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Guidance counsellors' perceptions and experience of creativity in their professional practice and the impact of this creativity on their work with students

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**Guidance Counsellors' Perceptions and
Experience of Creativity in Their Professional
Practice and the Impact of This Creativity on
Their Work with Students**

Moira Murrihy

**Master of Arts (MA) in Guidance Counselling
and**

Lifespan Development

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**Guidance Counsellors' Perceptions and
Experience of Creativity in Their
Professional Practice and the Impact of
This Creativity on Their Work with
Students**

By Moira Murrihy

Student Number: 09002268

Research Supervisor: Gerry Myers

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Abstract

This study explored Irish post-primary guidance counsellors' perceptions and experiences in relation to the use of creativity in their own professional practice, and the perceived impact of this creativity on their work with students. The ever-changing macro and micro climate of the twenty-first century (especially COVID-19) is a particularly challenging one for students to navigate at post-primary level. As a result of this evolving uncertain and dynamic economic landscape, students require sustained support and guidance concerning their futures. The literature acknowledges that it is more difficult for the students of today to 'choose a career and then pursue it' than it has been heretofore (Lengelle and Ashby, 2017, p.404). The old way of 'doing careers' no longer adequately serves the needs of today's students (Reid and West, 2016, p.573). For these reasons, there is a requirement for guidance counselling to be inventive and creative in how the service responds to the new way of engaging with third level and evolving work practices. An interpretivist paradigm was implemented using semi-structured interviews from nine qualified post-primary guidance counsellors practising in Irish schools (Thomas 2013). The findings were interpreted using Braun and Clarke's (2012) system of thematic analysis. The findings indicate that creativity plays an integral role in guidance counsellors' professional practice on a day-to-day basis. When it comes to employing creative methods within the classroom and in the one-to-one sessions, 'one size does not fit all.' The use of creativity fosters respectful and trusting relationships between guidance counsellors and students. The findings also indicated that having a safe space where students can express themselves is considered important by students. Finally, the research highlights a need for CPD in the area of creativity among guidance counsellors in professional practice. The research concludes with a number of recommendations in relation to policy, practice and research.

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 _____

Moira Murríhy

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Glossary

ASCA	American School Counselor Association
CPD	Continuous professional development
DES	Department of Education and Skills
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
ICT	Information communication technology
IGC	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
RE	Religious education
SEC	State Examination Commission
SPHE	Social Personal and Health Education
UL	University of Limerick

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This thesis comprises a wider study for a Masters Degree in Guidance Counselling. It is interested in exploring the perceptions of guidance counsellors across several themes, notably, their thoughts on creative practices in their engagement with students. The research took place during a period of huge change – a global pandemic, COVID-19 –, which has fundamentally changed the way education will be both delivered and experienced.

This chapter will introduce the research topic and provide the context and rationale underpinning the investigation. It will present the positionality of the researcher and outline the methodology used. The aims and objectives of the research project will be outlined, and the chapter will conclude with a plan of the thesis.

1.1 Context and justification for this research

COVID-19 has changed the way education at all levels and work in all spheres is being, and will be, approached in the future. It has introduced a climate of instability and uncertainty into our lives. This is also experienced in classrooms and expressed in one-to-one meetings with students. Guidance counsellors are at the forefront of assisting students to determine their future choices and in making sense of their sense of purpose in life (Charni 2020).

The ever-changing economic climate of the early twenty-first century is a particularly challenging one for students at post-primary level to navigate. As a result of this, students require support and guidance concerning their futures. It is more difficult for the students of today to ‘choose a career and then pursue it’ (Lengelle and Ashby, 2017, p.404). Due to time constraints, a lack of resources and underfunding, guidance counsellors need to explicitly manage their time with students to maximise engagement.

The old way of ‘doing careers’ does not adequately serve the needs of today’s students as ‘in the context of mass migration and unstable labour markets ... traditional career guidance is no longer sufficient ... the need for a paradigm shift is becoming more urgent’ (Reid and West,

2016, p.573). Due to these reasons, there is a need for guidance counselling to be more inventive and creative than may have been the case heretofore in how the service caters to the everchanging needs of the student populace.

The need for students to become agile in today's unpredictable landscape is crucial. Now more than ever, it is necessary that students learn to become adaptable, as 'the era of employment for life is long over' (Doyle, 2017, p.1). In order to adequately prepare students for the realities which they will inevitably face in third-level education, on courses and in work environments, today's guidance counsellor must also be adaptable and willing to change their education and education methodologies.

The nature and role of a guidance counsellor has changed and evolved over the past number of years. Students today 'quickly become impatient and bored so the counselling process needs to be dynamic' (Geldard and Geldard, 2009, p.177). Due in part to postmodernism and globalization, career guidance has been forced to become more fluid, responsive and cognizant of the virtual world in which students are so invested. We know from research that students spend three to five hours a day on their smartphones (Schwab 2017).

Thus, the approaches used by the guidance counsellors now attempt to seamlessly engage with the current technological period of social media and communications urgency. Guidance counsellors are required to be opportunistic, flexible and quick (Geldard and Geldard 2009). We have witnessed a paradigm shift in terms of provision in the careers service. Traditional approaches to career guidance lack sufficiency (Reid and West 2016). Change agents are, to use a contemporary term, 'influencers' in positions of authority or access and their potential to affect change with stakeholders should not be underestimated. Thus, there is an opportunity to explore what guidance counsellors are doing in their day-to-day work practices as responsive change agents within schools.

1.2 The researcher's positionality in the study

Thomas (2017) articulates that it is imperative for a researcher to make their position known at the beginning of their research, which is particularly important in interpretivist research. In line with Thomas' viewpoint, this section will outline the researcher's position and role in this research (Thomas 2013). The researcher is a trainee guidance counsellor currently teaching English in a post-primary school in the west of Ireland. As a qualified English teacher, the researcher has always had an interest in creativity and its use within the education system as she comes from a creative family background. The researcher's love of music and the arts has played an integral role in how she communicates and connects with students, thus prompting her research into this topic for her own future practice.

The researcher conducted nine semi-structured interviews with qualified post-primary guidance counsellors. Participants of this research were accessed through snowball sampling (HesseBiber and Leavy 2010). The researcher knew one contact professionally which led to her contacting other guidance counsellors who had an interest in the area of creativity.

The researcher endeavoured to recognise her own bias and assumptions through the use of a reflective journal. Using a reflective journal allowed the researcher to address the 'continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation' (Berger, 2015, p.220) which arose throughout the research. It is not felt that the reflective journal led to any surprises that were pertinent to the study, but it did assist in framing the direction the researcher wanted to take over the lifetime of the study.

1.3 Research methodology

Research was conducted using an interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm was chosen to engage guidance counsellor's perceptions and experience of creativity in their own professional practice and the impact of this creativity on their work with students. Nine semi-structured interviews were completed with qualified practising guidance counsellors. The interviewees were selected through snowballing sampling. Thematic analysis, developed by Braun and Clarke (2012) was performed to analyse the data.

1.4 Aims and objectives of the study

This study seeks to engage with guidance counsellors' perceptions and experience of creativity in their own professional practice and the impact of this creativity on their work with students. This research will focus on post-primary schools in Ireland. As such, the primary research question identified by the researcher is:

1. What are the different types of creative tools employed by guidance counsellors in professional practice and what impact do they have on the students they work with?

There were three secondary questions posed in this study:

1. What are the main benefits of using creative methods in a guidance counsellor's professional practice in a post-primary school and what impact might they have on students?
2. What do guidance counsellors, who use creativity within their own professional practice, feel works well for them (in the classroom or in a one-to-one session)?
3. What are the forms, if any, formal or informal, of continual professional development that guidance counsellors feel might further deepen the creativity in their professional practice?

The first aim of this research is to explore the various types of creative methods employed by guidance counsellors. This is particularly relevant today as, due to time constraints and a lack of resources, one-to-one sessions are no longer a regular option for students. It is, therefore, important 'that the limited time career practitioners do have available to work directly with young people is optimised' (Westergaard, 2012, p.327).

Secondly, the aim of this research is to investigate what guidance counsellors are currently doing in their professional practices to ensure their work is responsive and agile, and to question which methods work best with students.

1.5 Dissertation outline

Chapter 1

Introduction

This chapter presents the context and justification for research into the topic of creativity used by guidance counsellors and its perceived impact on students. Relevant literature is presented which offers justification for the chosen topic of research. It also details the positionality of the researcher and discusses the methodology chosen to collect and analyse the data. It concludes with an outline of the structure of this dissertation.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter presents an overview and critical analysis of relevant policy and literature on the topic of guidance counsellors' perceptions and experience of creativity in their professional practice and the impact of this creativity on their work with students. The chapter details how the literature was selected (including inclusion and exclusion criteria) and points out areas of agreement and divergence. Finally, it highlights themes that will be critically reflected upon in the discussion chapter.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter contemplates the research questions and presents the epistemology that underpins the study, justifies the use of the chosen interpretivist paradigm as well as the chosen data collection methods. Ethical considerations are also discussed.

Chapter 4

Findings

This chapter provides a description of the nine participants and presents the main themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis. It notes that the research took place during COVID19, which meant that the proposed methodology had to be changed. This chapter will include representative quotations from participants.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This chapter synthesises the findings in the context of the research questions and literature review. Ethical considerations are also outlined. It creates a critical synthesis of the findings and the literature and policy implications for the areas under review. The chapter engages with areas of corroboration, divergence and contestation and seeks, overall, to reframe what creativity might mean in the practice of guidance counsellors in the present Irish context at a social, economic, political and educational level.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This chapter encapsulates the findings of this research. It presents the strengths and limitations of this study and outlines recommendations for future practice, policy and research in the area of creativity within guidance counselling practice. It will also provide a statement of personal and professional learning.

The following chapter presents a literature review, looking to the scholarly contribution of commentators from the field of education.

2. Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Carson and Becker (2004) suggest that there is no doubt there are various benefits to using creativity when delivering guidance counselling within the classroom and during one-to-one sessions; however, not all guidance counsellors are comfortable with using divergent thinking in terms of how they deliver their services. Thus, pupils are dependent on the philosophical disposition of guidance counsellors in terms of accessing the more creative strands of teaching.

This literature review explores such creative practices in an educational setting and how these creative practices may help students to express themselves in ways they typically do not with the more traditional approaches to teaching, instruction and learning. The chapter aims to contextualise creativity and creative practices in the context of well-being, and then examine their perceived value as alternatives to mainstream approaches where the aforementioned more traditional practices have not been successful as interventions in terms of engaging with students.

An overview of Irish Policy on Guidance Counselling, theory on creative practices and research on the perceived benefits of such practices on students will be interpreted and synthesised in this chapter (Gladding 2008; Merriam 1998). This literature review will concentrate on three main areas, which are presented in thematic sections. The opening section explores the policy and practice of guidance counselling in second-level education. The second section discusses how guidance counselling is delivered in the classroom in second-level education, and the final section discusses creative methods employed by guidance counsellors. Firstly, the researcher will identify the search strategy.

2.1 Search strategy

The database in the Glucksman Library at The University of Limerick was the primary source used for researching information. A variety of search terms were included such as ‘guidance counselling’, ‘creative practices’, ‘experiential’, ‘post-primary’, ‘student’, ‘counsellor’, the

American spelling of the word ‘counselor’, ‘active learning’ and ‘high school’. Searches more specific to the guidance counsellor’s perceptions used included the terms, ‘perceptions’, ‘experiences’ and ‘engagement’. Search terms from both lists were also combined for more specific searches. Included in the search were peer-reviewed articles and reports from the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC), National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), Department of Education and Skills (DES), American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and other professional bodies. Specifically, the following databases were accessed: EBSCO, ERIC, JSTOR, LexisNexis Academic and Google Scholar.

2.2 Constraints of this literature review

‘Guidance in second level schools refers to a range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence that assists students to develop self-management skills which will lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives.’

