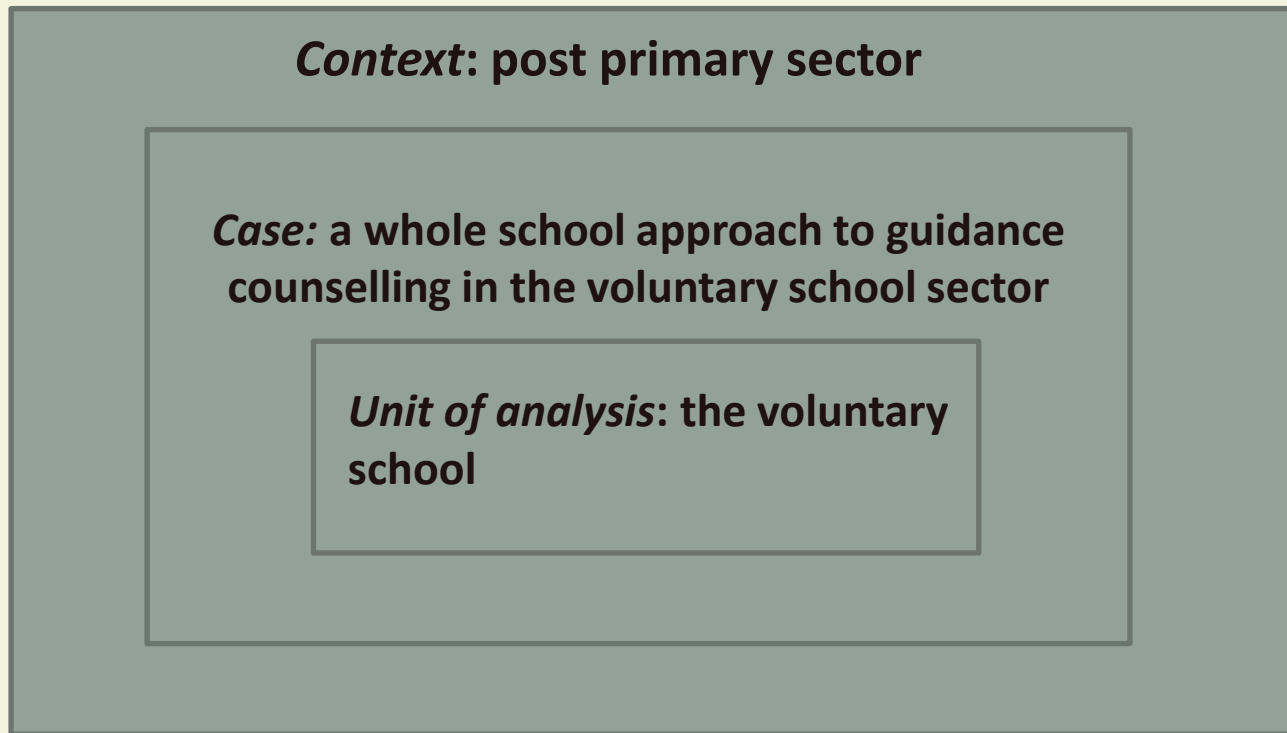
Secondary questions:

- 1. How is a whole school approach to guidance counselling carried out within one voluntary post-primary [case] school?*
- 2. What is the nature of guidance counselling (personal and social, educational and career) provision within the case school?*
- 3. What are the perceptions of key stakeholders of a whole school approach to guidance counselling within the case school?*
- 4. How has the DES Budget 2012 re-allocation of guidance counselling provision impacted upon a whole school approach to guidance counselling in the case school?*

Methodology: Explanatory Single Case Study

- Holistic explanatory single case study (Abma and Stake, 2014; Yin, 2014)
 - investigates causal relationships and presents data to explain how events occur or are experienced by participants (Yin, 2014)
 - i.e. how a whole school approach to guidance counselling is experienced by a range of different stakeholders in one case school during a particular time period (April 2015- March 2016) within broader context of Irish post primary sector.*
- Characteristics of naturalistic case studies; *emic issues, influence of context, meaning and interpretation, holistic understanding and learning from the case* (Abma and Stake, 2014).
- “Multiplicity of perspectives which are rooted in a specific context” primary defining feature of single case study (Lewis and Ritchie, 2003 p.14).

Boundaries of Case Study (Yin, 2014)



Mixed Methods Design Frame

- Brought together context, meaning-making, and community processes in case study (Perry, 2009).
- Provided breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration, and offset the weaknesses inherent in using each approach by itself (Yin, 2014).
- Maximised empirical power and effectiveness of the case study (Yin, 2014).

Primary Data Sources

1. Semi-structured interviews: Principal and Deputy Principal, Guidance Counsellor and 4 past students
2. Focus groups: sample of JC (n10) and SC (n10) students, and parents (n7) of students currently enrolled in the school;
3. On-line survey to all teaching and support staff - response rate of 61% (n37 out of n61)
4. Naturalistic observations of four guidance counselling activities in case school.