(DES, 2005, p.4).

There are many creative approaches to counselling such as music, drama, art and dance, to name a few (Gladding 2005). Creativity ‘in clinical practice can serve as a foundation for creativity in counsellor education’ (Council for the Association of Counseling and Related Educational Programs 2009 in Allison Smith, 2011, p.150). Due to the word limit constraints of the research, this review will focus on creative practices used within an educational setting and will not include specifically recognised therapeutic approaches such as psychotherapy or art therapies used by practising psychotherapists.

2.3 Irish Policy relating to the delivery of guidance counselling in post-primary schools

The term guidance is defined in Irish policy as a learning experience that supports a learner’s development of the skill of self-management, which will eventually direct efficient decisions and choices regarding their lives (NCGE 2004). Within the Irish context, the guidance

counsellors convey guidance through a holistic method, which comprises social and personal progression, career supervision and educational guidance (DES 2005).

The areas of classroom guidance, classroom well-being, teaching and learning, and guidance counsellor support of students in difficulty have become the source of much empirical work (Baxter and Kavanagh 2012; Reid 2016; Smith 2011; Veach and Gladding 2006). This study will focus on the use of creative methods in both the classroom delivery of guidance counselling and within the one-to-one sessions.

2.3.1 Wellness and well-being

The concepts and constructs of wellness and well-being are now moving centre stage in the education system and in workplaces more generally. For these reasons, this is an opportune time to explore how career guidance teachers could explore creative intelligence through their work in both group and individual contexts with students (Dodge *et al.* 2012; Hefferon *et al.* 2017).

Attempting to define well-being is problematic. On the one hand there is a hedonic tradition, looking to happiness, general satisfaction with life, positive affect and low negative affect (Lyubomirsky and Lepper 1999); on the other hand, there is the eudaemonic tradition, with an emphasis on positive psychological functioning and lifespan development, going back to Rogers (1967). It seems reasonable to argue that, whatever one's particular tradition, wellbeing is a multidimensional construct. Essentially, guidance counsellors can place themselves at the forefront of innovative teaching methodologies as they are not as constrained by the more traditional disciplines (Walsh *et al.* 2018).

2.3.2 Wellness and well-being in a policy context

Interestingly, policy relating to Irish post-primary school also recognises the importance of well-being and the effects that mental health can have on a student. As a result of this, the

NCCA policy on well-being reflects the need for positive engagement with the guidance counselling service (NCCA 2017). The new well-being programmes can be delivered in the classroom and are designed to complement the existing SPHE (DES 2000) and RSE (DES 1998) modules. The new framework for the Junior Cycle (DES 2015a) places a strong emphasis on well-being and mental health in the Junior Cycle. It states that:

‘In recognition of the unique contribution that guidance can make to the promotion of students’ well-being, guidance provision may also be included in the hours available for wellbeing’

(DES, 2015b, p.22).

However, these programmes do not engage with vocational guidance at Junior Cycle level (Baxter and Kavanagh 2012). The opposite can be said of the Senior Cycle where the emphasis is on vocational guidance in the classroom. Senior Cycle students are exposed to the world of work in programmes that are part of the guidance plan in a post-primary school (DES 2017a). It is evident that there is an imbalance in the way in which guidance counselling is delivered in post-primary schools between the Junior Cycle and the Senior Cycle. In 2009, the DES drew attention to this imbalance, declaring that ‘there is a lack of balance in guidance provision between the Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle’ (DES, 2009, p.11). It remains to be seen whether or not this imbalance will be addressed by either policy or practice (Smyth and Calvert 2011). In Irish post-primary schools, guidance counselling is traditionally delivered within a one-to-one session and also within a classroom setting. The classroom setting can include the use of ICT as well as a range of other teaching methodology. The use of ICT within the classroom is actively encouraged by DES (2015b) and is essential to deliver material relating to websites and online resources (Bimrose *et al.* 2010; Reid 2016). Incorporating ICT into a careers class allows the guidance counsellor the opportunity to deliver information in creative and interesting ways, which in turn enhances the students’ career knowledge (DES 2015).

Carl Rogers defines creativity as the ‘emergence in action of a novel relational product growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on one hand and the materials, events, people or circumstances of his life in the other’ (Rogers, 1945, p.51). There are many links between creativity and promoting positive mental health (Noone 2019). Despite the policies in place to

promote well-being in post-primary schools, Hearne *et al.* (2016) argue that the DES cutbacks to guidance counselling services in 2012 mean that Junior Cycle students are not receiving adequate guidance counselling provision.

2.4 A safe place for students to express their thoughts and feelings

The research conducted highlighted the importance of providing students with a safe environment in which to express their feelings and concerns (Westergaard 2012; Lengelle and Ashby 2017; Maree 2013). ‘Safety’ in this case ‘refers to both the physical environment and the boundaries of the relationship’ (Westergaard, 2012, p.330). The importance of a safe and secure space where students can express themselves is paramount when working creatively with students. Some students do not feel safe in their own homes, in their neighbourhood or even within their own classrooms (Westergaard 2012). Natalie Rogers discussed the importance of a psychologically safe environment in her interview with Tony Merry (1997) in which she advocates the use of the person-centred approach when using expressive arts therapy. Similarly, to Westergaard, Rogers advocates that clear boundaries are established and that as counsellors, we honour our own boundaries and the boundaries of the client to the best of our ability.

It is important that the guidance counsellor establishes these boundaries at the beginning of the session in order for the student to feel safe and at ease. This applies equally within the group context and in one-to-one sessions. Geldard and Geldard describe how important these boundaries are and also how important it is to establish the levels of confidentiality:

‘In order for the child to feel safe, a level of confidentiality is required. This confidentiality, and its limits, need to be discussed with the child early in the relationship-building processes

(Geldard and Geldard, 2007, p.13).

Students who feel safe within a ‘holding environment’ will participate and ‘engage more closely with their inner worlds’ (Hunt *et al.*, 1998, p33). Winnicott (1971) described this space as a ‘holding environment, giving opportunities to meet neglected ego needs and allow the true authentic self to emerge’ (Winnicott, 1971, p.23). This holding space ‘is the space between the inner and outer world which is also the space between people – the transitional space – that intimate relationships and creativity occur’ (Winnicott, 1971, p.23). Within this holding space

a student can express themselves freely without fear of judgement, creating an experience for the student which is all ‘grist to the therapy mill’ (Yalom, 2001, p.71).

For this reason, it is important that young people feel welcomed when attending a one-to-one session with the guidance counsellor. Students must also feel cared for as ‘sometimes speechless with anxiety, the very first message they receive would be these’ (Luxmoore, 2000, p.112). The feeling of isolation can disrupt the attainment of the feeling of safety within the environment. Once the student feels safe in their surroundings it can often help to ‘break through the sense of isolation that those who are dealing with difficult issues often feel’ (Maree, 2013, p.3).

The importance of establishing a safe place where students feel safe to share their creative expressions is a sentiment also shared by Lengelle and Ashby. A classroom or office environment where there is empathy allows students to feel as though they can abandon familiar replies and ‘ready-made common expressions’ (Lengelle and Ashby, 2017, p.410). Of course, it is accepted that some expression might be very mundane and ordinary or routine, rather than creative. In Lengelle and Ashby’s *Recommendations for practice* there is an emphasis on how trust is linked to how comfortable students feel sharing their work. In this instance, a ‘safe place’ also means a place which is free from criticism and a place where feedback is ‘gentle’ (Lengelle and Ashby 2017, p.410).

Prever (2010) emphasises ‘the importance of establishing a warm, empathic relationship with a young person as a prerequisite of a successful counselling and helping’ (Prever, 2010, p.650). The establishment of such a relationship between a guidance counsellor and student is intrinsically linked to how safe a student feels, such a relationship ‘requires a willingness to be vulnerable and to receive responses in a non-defensive way’ (Lengelle and Ashby, 2017, p.411). However, although the quality of the relationship between the guidance counsellor and a student has been cited as an important component for a successful session by various authors, Cooper (2010) believes that there may be too much of an emphasis on its significance, stating ‘... while the relationship may be the key healing agent for many clients, it cannot be assumed that it will be necessary or important for all’ (Cooper, 2010, p.189). The main body of literature suggests that the importance of a student feeling safe in a guidance counselling session is paramount.

The link between a safe place and the use of creative counselling practices is central to a successful session and delivery of such techniques.

2.5 Creative counselling and the career guidance experience

Creativity in counselling can be understood as ‘divergent thinking’, or ‘thinking outside of the box’ (Smith, 2001, p.152). Hecker and Kottler suggest that creativity is a collaborative process between a client and counsellor. They believe that creativity is developed in this relationship, as being creative ‘is a process typically born from frustration or the need for a solution’ (Hecker and Kottler, 2002, p.2). This frustration felt by the therapist and their client ‘are often the thunderstorms guiding the lightning bolts of creativity’ (Hecker and Kottler, 2002, p.8). Of course, a guidance counsellor is not engaged in a formal therapeutic relationship, as with a therapist/client, nonetheless there are elements of the therapeutic tradition such as respect, empathy, active and passive listening, and growth facilitation.

2.6 Narrative approach

As a creative approach to counselling, the narrative technique proved to be one of the most popular techniques used by counsellors from the findings of the research. Maree’s theory on ‘narratibility’ is similar to Winslade and Monk’s belief that ‘we live our lives according to the stories we tell about ourselves and the stories others tell about us’ (Winslade and Monk, 2007, p.2). Thus, the idea behind using the narrative technique with students is that they can define ‘how the self of yesterday became the self of today and will become the self of tomorrow’ (Savikas, 2005 p.58). In essence, students can narrate their own stories or tell their stories to help make sense of their own lives. Guidance counsellors using this technique prompt students to ‘use their own words to tell their own stories which carry their own meaning’ (Semmler and Williams, 2000, p.51).

Oliver *et al.* (2007) advocate the use of letter writing as part of narrative therapy. They believe that writing letters to family members can build stronger connections within the family. The

letters written by students to a family member can be positive and focus on positive changes made rather than focusing on the negatives of a certain relationship.

Expressive writing can also refer to ‘journaling’. Journaling can be helpful to students who struggle to express themselves verbally (Zyromski 2007). The process of journaling involves students writing about their feelings during any time of the day. Students can journal at the end of the day while reflecting on what has happened during the day or they can focus on what feelings they are having at any particular time, and this writing can take a structured or unstructured form depending on the student’s own preference (Gess-Newsome *et al.* 2003). Some students may prefer to express themselves with the use of technology and blog about their feelings and emotions (Lent and Brown 2013).

Changing how a student views their own narrative can have a positive effect on them. For example, a student who has been told all their lives that they ‘don’t matter’ or that they are ‘no good’ will start to internalise this narrative and begin to believe it (Nafziger and DeKruyf 2013). Once a student is able to narrate their own life story, they also have the power and ability to control their story. The student becomes the ‘author of their own life’ (Meijers and Lengelle 2012), between the narration of their first and second story, a ‘transformational space’ exists in which a new perspective is gained by the student and this shift in thinking allows for the emergence of a new narrative.

2.7 Expressive writing

Adolescents can express themselves through various creative ways as a ‘means of expressing the inner explosion of adolescence’ (Emunah, 1990, p.102). In 2013, Burke and Minton published an article for the NCGE entitled *Positive Psychology in Guidance Counselling*.

Snyder and Lopez describe positive psychology as ‘scientific and applied approach to uncovering people’s strengths and promoting their positive functioning’ (Snyder and Lopez, 2007, p.3). Expressive writing featured among the interventions described by Burke and Minton (2013). Lengelle and Ashby define ‘Writing as soul work’ as ‘the active engagement of students in transformative writing activities’ (Lengelle and Ashby, 2010, p.406).

In the last decade or so, more than four hundred journal papers have been published on the benefits of expressive writing (Burke and Minton 2013). Burke and Minton (2013) stress the psychological benefits of expressive writing and link its effects to an improvement in the overall well-being of those who took part in a short expressive writing intervention. According to Pennebaker (1997), expressive writing increases and enhances positive moods in participants. There are many varying types of expressive writing. Lengelle *et al.* define these as ‘creative, expressive and reflective/reflexive writing’ (Lengelle *et al.*, 2013, p.420).

Lengelle and Ashby (2017) cite many beneficial reasons for a guidance counsellor to use writing as soul work. On a practical level, writing as soul work is ‘both time and cost effective’ (Lengelle and Ashby, 2017, p.413). The positive results of writing for personal development are well documented (Pennebaker 2011). Its use in careers work has also been researched and the results of using expressive writing are promising (Lengelle and Meijers 2014). Writing for soul work also increases literacy levels among the students who participate in writing exercises, and this has a positive effect on the student’s subjects across the board.

Students can express themselves in a powerful way through the medium of poetry as a means of self-expression (Alexander 1990). Bowman (1992) believed that students expressing themselves through poetic intervention could grow through their own journey of selfdiscovery. The authors Kress *et al.* (2008) postulate that letter writing has the same effect on students. Students who write therapeutic letters to their future selves can help students imagine that they are in a different place to the one they are in now.

2.8 Conclusion

There is a vast amount of literature available on the topic of expressive writing; however, the literature relating directly to Irish post-primary schools is limited. Most of the literature is based in the UK educational system; however, the types of creative interventions are still applicable and relevant to this research topic.

We must remember that all students learn differently, and some students may not fully engage with creative techniques (Collins 2018). We noted earlier how overusing creative techniques can be unconstructive. Having said this, Carson and Becker (2004) believe that ‘creativity can

often be the water that quenches dry throats in the desert and points the way to an oasis' (Carson and Becker, 2004, p.112).

This research aids in understanding that there are many benefits to employing creative methodologies in the post-primary sector. Moreover, this research also states that the clients usually feel the techniques that are 'creative playful', and this approach of operating is unfamiliar and might encourage the client to feel additionally open. It has also been evaluated through this research that such interventions also aid in consideration of time constraints faced by guidance counsellors within the post-primary schools.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological framework of the study. It notes that a qualitative approach was taken with semi-structured interviews, which were interpreted using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012). The research viewed the concept of creativity among a cohort of post-primary guidance counsellors in the Republic of Ireland (Donnelly 2016).

3.1 Rationale for the study

Guidance may be defined as 'a range of processes designed to enable individuals to make informed choices and transitions related to their educational, vocational and personal development' (Watts and Kidd, 2000, p.489).

Guidance counselling was introduced into Irish post-primary schools in 1966, and in 1972 guidance provision was allocated on an ex-quota basis to all post-primary schools with an excess of 250 pupils (Coolahan, 1981, p.198). Since 2012, the ex-quota allocation for guidance counselling has been removed. A specific issue has been identified by the IGC whereby school management are regularly forced to elect between offering a curricular exam subject and guidance provision (IGC 2012b).

There are some thirty-four subjects for Senior Cycle students (SEC 2017), but provision and allocation dominate the landscape of potential choice. It is clear from the research that 'students

make decisions within a specific school context and their choices are therefore likely to be influenced by school structures and practices' (Darmody and Smyth, 2005, p.165).

Within this landscape, guidance counsellors must make optimum use of their time with students. The overall objective of this research is to explore the various creative methods employed by guidance counsellors in professional practice within an Irish post-primary school setting (Galvin 2012). This is particularly relevant today as it is important 'that the limited time career practitioners do have available to work directly with young people is optimised' (Westergaard, 2012, p.327).

3.1 Research questions

For the purpose of this study, the term 'research' is defined as an investigation through scientific analysis (Tuckman and Harper 2012). Research questions frame the design paradigm of the research and how it is delivered (Hogan *et al.* 2009; Punch and Oancea 2014). The primary research question encompasses the overall aim and objective of this study (Miles *et al.* 2013). Thomas (2009) articulates that research is not based on a chosen methodology but rather the question that it is posing.

This research aims to investigate what guidance counsellors are doing on a day-to-day basis in terms of their professional practices, to be creative in their approach to their work. It also aims to question which creative methods appear to work best for guidance counsellors with students including, for example, use of snow globes, storytelling, poetry, music and narrative storytelling. Therefore, the study seeks to engage with guidance counsellors' perceptions and experience of creativity in their own professional practice and the impact of this creativity on their work with students.

As such, the primary research question identified by the researcher is:

1. What are the different types of creative tools employed by guidance counsellors in professional practice and what impact do they have on the students they work with?

There were three secondary questions posed in this study:

1. What are the main benefits of using creative methods in a guidance counsellor's professional practice in a post-primary school, and what impact might they have on students?

2. What do guidance counsellors, who use creativity within their own professional practice, articulate works well for them (in the classroom or in a one-to-one session)?
3. Are there any forms of formal or informal continual professional development (CPD) that guidance counsellors feel might further deepen the creativity in their professional practice?

3.2 Methodology

Methodology has been defined by Mills and Birks (2014) as a ‘lens’ which a researcher can see through when choosing an appropriate method of research to answer the question posed by the study. Boudah (2010) postulates that methodology is not merely a description of *how* the methods will be used in the study, but rather *why* those methods were chosen and what the limitations of those methods are. According to Thomas (2013), the research design should also factor in how the researcher proposes to acquire participants and what the timeframe for the research is.

Mills and Birks (2014) argue that the desired outcome of the study influences the researcher’s choice of methodology. However, in this instance the researcher’s questions are based on a thirst for knowledge surrounding creative practices employed by guidance counsellors and what the perceived impact these practices have on students. As a result of this, the researcher favoured the qualitative approach in order to gain insight and understanding on the topic of creativity from the perspective of guidance counsellors.

3.2.1 Chosen paradigm and research frame for study

It is worth looking at definitional issues around research paradigms (Basit 2010). A paradigm may be defined as ‘a set of assumptions about the social world, and about what constitutes proper techniques and topics for inquiry’ (Punch, 2005, p.27). The researcher considered the two paradigms of positivism and interpretivism as outlined by Thomas (2013). This particular

research needed to be critical and useful in terms of potential implications for policy and practice, and therefore chose a paradigm that is ‘open to whether there is a problem that needs to be addressed and it is also open regarding what might count as a reasonable resolution of that problem’ (Feinberg *et al.*, 2012, p.236). As this study is based on guidance counsellors’ personal perceptions on how creativity impacts students, the data collected was considered to be subjective (Basit 2010). An interpretivist qualitative method was used to collect data.

The next section of this chapter will discuss the rationale for choosing the qualitative approach to data collection.

3.2. 2 Rationale for choosing the qualitative approach

The rationale for choosing the qualitative approach is that it is ‘beneficial for this study to have the opinions and feedback from guidance counsellors working directly in the field as both gatekeepers and stakeholders’ (McLeod, 2015, p.92). Qualitative research ensures that the participants are given a voice and this gives the research more authenticity by the data collected focusing on ‘depth rather than breadth’ (Basit, 2010, p.16). In essence, we are interested in the richness of narratives and in what is termed in the research meaning-making (Cohen *et al.* 2013; Thomas 2013).

The information collected from the participants consisted of their own views and opinions on the topic of creativity. Thomas (2013) states that interpretivist epistemology is concerned with how people’s views are constructed. Each of the participants’ responses varied depending on the question, therefore the data could not be analysed using a numeric scientific formula (Thomas 2013), leading to a particular choice of methodology.

3.3 Choosing the methodology

Interviews are to the point and provide more in-depth information that might not be as succinct and nuanced in a questionnaire design. Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with participants (Thomas 2013). The rationale for choosing semi-structured interviews is because it allows the participant freedom to elaborate on the questions asked and the answers given which may be useful to the researcher, in comparison with structured

interviews which do not allow the same leeway to interviewees. This type of interview also allows for the participant to answer in their own words as the questions are more open-ended (Creswell 2009).

Interviews can put a person at ease to say what they want without having to write it down, and as a result, ideas and conversation can flow more easily allowing the interviewer to have a better understanding of the answers given. Interviews also allow for probing, or further questioning if an answer is unclear or the interviewer can feel they can get the interviewee to elaborate on certain aspects of the information given. The researcher can, for example, use either a topic guide/schedule or prompts such as newspaper articles or photo collages (Berg, 2007, p.96). Similarly, semi-structured interviews provide the participant with their own creative licence to expand on their answers if the material is considered interesting and relevant to the topic of study (Thomas 2013).

In order to capitalise on the ‘off the cuff’ remarks from participants, the researcher needed to be flexible and provide follow-up supplementary questions. These supplementary questions should aim to be linked to the participant’s responses and encourage answers with more depth (Basit 2010).

3.3.1 Strengths and limitations of semi-structured interviews

There are limitations to conducting interviews as they can be time consuming and there is a fear of bias on the researcher’s part (Bell 2010). An interviewer must also be aware of personal agendas and bias when conducting interviews and learn to disregard any information which appears that way. The researcher favours creative methods within their own practice as a trainee guidance counsellor, and therefore ought to be aware of this bias while conducting interviews. Similarly, Cooper (2010) advocates for an open attitude to the process.

The researcher is aware that their own biases may affect the research and in order to address this concern she has kept a reflective journal (Bassot 2010). These potential biases were addressed in a reflective journal using Schön’s model of reflection. Schön advocates that a change in behaviour is possible through reflecting on a lived experience (Schön 1983). The

reflective journal ensured that any biases were monitored by the researcher. Using this model, the researcher reflected by describing any issues that arose during the interviews.

Interviews as a method of data collection can also be a very time-consuming process (Imms and Ereaut 2002) in terms of organising times and days that suit everyone, and often an interviewer is at the mercy of the interviewee in regard to how much information they can actually give. An interviewee may not have the information needed at the time of the interview and, as a result, interviewing can become a stressful process when interviewees are giving one word replies.

The information gathered from interviews can give valuable insight into the feelings and attitudes of the people being interviewed. Recording interviews also means that any piece of information missed during the interview can be easily accessed at a later stage. Given the expected small sample of expected respondents, it is necessary to rely on methods that allow for greater exploratory depth.

Finally, the limitations of the sample mean that the findings cannot be generalised or claim that they are entirely representative of a wider population, but this is mitigated by the fact that this research is more exploratory in orientation.

The next section of this chapter will discuss the research sampling strategy.

3.4 Research sample

Sampling speaks to the overall number of people or units in a study. Researchers want to be able to generalise from the findings, or at least make informed commentary on the sample chosen.

Experienced guidance counsellors with an interest in the topic of creativity were recruited in order to acquire information relevant to the research (Silverman 2013). It was concluded that snowball sampling would be an effective strategy to use.

‘Snowball sampling is an effective strategy for the identification of participants who are able to provide important insights, knowledge, understanding and information about the experience or event that is the focus of the research’

(Offredy and Vickers, 2010, p.139).

The researcher worked with a guidance counsellor who had many connections with others who had expressed interest in the topic of creativity and as such, was able to obtain information on possible participants. In total, nine guidance counsellors were chosen to participate in the study and were interviewed.

3.4.1 Inclusion criteria

Each participant was a qualified guidance counsellor, currently working in the post-primary sector with five or more years of post-qualification work.

3.5 The research process

The intended methodology research for this study was face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with individual guidance counsellors. Owing to the pandemic (Covid-19) however, the face-to-face interviews were replaced with telephone interviews for safety reasons. Telephone interviews have served a purpose when geographical locations, conflict of schedules and concerns relating to GDPR were issues (Holt 2010; Nandi and Platt 2017; Stephens 2007; Sturges and Hanrahan 2004). However, researchers emphasise that technological platforms have many limitations and favour interviewing participants in person (Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst 2017; Deakin and Wakefield 2014; Hanna 2012; Oates 2015; Seitz 2016; Weinmann *et al.* 2012; Weller 2017). Cues taken from body language were absent during telephone interviews; the researcher also spent time speaking to the participants in order to build a rapport with them which would not have been necessary had the interviews taken place face to face.