Contextual Documentation

School documents examined:

- 1) School Plan
- 2) School Guidance Policy
- 3) School Guidance Plan
- 4) Whole School Guidance Programme
- 5) School Anti-bullying Policy
- 6) School Special Needs Policy
- 7) School Handbook
- 8) DES WSE-MLL School Report
- 9) DES Subject (Guidance) Inspection Report

Fieldwork Stages (Patton, 2002)

Stage 1	Stage 2							Stage 3:
<i>Entering the field</i>	<i>In the Field</i>							<i>Close of fieldwork</i>
25 May 2015	2 & 9 June 2015	5 Oct 2015 - 16 Nov 2015	15 Oct 2015- 3 Nov 2015	22 Oct 2015	3 Nov 2015	9 Feb 2016	27 Jan 2016 – 6 March 2016	7 March 2016 onwards
<i>Initial meeting between research team and school management in case school</i>	<i>Interviews with guidance counsellor and school management</i>	<i>Administration of online staff survey</i>	<i>Four naturalistic observations of guidance counselling activities</i>	<i>Student focus group: Junior Cycle</i>	<i>Student focus group: Senior Cycle</i>	<i>Focus group with parents</i>	<i>Interviews with past students</i>	<i>Exit field, data analysis, and interpretation of findings</i>

Methods of Analysis

- Quantitative: online survey - descriptive and ordinal data analysed in SurveyMonkey to produce statistical information and graphical representation
- Qualitative: thematic analysis of open ended questions in the survey, interviews, focus groups and naturalistic observations using Braun and Clarke's 6 stage framework (2012)

Quality in Case Study

- Four criteria of *construct validity, internal validity, external validity* and *reliability* applied (Abma and Stake, 2014; Cohen et al., 2011; Yin, 2014).
- Regular peer debriefing and support amongst research team, member checking, detailed audit trail and prolonged involvement with the case school (McLeod, 2014).
- Data triangulation (Tashakkori and Teddie, 2003)
- Three level ethical regulation; *legislative (UL Ethics Board)* *professional (IGC, 2012, NCGE, 2008)* and *personal (reflexivity)* (Cohen et al., 2011).
- Reflexivity – individual and team - problematising issues, regular monitoring of researcher bias, analysis of emerging data at different time points and took part in group interpretation of the findings (McLeod, 2014).

Case Study Findings

Distilled through 3 themes:

1. A Whole School Approach to Guidance Counselling in the Case School
2. Guidance Counselling Provision in the Case School
3. Delivering a Whole School Approach to Guidance Counselling: Roles and Responsibilities

T1: Whole School Approach to Guidance Counselling in the Case School

- Rationale, definition and complex understanding of WSA in school: varying perspectives from different stakeholders emerged
- Diffusion at times about WSA guidance provision and pastoral care provision (inc. SPHE) in school
- Confusion amongst some staff about holistic guidance counselling
- Collaborative engagement amongst staff through SST and WSGP – guidance counsellor not working in isolation

T2: Guidance Counselling Provision in the Case School

- Guidance Counsellor: 22 hours for in excess of 650 students
- Holistic model with stronger emphasis on careers and personal guidance over educational guidance by GC
- Awareness of School Guidance Plan an issue
- High workload of GC – personal (1-to-1) guidance counselling commended but consistent challenge to meet demands
- Disparity between JC and SC guidance provision and access to service evident
- WSGP - model of collaborative/collegial careers guidance, also an antidote to pressure of a busy guidance service
- Balance of 1-to-1 vs. classroom guidance
- Emphasis on academic achievement – explicit and implicit

T3: Roles and Responsibilities Re. Guidance Provision in the Case School

- Stakeholder involvement on a spectrum:
from heavy involvement (GC & management), to partial involvement (teaching & support staff), to minimum involvement (students, parents, DES)
- GC role – *delivery of holistic service, chair SST's, co-ordinate WSGP; visible to some stakeholders (staff, students) but less so to others (parents)*
- School Management role – *allocation, administration and support to guidance service*

T3: Roles and Responsibilities in the Case School

- Teaching staff role – *obvious vs unaware – Year Head roles, involvement in SST & WSGP, referral to GC, individual support to students (personal and academic)*
- Students role – *‘receivers’ of guidance, no involvement in Guidance Planning*
- Parents role – *knowledge of provision primarily through their children, some direct experiences of guidance service vs limited knowledge and contact*
- DES role – *policy and curriculum, evaluation and inspection*

Strengths and Limitations of Case Study

- In-depth, holistic singular case study for context and understanding of guidance counselling
- Mixed methods approach
- Prolonged engagement with case school
- Identifies unique features of case school
- Generalisation vs typicality/transferability
- One type of school as the research site i.e. voluntary – further research on other school types needed
- Some stakeholders not included – BOM, external services (e.g. NEPS)

Conclusions

- Boundaries of Guidance Counsellor Role in Schools -
threefold role - *Guidance, Year Head, Teaching*
- Breadth (and depth) of the guidance counsellor's role
with personal aspect of the role experiencing
pressure
- Need for ongoing education of stakeholders -
students, parents, staff - on what guidance is
- Clarity lacking in policy on what precisely is meant by
a whole school approach to Guidance Counselling
(and other school initiatives e.g. Wellbeing)

Conclusions

- Positive disposition for a whole school approach to guidance but readiness is an issue - need for staff CPD on whole school approaches to guidance counselling and pastoral care identified
- As this study concluded a partial restoration of the guidance allocation in Budget 2016 occurred indirectly but crucially not as an ex quota allocation
- Schools now have autonomy/choice re. investment in guidance provision - values and attitudes of management are central to meaningful provision

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