The interviews with participants were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The participants of the research were sent emails which included all the relevant GDPR policy, and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. The completed and signed forms relating to consent and GDPR were emailed to the researcher prior to audio recording the interviews. The interviews were conducted from 13th April to 24th April, 2020. Each participant was emailed their transcript and asked if any amendments were needed (Bell 2010).

3.6 Data analysis

The data collected from these interviews was analysed using the Braun and Clarke (2012) thematic data analysis framework. Thematic analysis is when the researcher codes the data from the interviews using their own system of symbols, numbers etc. Braun and Clarke (2012) define thematic analysis as ‘essentially a method for identifying and analysing patterns in qualitative data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p.2). The six phases comprise ‘familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes and the final stage of producing the findings report’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.287).

For the familiarisation stage, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with participants, which were recorded with a Dictaphone. All information from the interviews was collected and transcribed by the researcher directly after they had taken place (Charmaz, 2006 p.3). Once the interviews had been transcribed, the raw data which emerged was then coded by the researcher using various colours and initials (Braun and Clarke 2012). The coding process for this type of data is a process known as coding by content, or content analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012; Thomas 2013). According to Charmaz (2006), ‘Coding distils data, sorts them, and gives us a handle for making comparisons with other segments of data’ (Charmaz, 2006, p.3). The coding process identified various overarching themes on the topic, which the researcher then organised using various headings for the chosen themes (Bryman 2012).

The final stage of the data analysis was interpreting the data and writing the findings, which are presented in Chapter 4 (Gibbs 2007).

3.7 Validity and reliability issues

Validity refers to a ‘process whereby the researcher earns the confidence of the reader that he or she has “gotten it right”. Trustworthiness takes the place of truth’ (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2010, p.48). The data collected by the researcher must be examined through a critical lens to ensure it ‘is likely to be reliable and valid’ (Bell 2010, p.119).

Reliability, as defined by Thomas (2013), is the ‘extent to which a test will give the same result on different occasions’ (Thomas, 2013, p.138). In relation to qualitative methods, reliability is concerned with the correlation between the recorded data from the researcher and ‘what actually occurs in the natural setting that is being researched’ (Cohen *et al.*, 2013, p.119).

A related term to both validity and reliability issues is triangulation. Triangulation refers to gathering data from various sources on the same topic (Thomas 2013). The researcher is aware that it is difficult to get conclusive evidence from semi-structured interviews alone (Thomas 2013). Due to time constraints it was not possible to incorporate other means of data collection; this is one of the limitations of this study which is discussed in Chapter 6.

In order for qualitative research to be reliable while being subjective, the researcher must practise reflexivity (Braun and Clarke 2012). The next section of this chapter discusses reflexivity in more detail.

3.8 Reflexivity

It is pertinent that ‘researchers must continually ask themselves where they are at any given moment in relation to what they study and what are the potential ramifications of this position on their research’ (Berger, 2015, p.231). In this instance, the researcher of this study is interested in the topic of creativity. ‘There is no such thing as a “position-free project”. Even the detached objective external researcher occupies a position with respect to the research’ (Punch and Oancea, 2014, p.50). With this in mind, the researcher needed to practise reflexivity to ensure the validity and reliability of the data collected. The researcher has worked in the educational sector for eight years and as such, the attitudes associated with this experience needed to be examined by the researcher (Hayes and Morgan 2011).

3.9 Ethical issues

Thomas (2017) defines ethics as ‘principles of conduct about what is right and wrong’ (Thomas, 2017, p.37). Mertens (2010) believes that ‘ethics in research should be an integral part of the research planning and implementation process’ (Mertens, 2010, p.12).

The researcher ensured the participants were provided with information on the topic of study, GDPR guidelines and consent forms. These documents were provided to the Ethics Board in UL. The researcher is aware that they have a duty of care to the participants that consented to taking part in the research (Hearne 2013). In accordance with this, the researcher ensured that the principles of ethical research were upheld: (i) nonmaleficence, (ii) beneficence, (iii) autonomy, (iv) fidelity and (v) justice (McLeod 2015). These five principles align with the ethical principles proposed by the National Centre for Guidance in Education which are ‘respect for the rights and dignity of the person, competence, responsibility and integrity’ (NCGE, 2008, p.2).

UL’s Ethics Committee granted ethical approval in February 2020. Once ethical approval had been granted the researcher contacted participants by telephone to arrange a time and date for the audio recorded interview. While conducting interviews with those who consented, the researcher also followed the IGC Code of Ethics (2012) to ensure that the interviews were done in an ethical manner. The guidelines provided from the IGC ‘can serve as a reference point when specific issues arise in the research process such as duty of care, levels of confidentiality guaranteed and the sharing of data’ (Hearne, 2013, p.7).

All information from the interviews was collected with confidentiality, and anonymity was maintained in conversations with others and in the storage of the interviews. The researcher assured the participants of confidentiality and anonymity. Transcripts of the conducted interviews were given to participants to make sure they were happy with what they had said and this also allowed participants the option to edit their scripts. The researcher was also mindful that participants consented voluntarily to be part of the research during their own free time. The collected data was stored in accordance with the University of Limerick’s data storage and destruction policy and adhered to General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

3.10 Conclusion

The methodological approach underpinning the research study was discussed in this chapter. This chapter outlined the methodology used to conduct the research and discussed the rationale

for choosing a qualitative methodological approach. The research questions were presented in this chapter and issues such as validity, reliability and reflexivity were also discussed.

The data collection method was outlined and discussed as well as the analysis of the data. Issues of validity, reliability and ethical issues were also discussed in this chapter. The researcher employed a research journal as a tool for writing up research elements. The chapter concludes with an ethical consideration relating to any issues relating the research.

The next chapter will present the findings from the semi-structured interviews.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of nine semi-structured interviews with Irish post-primary guidance counsellors based in various schools around the country. The research findings arose from Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach which was discussed in more detail in the methodology chapter. The themes presented address the research questions and highlight the important role creativity plays for guidance counsellors in the twenty-first century. The findings from the data analysis revealed five overarching themes with one subtheme. This chapter is divided into two sections; the first section will briefly describe the participants of this study. The second section of this chapter will present the main themes and subthemes identified by the researcher.

4.1 The participants

The following table presents participant information.

*Pseudonyms are used in this table to ensure the anonymity of the research participants.

Table 4.1: Interview Profiles

Participant *	Position	Initial teaching qualification	Number of students
Orla	Guidance counsellor with 20+ years' experience	English & History	350 students – mixed gender
Louise	Guidance counsellor 5 years' experience	English & Geography	550 students – mixed gender
Kate	Guidance counsellor 18 years' experience	English	525 students – all boys school
Jerry	Guidance counsellor 25 years' experience	English & History	430 students – all boys school

Helen	Guidance counsellor 14 years' experience	English	560 students – all boys school
Fiadh	Guidance counsellor & College of Further Education 10+ years' experience	English Literature	570 students – mixed gender
Ellen	Guidance counsellor 6 years' experience	English & S.P.H.E	440 students – mixed gender
Cliona	Guidance counsellor 5 years' experience	English	476 students – mixed gender. One of two schools in the country to use ipads in the classroom
Cara	Guidance counsellor 7 years' experience	English & Geography	420 students – mixed

The findings can be broken down into five thematic areas.

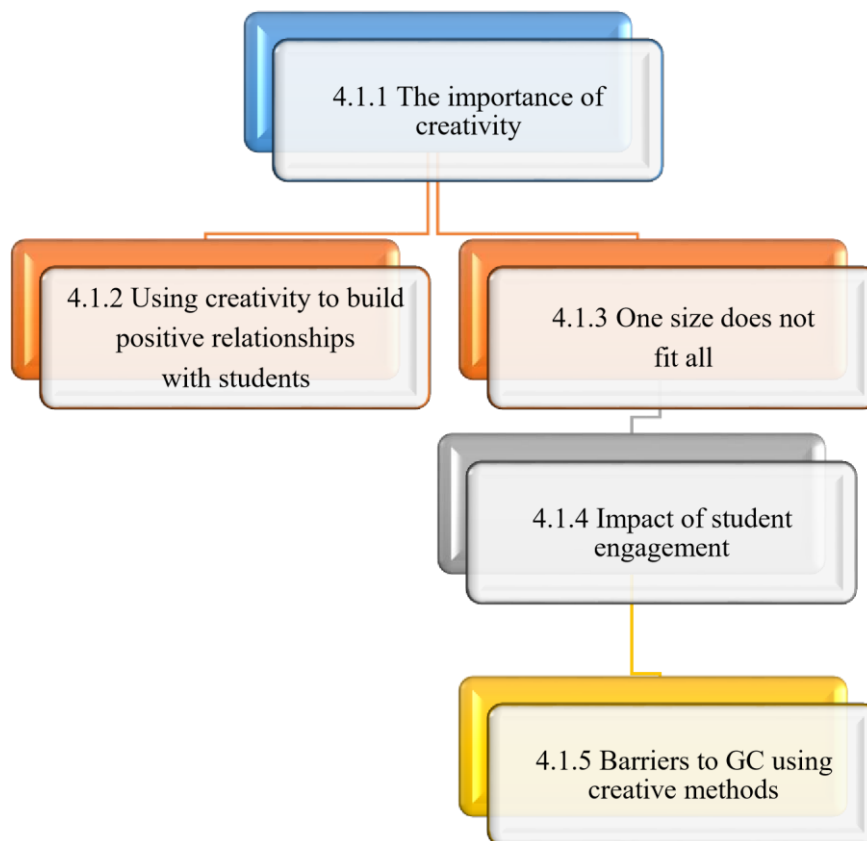


Figure 4.1 Map of Overarching Themes

4.2 Theme 1: The importance of creativity to guidance counsellors in their professional practice

The research indicated that creativity is important to each of the nine respondents in their professional practice for various reasons. Creativity was reported as important in the delivery of class material, such as CAO information, working with students in one-to-one sessions and engaging students in the classroom. Guidance counsellors do not have a specific curriculum to follow; however, information regarding the CAO, apprentices, psychometric testing, Junior Cycle subject information and other careers-related information must be delivered to students. Specifically, how this type of information is delivered to students varies from school to school as there is no standardised national guidance plan. Each of the nine respondents report that creativity is important to ensure all information regarding careers is made accessible to all students. For this reason, Orla emphasised the importance of creativity and highlighted that guidance counsellors need to be *‘independently creative in how they develop a guidance syllabus and how they develop that content to make it more accessible to students’*.

The findings highlighted the importance of creativity within the well-being framework which is part of the new Junior Cycle. Five of the respondents discussed the importance of creativity when tasked with organising well-being initiatives. The respondents indicated that the well-being hours are at the discretion of the school management and there is no standardised plan for how those hours are delivered. In relation to the well-being hours, Helen articulated that *‘creativity and guidance is extended without any kinds of guidelines’*. Due to the lack of guidelines available, the interviews highlighted how creativity in guidance counselling is a product of necessity, and therefore an important aspect of their professional practice.

The research highlighted how creativity is important to guidance counsellors in their one-to-one sessions. Each of the nine respondents indicated that creative methods were important when dealing with a student who was not responding to traditional talk therapy. Louise discussed how creativity, to her, means *‘being flexible and responding to clients’ needs,’* particularly when she is meeting students for one-to-one counselling sessions. Louise believes that it is imperative to *‘be creative in terms of how to make the student more comfortable and to navigate the process’*. Similarly, Ellen has experienced students who have found it difficult to open up in her one-to-one sessions. Ellen suggests that *‘it is paramount that a guidance counsellor has*

the capacity to implement creative strategies when a student is struggling to articulate'. For this reason, Ellen also contends that *'creativity is about adopting a strategy that will work for the student in front of you'*.

The findings indicated that creativity is important to guidance counsellors who feel that they typically have a creative personality. The research also highlighted that creativity is important to guidance counsellors who want their professional practice to be relevant, current and up to date. Fiadh notes that creativity is *'part of her personality'* and that it is an integral part of how she provides guidance within her school. To her, creativity means *'using your imagination to employ critical thinking to create new and original ideas, to think creatively outside the box'*. Cliona and Cara both spoke of how creativity allows them to stay relevant with students. Cara believes creativity is necessary to ensure her delivery of guidance is *'fresh and doesn't go stale, otherwise it would be very boring for the students'*. Cliona concurs with this statement stating that creativity is essential to deliver information to students in *'innovative ways'*.

4.2 Theme 2: Using creativity to build a positive relationship with students

Building a positive relationship with students through the use of creativity was interwoven into each of the respondent's answers to the majority of the questions asked. All nine respondents indicated that using creative methods strengthened their relationship with students. Although the nine respondents differed in what they meant by the term 'creativity', each one of them indicated that their use of creativity was paramount in building relationships with students.

The research highlighted that the current ratio of students to guidance counsellors often means that there is only one guidance counsellor in a post-primary school. Therefore, the guidance counsellor does not have time to build a rapport with a student who they have not met before. One of the respondents discussed how her school has a policy in place where a student can receive no more than six one-to-one sessions.

The interviews highlighted the various creative methods used by guidance counsellors in order to build trusting relationships with students. Three of the respondents spoke about their involvement in extracurricular activities and indicated how their involvement in school events

such as sports teams and school tours allowed them the opportunity to get to know students outside the classroom. Extracurricular activities also provide students with a unique opportunity to spend time with the guidance counsellor in a non-educational setting. This time spent together attending extracurricular activities fosters a relationship built on trust and mutual respect. Orla believes that her involvement in extracurricular activities has allowed her to connect with her students outside the classroom in a positive manner. This connection outside the classroom *'creates a relationship with an anchor'* that otherwise would not be possible during class time. Students are more willing to build a trusting relationship with a guidance counsellor if they see them as a person they can identify with. Building relationships with students must be done in a safe and controlled environment; extracurricular activities ensure that this is done in accordance with all safeguarding policies.

The use of creative methods within the classroom creates a fun atmosphere. This atmosphere of fun and enjoyment is key to fostering and maintaining a positive relationship. Fiadh believes that once a positive learning environment is created, it is much easier to establish and build on a positive connection with students. The findings also revealed that building a positive relationship with students was one of the main reasons students felt comfortable coming to the guidance counsellor with an issue, problem or concern about another student.

Creative strategies work for the majority of students; however, there are also students who feel out of their depth with creativity. The vast majority of students have a positive experience with creativity, but guidance counsellors need to understand that they may not work for every student. Ellen spoke of the importance of noting when a particular creative strategy is not working with a student. She discussed how important it is to move on and try a different approach with that student *'without damaging the relationship'*. This is particularly relevant with students who have had a negative experience with a previous counsellor. If a positive relationship has been built between the student and the guidance counsellor, the student will feel more comfortable speaking about why previous sessions did not work well for them. For this reason, Jerry believes that if you *'get the relationship right'* the rest will follow. He also indicated that students have a positive perception of a guidance counsellor who puts time and effort into being creative with students. In Jerry's experience, *'the student is quite convinced you're taking them seriously and that creates a trusting relationship, then they'd risk anything you want to go along with'*.

4.2.1 Subtheme 1: The importance of creating a safe space for students to express themselves

Five of the respondents expressed the importance of creating a safe space for students to express themselves without judgement. Students need a safe space in which they feel comfortable before they begin to express themselves in a one-to-one session, and need to feel as though what they have said in their session will remain in that safe space, especially students who have to re-enter the classroom once they have finished their session. Creating a safe space is integral to the one-to-one sessions. Three of the respondents spoke about making the physical room comfortable and welcoming for students. One of the respondents discussed how important the interior of her office is to creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere. In her office she has a lamp which she turns on to remind herself to be present with students. She also has created a section in her office where students can *'sit and spend some time with a pen and paper so that there are no eyes on them all the time ... then get a little bit of space'*. She also spoke how a soft chair and a box of tissues can make a student feel safe to express themselves. If a student can see that an effort has been made to make their comfort a priority, they are more willing to open up and express themselves.

Creating a safe space for students is not limited to the one-to-one sessions. Four of the respondents discussed creating a safe space within the classroom. Orla discussed how she organises her classroom in a circle layout. She believes that a tiered approach is not conducive to a relaxed and open classroom environment. A safe space in the classroom promotes lively discussion and debate as the students feel safe to express their views without being judged. Creating a safe environment for students to express themselves promotes a supportive, holistic environment which illustrates to the students that their mental health is just as important as their academic needs. This safe environment encourages students to see guidance counsellors as *'more human'* (Cara). Consequently, students are more willing to open up and express themselves in their one-to-one sessions.

4.3 Theme 3: One size does not fit all

All nine of the participants were primarily English teachers before entering into guidance counselling. Five of the respondents described how they bring their experience of teaching English into the delivery of the guidance course.

The research found that one size does not fit all when using creative methods with students. What works for one guidance counsellor may not work for another. Each of the nine respondents spoke of how planning, and knowing their students, is essential when using creative methods. The general consensus among the nine respondents indicated that a knowledge of the class and student was crucial when deciding if a creative method was appropriate for a particular situation. Cara described how in her current practice, there is a crossover with the English methodology she would previously have used. She discussed how she asks '*students who are dealing with anxiety to practise journaling*'. Jerry strongly believes in the power of writing as a means of connecting creatively with a student. In his practice, Jerry detailed how he uses the narrative approach in his counselling practice. He asks students to tell him a story. In his experience, '*sometimes a kid has a story that they're defined by*'. In Jerry's experience, asking students to 'tell him their story with a different ending' and getting the story from the '*student's point of view*' works well in his one-to-one sessions. Another creative method Jerry spoke about was letter writing. Jerry believes that letter writing works well with '*Mr, I don't do words*'. Louise, Faidh and Jerry discussed how poetry works well with certain students. Louise detailed how she uses the Brendan Kennelly poem *Begin* at the start of a new term and uses the imagery to discuss a student's hopes and ambitions for the coming school year. Jerry spoke about using poetry as a creative intervention with a particular student who was not responding to other methods he had tried within a one-to-one session. Jerry discussed how using poetry with this student worked well as '*it wasn't just poetry or it wasn't just lyrics, but suddenly she had this identity*'. Fiadh discussed how she ran a poetry competition as part of a wellness week in her school. She felt that poetry worked well with the students and helped students feel a little bit better about themselves.

Two respondents spoke about making snow globes with students. Kate uses the snow globe as a metaphor for the student's state of mind. She compares the chaos of a shaken globe to the

student's *frazzled mind* and tells students that '*if you put the globe down and let it rest, it will [become] calm*'. Four of the respondents spoke about running a 'wellness week' or a 'wellbeing week'. In Cara's school, they run a 'wellness day' for Leaving Cert students. The wellness focuses on workshops for students such as healthy eating and coping with anxiety. Helen's school also places a special focus on their Leaving Cert students during well-being week. Helen feels that this is necessary as '*there's a lot of focus on [the] Junior Cycle*'.

4.4. Theme 4: The benefit and impact of student engagement in creative guidance counselling

The research indicated a number of benefits to using creative methods for both guidance counsellors and students. Each of the nine respondents indicated that productivity increases when students engage in a creative lesson. The reported benefits for the guidance counsellor were increased interest from students, a positive learning environment and mutual respect between students and staff. The research highlighted a reported uptake in student engagement when creative methods were employed by guidance counsellors. Each of the nine respondents specified that creativity was paramount in gaining and maintaining student engagement. Three of the respondents discussed how their use of creative methods has engaged students with low self-esteem. Jerry believes creative methods work well with students who have low self-esteem as the delivery of guidance '*ties into supporting the whole person, acknowledging the whole person*'.

Each of the nine respondents spoke about the use of technology in their classes. Six of the respondents discussed how technology has impacted students' engagement levels in their experience from previous years. Louise believes that being creative in terms of social media allows her to '*engage young people*' and that creativity encourages students to engage with topics and helps to promote a dialogue both inside and outside the classroom. Orla spoke about how important creativity is in terms of engaging with students who have ASD. She believes that '*being sensitive to that inclusivity*' and having a holistic approach encourages engagement from all students within a mixed ability class. She also stressed how important being creative is when teaching digital natives as '*their attention span has changed with the technology*'.

In summary, all nine respondents indicated that creativity has an impact on students, especially with students with low self-esteem and those who are vulnerable.

4.5 Theme 5: Barriers to guidance counsellors using creative methods

The research highlighted a number of barriers to guidance counsellors using creative methods. Each of the nine respondents indicated a lack of time and resources as a barrier to using creativity in their professional practice. Discipline issues, a lack of confidence to try new creative methods and a lack of training in creative methods were also highlighted as barriers.

The general consensus from the data collected is that there is a huge demand on a guidance counsellor's time. Three of the respondents felt that there was not enough resources allocated to the guidance department to help alleviate the pressure felt by guidance counsellors. The research indicated that guidance counsellors would be more willing to use new creative methods if they felt they had time to plan and prepare their classes. However, due to the time constraints, some of the respondents admitted that it is easier to use methods they are familiar with. Three of the respondents spoke about how the environment within a classroom can dictate whether or not creative methods are used. Kate remarked that *'discipline is a big issue. When discipline is an issue you're less likely to put students in groups and pairs'*. The research highlighted a link between a lack of confidence in a guidance counsellor's ability to deliver creative methods and a lack of CPD on the topic of creativity. Five of the respondents felt that their confidence in their own ability was a barrier to using certain creative strategies.

Eight of the respondents were not aware of any CPD offered on the topic of creativity. All of the nine respondents would welcome CPD particularly in the area of art therapy, sand therapy, drama workshops and storytelling workshops. One of the respondents discussed how she would *'love to know more strategies, have a bigger bank of resources'*. The research highlighted a lack of CPD in the area of creativity as one of the main barriers faced by guidance counsellors. The majority of the respondents indicated that they would try new creative methods if they had training in the area and felt confident in their ability to deliver it. In conclusion, the barriers to guidance counsellors using creative methods are deficiency of time, insufficient resources, low confidence in their own abilities and a lack of CPD in the area of creativity.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the perceptions and experiences of nine Irish post-primary guidance counsellors on the topic of creativity and its impact on their work with students. The data analysis was outlined, and the findings were analysed and presented through five overarching themes and one subtheme. It was found that building a positive relationship with students through the use of creative methods has many benefits for both guidance counsellor and students. The creation of a safe space where students can express themselves was discussed as an integral part of one-to-one sessions. The various ways in which guidance counsellors use creative methods was outlined in which the research reported that one size does not fit all. The benefit and impact of student engagement in creative guidance counselling was outlined as were barriers to guidance counsellors using creative methods. The next chapter will present a discussion and analysis of the findings in the context of the literature review and research question.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

This chapter aims to contextualise and map back the data from the findings chapter to the literature review. It notes that all policy and practice relate back to core documentation from DES, NCGE and IGC deliberations. The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) advises on policy and strategies for guidance in the context of lifelong learning. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) advises on policies relating to the delivery of guidance counselling in a post-primary setting. In the context of this study, The Irish Institute of guidance counsellors (IGC) ensures that professionalism is maintained by practising guidance counsellors in post-primary schools. The IGC provides the guidelines for practising guidance counsellors to follow in post-primary schools such as The Code of Ethics which is discussed in 5.6 of this chapter.

Having accomplished this, it then looks to the research question, aims and objectives. Chapter 2 highlighted the fact that there are many benefits to guidance counsellors employing creative methodologies in the Irish post-primary educational sector. It also highlighted many barriers for guidance counsellor including a lack of structured and dedicated time with pupils, their training and school resources. The purpose of this study was to engage with guidance counsellors' perceptions and experience of creativity in their own professional practice and the impact of this creativity on their work with students.

The discussion chapter will be presented under the four main themes which emerged from the study:

1. The importance of creativity to guidance counsellors in their professional practice
2. Using creativity to build positive relationships with students
3. One size does not fit all
4. The benefit and impact of student engagement in creative guidance counselling
5. Barriers to guidance counsellors using creative methods

5.1 Overview of research findings

This section of the chapter discusses the findings in relation to the primary research question outlined in Chapter 3. The primary research sought to engage with guidance counsellors' perceptions and experience of creativity in their own professional practice and the impact of this creativity on their work with students. The concept of creativity in guidance counselling appears in the literature in many other systems such as Ghana (Ocansey 2001), Indonesia (Setiawan 2006), Australia (Walker *et al.* 2006) and the United States (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistic 2003) and more recently in countries such as Namibia (Mushaandja *et al.* 2013), Tanzania (Kano 2012) and the UK (Kelechie and Ihuoma 2011). The secondary questions posed by this research set out to gather information on what types of creative methods guidance counsellors are using within their professional practice, what impact these methods have on students and whether or not there is continuing professional development (CPD) offered to guidance counsellors in the area of creative practices.

Overall, the findings highlight the benefits of using creative methods for both student and guidance counsellor. Primarily, creative methods are understood to help to establish a mutually respectful relationship both within the classroom and the one-to-one sessions. Findings highlight that creative methods are enjoyable for both student and guidance counsellor which, in turn, leads to higher levels of engagement. A need for more in-depth and specific CPD courses offered in the area of creative methods was identified. The following sections engage with the themes identified in the study and set them in context to the literature where relevant.

5.2 The importance of creativity to guidance counsellors in their professional practice

The literature review discussed how the nature and role of a guidance counsellor has changed and evolved over the past number of years (Kelechie and Ihuoma 2011). It also noted how, as a result of postmodernism and globalization, guidance counsellors are required to be opportunistic, flexible and quick to respond and adapt to changing work environments (Geldard and Geldard 2009). These sentiments were corroborated by the nine respondents.

Of course, the use of creativity in guidance counselling practice is not a uniform experience and different education systems both place and allow for differing levels of expression. This can be both a philosophical and resource issue (Mushaandja *et al.* 2013).

Many of the respondents discussed how, unlike other subjects, there is no specific syllabus for guidance counsellors to follow. Orla observed the lack of a syllabus stating '*we [guidance counsellors] need to be independently creative in how we develop our syllabus and how we develop our content*'. Guidance counsellors devise their own plan(s) for how the material relating to subject choice, CAO information and information on apprenticeships etc. should be delivered both in classrooms and in one-to-one sessions. Creativity, therefore plays an important role in a guidance counsellor's professional practice.

Although Chapter 2 highlighted how the new Well Being policy (NCCA 2017) reflects the need for positive engagement with the guidance counselling service more generally, research has shown that the DES cutbacks in guidance counselling services in 2012 have resulted in Junior Cycle students are not receiving adequate guidance counselling provision (Hearne *et al.* 2016). Research also noted how the emphasis is on the delivery of vocational guidance in Senior Cycle. Fundamentally, the loss of contact hours in the Junior Cert curriculum cannot be offset by guidance counsellor creativity.

The definition of guidance counselling provided by the DES (2005) emphasises the delivery of guidance through a holistic method, therefore in order for guidance counsellors to deliver a holistic guidance experience for students in both Junior and Senior Cycle, they need to be creative with the delivery of their material. Helen discussed how guidance is now being extended with the new Well Being guidelines stating that '*creativity and guidance is very extended for both without any kinds of limits or guidelines*'.

The findings confirmed how important creativity is for guidance counsellors in one-to-one sessions.

5.3 Using creativity to build positive relationships with students

The literature review advocates for the establishment of a warm, empathic relationship between the guidance counsellor and student (Prever 2010). Establishing a place where students can feel safe is crucial to a successful one-to-one session (Hunt *et al.* 1998). The research data confirms that establishing a positive relationship with students is central to providing a successful guidance service within a post-primary school. One respondent discussed how creativity leads to fun, and fun can lead to a connection. Everything I do, I suppose, really is anchored in ensuring the relationship with the student is upheld. The positive relationship with the student is upheld. Another respondent discussed how employing a creative strategy does not mean that it will be successful: it's about thinking of lots of strategies and understanding the ones that are not working, and moving on without damaging the relationship. In each instance, establishing and preserving a positive relationship is centred on the use of creative practices.

The findings show that once a student feels safe both with the guidance counsellor and in the physical room, a one-to-one session can be quite fruitful. The findings corroborate the theories discussed in the literature review, mainly that a student must feel safe and secure in the environment they are in before they express themselves openly (Westergaard 2012; Lengelle and Ashby 2017; Maree 2018). Orla discussed how guidance counsellors can *'bring them into that space safely where they can express whatever it is that's going on for them in the moment without judgement and they can leave it with you but in that space, leave it in the counselling space'*.

The current ratio of students to guidance counsellors often means that there is only one guidance counsellor in a post primary school (DES 2012). For this reason, the data illustrates that a guidance counsellor's involvement in extracurricular activities can help form positive relationships with students who they otherwise would not get to meet prior to a one to one session. One respondent detailed how important being involved in extracurricular activities has been a huge part of her creating connections with her students,

'Your presence in the school and your involvement in extracurricular...encouraging that involvement and allowing their strengths and their creativity to comment with me in some way. That creates that relationship' (Orla).

For these reasons, guidance counsellors need to be creative with how they manage their time while also catering to the needs of their clients. Consequently, building a positive relationship with students prior to their one to one session is beneficial for a number of reasons.

5.4 One size does not fit all

Interestingly, the findings indicated that each of the nine respondents had a primary degree in English. While researching which creative methods each of the guidance counsellors use, the most popular responses included four media; storytelling, letter writing, journaling and using poetry. Cara discussed how there is a ‘*crossover*’ between the methods she uses when teaching English and working with students. For example, when dealing with students with anxiety, Cara will ask those students to journal and indicates that ‘*it’s not unlike trying to motivate students to start a piece of writing in an English classroom. You’re drawing on the same skills or ideas*’.

Research into creative practices used by guidance counsellors, found that the most effective practices with students were the use of narrative technique, and expressive writing (Gladding 2008; Merriam 1998; Baxter and Kavanagh 2012; Reid 2016; Smith 2011; Veach and Gladding 2006). These forms of creative methods play an important role in difficult one to one counselling sessions. One of the respondents detailed how when he used poetry and expressive writing with a student, it led to a breakthrough in communication between them. This breakthrough detailed by the respondent, corroborates the theory of transformative writing in narrative therapy detailed in the literature review (Meijers and Lengelle 2012). It is interesting to note that each of the respondents had some experience in teaching English as a subject in post-primary school. Each of the respondents had a degree in English or English literature. At present, data on which subjects guidance counsellors teach in post-primary schools in Ireland is not available. The results of this study, however, seem to indicate that the methodologies employed by the respondents in the classroom when teaching English have now transferred into their guidance counselling methodologies. It would be an interesting study to investigate what part creativity plays in guidance counsellors’ professional practice from different disciplines such as science or woodwork.

Chapter 2 detailed how through expressive writing, the student becomes the ‘author of their own life’ Meijers and Lengelle (2012). This occurs between the narration of their first and second story, a ‘transformational space’ exists in which a new perspective is gained by the student and this shift in thinking allows for the emergence of a new narrative. Another respondent spoke about how important it is for students to tell their own story as part of the counselling process, especially if they have had a negative experience with a previous counselling experience. *‘Sometimes a kid has a story that they’re defined by, like “I am the one who stole the car and got in trouble” and I just go, can you tell me that with a different ending?’* (Jerry). Using this type of narrative technique can allow students to see different points of view and view their own story through a different lens. Guidance counsellors who engage in this type of creative technique are facilitating students to tell their story in their own words without any judgement (Semmler and Williams 2000) and this is crucial in the trust process.

The findings also highlighted that letter writing was a popular creative method used by guidance counsellors, allowing students to express themselves in a safe space as expressed in the research by Meijers and Lengelle (2012). Similarly, to the narrative technique, letter writing allows students to express themselves in safe and nonjudgmental way (Oliver *et al.* 2007). The literature review highlighted how poetry can be used with students to express themselves in a powerful way (Alexander, 1990; Bowman, 1992). This was found to be true by the participants who have used poetry as a successful counselling intervention with one respondent stating that *‘poetry can save lives’*.

The literature review did not detail other popular creative methods used by guidance counsellors in this study such as Wellness Days, Careers Fairs and various workshop on student well-being, which was rather surprising to this researcher. In terms of creative practices, one size does not fit all. The creative practices used by each of the guidance counsellors depended on three core phenomena; the class they had, the needs of the students and their own individual preferences. One thinks here, for example, of English teachers and their preferences around using particular methodologies.

The research from this study has proved that it is a very difficult task to detail exactly what creative practices work best with students as there are a number of variables including, time, resources, student’s needs, personalities, behaviour and preferred learning style. It is evident from the research that what works well with one student, may not work well with another.

Thus, it seems reasonable to call for an individualization of response to guidance with students. A large, well-designed study may engage with these findings.

5.5 The benefit and impact of student engagement in creative guidance counselling

In the ever-changing landscape of the twenty-first century, creative approaches can be ‘multicultural in nature’ as creative practices can appeal to students with different social and economic backgrounds (Gladding 2005).

The research detailed a number of benefits for both the guidance counsellor and student including increased interest from students, a positive learning environment and mutual respect between students and staff. Uptake in student engagement when creative methods were employed by guidance counsellors was a recurrent theme. Using creative methods *‘is about making guidance more enjoyable, more accessible and more effective for everyone’* (Ellen).

Bowman and Boone (1998) argue that one of the main benefits of creative counselling in a group setting is that it fosters a sense of community and raises self-awareness. Gladding (2005) also believes that increased self-awareness can be achieved through a person’s self-expression. However, Gladding also argued that in order for counselling to be effective, it does not always have to be ‘creative’. The literature review highlighted many benefits of the use of creative methods, however, it is clear from the research that the use of creative practices may not always be the correct approach with students. Gladding’s (2005) contention regarding creative counselling is corroborated by the respondents of the research who agreed with this point. One person stated that it is important to know that some creative strategies *‘could frustrate the student and discourage them from opening up’*. Another respondent discussed how *‘creativity alone in guidance is unlikely to solve all our problems, but is certainly a catalyst in some cases’*.

In contrast to Gladding, Carson and Becker (2004) suggest that there is no doubt that there are various benefits to using creativity when delivering guidance counselling within the classroom and during one to one sessions, however, not all guidance counsellors are comfortable with using divergent thinking in terms of how they deliver their services. Hazler (2002), for example, in his article *On Confusion, Creativity and Credibility* postulated that the confusion some counsellors feel should be embraced as a friend and not feared. Delivering the guidance service

through creative mediums is seen as both “positive and productive” as these interventions are often economical and can impact students in a short amount of time (Veach and Gladding, 2007, p.71).

These creative interventions are also helpful considering the time constraints many guidance counsellors face in post-primary school, not least the fact that principals within the schools’ network have varying opinions on how far the brief of guidance counsellors extends (NCGE 1997).

5.6 Barriers to guidance counsellors using creative methods

Wilson (2016) and Soffel (2016) have highlighted key challenges facing teachers in terms of practice and leadership roles, noting that ‘time’ is indeed a precious resource. Additionally, Sharma and Pandher (2018) note that teachers’ have limited time for their professional development.

A problematic issue faced by each of the nine respondents was that of timing, or more specifically, the lack of sufficient time with students in both a group and an individual context. As a result of this timing issue, Guidance counsellors felt that creativity was important in their professional practice allowing them to think outside the box and create new ways of reaching students with the limited time they have. Helen discussed how *‘being creative in guidance can suck up a lot of your time and that creating your own stuff can take quite an amount of time’*. Time is certainly a barrier to guidance counsellors using more creative techniques in their one-to-one sessions and in the classroom. This has the unwanted consequence of being more reliant on the more traditional tried and tested methods with a feeling that perhaps trying something new is a risk when time is at a premium.

Carson and Becker (2004) advocated for ‘more training on creativity to take place in counselling master’s programs’ (Smith, 2011, p.153). These authors suggested that ‘creativity be understood as fundamental rather than a specialty area that one acquires later in a counselling career after graduating from a counselling training program’ (Smith, 2011, p.153). This resonates with this study as the research identified a need for more CPD in the area of creative practice. The research also framed a link between a lack of confidence in a guidance

counsellor's ability to deliver creative methods and a lack of CPD on the topic of creativity. Kate discussed how she would *'like to have more training myself probably more time also'*. Interestingly, the literature seems to suggest that this should be located as a fundamental element of initial guidance counsellor training (initial GC education). This study advocates for continuous professional development.

Another barrier which the research speaks to concerns the behaviour of students. Discipline can be an issue with some students resulting in the guidance counsellor using less creative methods where a student's movement is limited within the classroom. This issue links to Section 5.4 where the suitability of creative methods depends on the student, in the case of a class where discipline is an issue, it depends on the class.

5.6 Ethical considerations

A substantive point worth noting is that guidance counsellors are not qualified psychotherapists or counsellors, and as such, should only provide a service that they are formally trained in. Having said that, a significant finding in this study was guidance counsellors articulated that the one-to-one sessions with students involved more counselling than guidance and that the counselling focus of their brief is significant.

According to the IGC, guidance counsellors should only 'offer those services for which they are qualified by education, training and experience' (IGC Code of Ethics, 2012). When employing creative strategies, guidance counsellors must ensure that they are not straying either consciously or subconsciously into the more formal field of counselling or psychotherapy. Ultimately, guidance counsellors have an ethical responsibility to refer cases to outside agencies that are beyond their competency (IGC Code of Ethics 2012) while, of course, being free to take up training in psychotherapy as an adjunct discipline.

5.7 Conclusion

This study has differentiated between the teaching and counselling aspects of guidance counsellors. In their national study, Hayes and Morgan (2011) found that guidance counsellors are recognised as being highly committed to carrying out the counselling aspect of their role.

Within this, over forty per cent of had progressed to further training since their initial qualification without any significant external supports within their schools by management. It is obvious that guidance counsellors are operating in highly fluid and dynamic environments.

The overall findings of this research were discussed in this chapter. The main themes emerging from the study were further explored. The central themes discussed gained insight into guidance counsellors' perceptions and experience of creativity in their own professional practice and the impact of this creativity on their work with students. The main findings of this chapter were:

creativity plays an important role in a guidance counsellor's professional practice, using creativity helps to build positive relationships with students, one size does not fit all when it comes to which creative practices work best, there are many benefits to both guidance counsellor and student to using creative methods and there are significant structural and practical day-to-day barriers to guidance counsellors using creative methods. It was argued that more defined and targeted CPD is required in the area of creative practices for guidance counsellors and that more time should be allocated to their work and engagement with students.

This chapter also outlined ethical concerns. The next chapter will discuss the strengths and limitations to the study; it will also outline recommendations for policy, practice and research for the use of creative practices in the future. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a reflection on this researcher's personal and professional learning from undertaking this research.

Chapter 6

6.0 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the findings of the study. The strengths and limitations of the research are evaluated, as well as recommendations for future guidance counselling policy, practice and research. It concludes with a reflection on the researcher's personal learning.

6.1 Summary of research

The primary aim of this research study sought to engage with guidance counsellors' perceptions and experience of creativity in their own professional practice and the impact of this creativity on their work with students. Subsequently, there were three secondary questions posed to provide further insight into the research topic:

1. What are the main benefits of using creative methods in a guidance counsellors' professional practice in post-primary school in Ireland, and what impact do they have on students?
2. What do guidance counsellors, who use creativity within their own professional practice, consider works well (in the classroom or in a one-to-one session)?
3. Are there any forms of formal or informal continuous professional development (CPD) that guidance counsellors feel might further deepen creativity in their professional practice?

The research questions were investigated through qualitative interviews with nine post-primary guidance counsellors. These semi-structured interviews were transcribed and the data from each was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic data analysis framework. Key themes which emerged from the data indicated that using creative methods has many benefits for both student and guidance counsellor, that creative methods are integral to building positive relationships with students, that creating a safe space ensures that creativity can be expressed and that there are many barriers to guidance counsellors using creative methods in their professional practice.

6.2 Strengths and limitations of the study

6.2.1 Strengths of this study

There are many strengths to this research, a key strength being the interviews were conducted with nine practising guidance counsellors in post-primary schools. This offered a valuable insight into the day-to-day experiences of guidance counsellors using creativity within their own professional practice. Qualitative research ensures that the participants are given a voice and this gives the research more authenticity by the data collected focusing on ‘depth rather than breadth’ (Basit, 2010, p.16). In essence, this study was interested in the richness of narratives and meaning-making (Cohen *et al.* 2013; Thomas 2013).

Another key strength in this study is that it addresses what creative methods guidance counsellors are currently using in an Irish post-primary school. This is a topic which has been neglected in Ireland, now more than ever it is imperative for guidance counsellors to stay abreast with CPD to ensure they are up to date with the latest practices. This should be reflected in new policy and practice initiatives.

This research has investigated which creative methods work best for guidance counsellors in a range of varying schools and differing educational backgrounds. Therefore, this study addressed a need for more interpretivist research to be conducted into the benefits of creative methods in the guidance counselling service. A further strength is the usefulness of the study for myself as a guidance counsellor, and those who read it, in terms of helping to engage practitioners in thinking about their lived creativity.

6.2.2 Limitations of this study

The interviews for this research were conducted over the telephone due to the global pandemic of Covid-19 and restrictions the Irish government placed on its citizens in terms of social distancing and lockdown. Researchers favour in-person interviews as technological platforms have many limitations (Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst 2017; Deakin and Wakefield 2014;

Hanna 2012; Oates 2015; Seitz 2016; Weinmann *et al.* 2012; Weller 2017). Cues taken from body language were absent during the telephone interviews, resulting in the researcher spending time speaking to the participants in order to build a rapport with them. This would not have been necessary had the interviews taken place face to face.

Due to time constraints and the aforementioned Covid19 restrictions, this research was based on the findings of just nine semi-structured interviews. The limited sample size means that no generalisation can be made of the findings (Thomas 2013).

Another limitation to the research conducted was based on the perceptions and experiences of the participants; however, no psychological testing measure was used, which is commonplace in many qualitative studies. This study did not measure the impact of creativity on students or take student's experiences into account. Perhaps the more important point to be addressed here is that the perceptions of students were not recorded.

This study is also only a snapshot in time and is neither retrospective nor futurist in orientation. Researcher bias was also a limitation to this study, which the researcher kept in check with the use of a reflective journal as discussed in Chapter 3. Of course, this is both a strength and a limitation of all interpretivist research.

A final limitation to this study was, although several geographical areas were accessed, perceptions and experiences of the study were restricted to just one geographical area.

6.3 Recommendations arising from the study

This section will address recommendations arising from this study. Recommendations will relate to policy, practice and research.

Recommendations for policy

As discussed in Chapter 5, guidance counsellors would use more creative methods if they had time to explore and trial them with students.

The findings align with broad efforts by guidance counsellors to reverse the 2012 cuts in the guidance service in schools.

The cuts to the guidance service in 2012 mean that guidance counselling hours are not ex quota. This puts a tremendous strain on guidance counsellors and as a result, many are under time pressures and do not have the time to try new creative methods, resulting in using tried and tested ones.

It is also recommended that the imbalance in Irish policy relating to the delivery of guidance counselling in Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle be addressed (Smyth and Calvert 2011). This may be seen in the numbers and distribution of guidance counsellors across schools in a national context.

Practice

It is recommended that guidance counsellors have a specific budget for resources. Chapter 4 highlighted a need for funding in the guidance counselling services for post-primary schools. Due to the changing nature of the job, resources can be costly for guidance counsellors. The findings highlighted how important it is to establish a safe space for students to express themselves (Westergaard 2012; Lengelle and Ashby 2017; Maree 2018). This means that the area a guidance counsellor is working in must be one which is fully resourced and comfortable for both the guidance counsellor and the student. Guidance counsellors should have access to working Internet both in the classroom and during one-to-one sessions (Bimrose *et al.* 2010; Reid 2016).

It is also recommended that guidance counsellors receive CPD in the area of creativity. The findings highlighted a need for more CPD on offer to guidance counsellors in the area of creativity with an emphasis on creativity within one-to-one sessions.

Each guidance counsellor department should carry out a dedicated and stand-alone resource and safe-space analysis so they can identify to stakeholders (school management and DES).

Research

The area of creativity within guidance counselling in Ireland is a topic which requires further research, particularly in the context of the current and predicted changes in the global economy.

This study was limited to the views and perceptions of guidance counsellors; further study which focuses on the student's experiences of using creativity and students' experiences of guidance counsellors' use of creativity would be very interesting.

Research into other creative practices which were not mentioned in this study would be of benefit to other guidance counsellors who wish to expand their knowledge and improve their practice. It would be interesting to research the choice of guidance counsellors' degree subjects. This research highlighted how English teachers value creativity in their own professional practice. Further research into the role creativity plays in post-primary guidance counsellors' professional practice in other subject areas such as science and foreign languages would be very interesting.

It would also be interesting to research if other countries use creative practices and if so how effective they are. Further study into the area of creativity using a psychological measure would also be interesting, to see how/if creative practices have an impact on students.

6.4 Researcher personal learning in this research project

All research should contain a reflexive element in the thinking and planning process (Palaganas *et al.* 2017). Reflexivity is both a concept and a process and is, thus, organic and ongoing (Dowling 2006). I have very much enjoyed the process of reflection in this study.

The researcher gained valuable learning into her future practice in the area of guidance counselling and this was an organic process. Interviewing practising guidance counsellors who use creative methods has given the researcher valuable insight into what might be considered 'best practice' in an international context and, further, given her own ideas for development.

To develop this point further, the study focused on which creative methods worked 'best', what impact they had on students and how guidance counsellors could improve their practice. Listening to those interviewed has given the researcher ideas for her own future practice as well as specific data on various creative practices through extensive reading undertaken for the literature review.

The researcher also learned about the various methodologies that can be used when conducting research. Valuable learning took place during the interviews; the researcher learned how to be patient and how to present when exploring a topic relating to future practice; this might be a good learning for guidance practice too when with a student. The researcher experienced personal growth throughout the process of reflection and it is a skill which the researcher will use in future practice.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented the conclusion of this study. It outlined the overall findings of the research in addition to identifying the strengths and limitations of the study. Recommendations in terms of policy, practice and research were discussed.

This chapter concluded with the researcher's personal learning from this research project.

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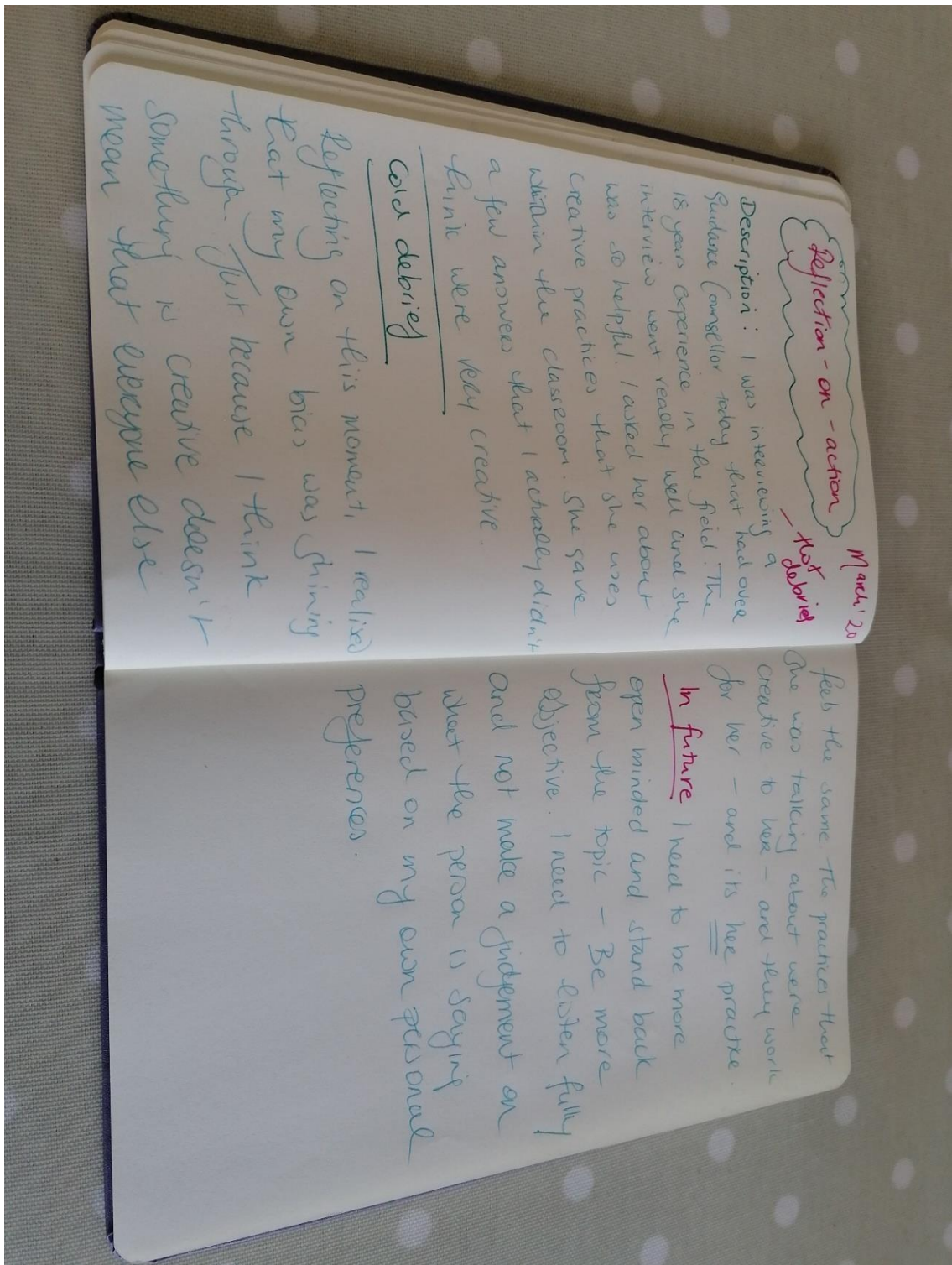
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Appendices

APPENDIX I Extract from reflective journal





EHSREC no. : 2020_02_43_EHS(ER)

Volunteer Information Letter

Date: 7th March, 2020

Research title: “Guidance Counsellors’ Perceptions and Experience of Creativity in Their Professional Practice and the Impact of this Creativity on their Work with Students”.

Dear Guidance Counsellor,

I am a student of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Gerry Myers, who is the Principal Investigator. I am undertaking a research study on a topic related to guidance counselling.

In my research I aim to explore creativity in the practice of guidance counsellors. In order to gather information on the topic I would appreciate if you would agree to participate in an audio-recorded skype or telephone interview. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure your anonymity. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed by me. The transcripts will be fully anonymised and any reference to your place of work will also be anonymised. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis phase. The results from this research study will be reported in my final dissertation and may also be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick for seven years. It is important to note that your name will not be used in the reporting of the research. If you have any queries or require further any further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Moira Murrihy

Supervisor/s: Gerry Myers

Telephone number/s:

+353-(0)61-213374

UL Email address: 09002268@studentmail.ul.ie

UL Email address: gerry.myers@ul.ie

There are no apparent risks to participants in this study. The study may benefit you by offering you an opportunity to think about creativity in your own practice as a Guidance Counsellor. Your participation will contribute to the outcomes of this study which is a topic relevant to Guidance Counselling.

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (2020_02_43_EHS(ER)). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

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



Consent Form (Research Volunteer)

EHS REC no. : 2020_02_43_EHS(ER)

Research Title: Guidance Counsellors' Perceptions and Experience of Creativity in Their Professional Practice and the Impact of this Creativity on their Work with Students

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

I hereby agree to take part in this study:

Signature: _____

Printed

name: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX IV Data protection consent section: Individual Interview Participant



EHSREC Approval Number: 2020_02_43_EHS(ER)

EHS RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Data Protection Consent Section: Individual Interview Participant

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 “Guidance Counsellors’ Perceptions and Experience of Creativity in Their Professional Practice and the Impact of this Creativity on their Work with Students”.

Yes No

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.

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 No

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



RESEARCH PRIVACY NOTICE

(UL template Version 3: 05-07-19)

Note for Principal Investigators/Research Supervisors/Researchers for a proposed research project when completing this Privacy Notice Template:

- Please review all prompts in brackets below and populate so that they accurately reflect the proposed research project to go before the REC.
- Once the Privacy Notice template has been populated, please delete this comment box and any remaining yellow prompts. Include your edited Privacy Notice as an attachment with your Research Ethics Approval Submission to the REC.

This Privacy Notice governs the use and storage of your personal data by the University of Limerick (the University). The processing of this data is carried out in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) / Data Protection Acts 1988-2018 (“Data Protection Law”) and in accordance with this Data Protection Privacy Notice. The University is the Data Controller for personal data we process about you.

The purpose of this Data Protection Privacy Notice is to explain how the University uses and processes personal data we collect and hold about you as a research participant. This notice extends to all your personal data as defined under Article 2(1) of the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679.

1. “Guidance Counsellors’ Perceptions and Experience of Creativity in Their Professional Practice and the Impact of this Creativity on their Work with Students”.

1.1 This study will explore creative and non-traditional methods used by experienced Guidance Counsellors in their professional practice and the impact of these on their work with students. This exploratory study will use an interpretive paradigm. Six to eight qualified guidance counsellors will be recruited, using snowball sampling, for semistructured audio-recorded interviews of one hour duration each. Participants will be given an information sheet and will be asked to give informed consent. Interviews will be face-to-face or by telephone. Thematic Analysis will be applied to the anonymised data in the transcribed interviews. The researcher will transcribe the interviews.

2. Research Ethics Committee

2.1 Ethical approval was granted by the EHS Research Ethics Committee on 13th February, 2020

3. Identity of the Data Controller(s)

3.1 The Data Controller/Joint Controllers is/are:

□ University of Limerick, Plassey, Limerick.

4. Identity and Contact Details of the Data Protection Officer of the Data Controller(s)/

4.1 You can contact the University of Limerick's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@ul.ie or by writing to Data Protection Officer, Room A1-073, University of Limerick, Limerick.

The Identity of the Principal Investigator

The Principal Investigator for this Research Project is Gerry Myers, Lecturer in the University of Limerick

Why the University Holds Your Personal Data

5.1 The University must process your personal data in order to undertake research relating to Guidance Counsellors' Perceptions and Experience of Creativity in Their Professional Practice and the Impact of this Creativity on their Work with Students.

6. Research Participant Personal Data held by the University

6.1 You provide us with your personal data to enable us to undertake the research project. Participation in this research project is voluntary and participants may withdraw without giving any reason. Should you wish to withdraw you may do so by contacting

the Principal Investigator at gerry.myers@ul.ie or writing to him/her at The University of Limerick, Castletroy, Limerick .

6.2 The categories of personal data collected/recorded may include:
EXAMPLES: Name, Address (Home/Term), Email, phone number(s)

8. Lawful Basis for University Processing Personal Data

8.1 Data Protection Law requires that the University must have a valid lawful basis in order to process personal data.

8.2 The University will rely on your explicit consent in order to process your personal data for research purposes. Consent must be freely given, specific, informed and an unambiguous indication of your wishes by which you (by a statement or by a clear affirmative action) signify agreement to the processing of personal data relating to you. Your decision not to consent will have no adverse consequences for you.

8.3 You are free to withdraw this consent and you can do so by contacting the Principal Investigator at the following email address gerry.myers@ul.ie.

Protecting Your Personal Data

Reasonable appropriate administrative, technical, personnel procedural and physical measures are employed to safeguard Personal Data against loss, theft and unauthorised uses access, uses or modifications.

All researchers of the University must adhere to the University's Data Protection Policy when processing Personal Data on behalf of UL (available at www.ul.ie/dataprotection).

Personal data collected for this research project will be pseudonymised within 7 years after collection and will fully anonymised within/after 12 months. Truly anonymised data is not Personal Data. Once data is anonymised for the purposes of this research project, the terms of this Privacy Notice will no longer apply.

Sharing Your Personal Data with Third Parties

The University will not disclose your personal data to third parties.

Retention of your Personal Data

12.1 All Personal Data collected for this research project will be retained in accordance with the University's [Records Management and Retention Policy](#). *The Retention Policy currently states a retention period of 7 years (August 2027). Where the personal data collected for this research will be held for a longer/shorter period, this should be stated here. Note that truly anonymised data is not personal data.*

13. Your Rights

13.1 Depending on the legal basis which we rely on to process your Personal Data, you may have the right to request that we:

- provide you with information as to whether we process your data and details relating to our processing, and with a copy of your personal data;
- rectify any inaccurate data we might have about you without undue delay;
- complete any incomplete information about you;
- under certain circumstances, erase your Personal Data without undue delay;
- under certain circumstances, be restricted from processing your data;
- under certain circumstances, furnish you with the Personal Data which you provided us within a structured, commonly used and machine readable format;

13.2 Requests for any of the above should be addressed by email to the Principal Investigator at gerry.myers@ul.ie AND the Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@ul.ie. Your request will be processed within 30 days of receipt. Please note, however, it may not be possible to facilitate all requests, for example, where the University is required by law to collect and process certain personal data including that personal information that is required of any research participant.

13.3 It is your responsibility to let the Principal Investigator know if your contact details change.

14. Queries, Contacts, Right of Complaint

14.1 Further information on Data Protection at the University of Limerick may be viewed at www.ul.ie/dataprotection. You can contact the Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@ul.ie or by writing to Data Protection Officer, Room A1-073, University of Limerick, Limerick.

14.2 You have a right to lodge a complaint with the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner (Supervisory Authority). While we recommend that you raise any concerns or queries with us first at the following email address gerry.myers@ul.ie, you may contact that Office at info@dataprotection.ie or by writing to the Data Protection Commissioner, Canal House, Station Road, Portarlinton, Co. Laois.

15. Review

15.1 This Privacy Notice will be reviewed and updated from time to time to take into account changes in the law and the experience gained from the Notice in practice.



Interview Questions

Question 1: What is your interest in the topic of creativity in your practice?

Question 2: What does the word “creativity” mean to you as a guidance counsellor?

Question3: Could you tell me about creativity within your own practice? (across the broad spectrum of your Guidance Counselling activities)

Question 4: Could I invite you to talk about three creative things that you do within your practice?

Question5: What do you think are the main benefits of creativity that you bring to bear in your practice?

Question 6: What do you think the impact of your creativity on your work with students is?

Question 7: On the basis of the creativity that you already use, do you have a sense of what you would like to change?

Question 8: What do you think works well?

Question 9: Is there any form of formal or informal continual professional development (CPD) that you think might further deepen the creativity in your practice?

