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## Agency, decision-making and the Irish post-primary guidance counsellor

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**UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK**

**OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH**

**Agency, Decision-Making and the Irish Post-Primary  
Guidance Counsellor**

**Lesley McKenna**

**MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development**

**University of Limerick**

**2018**





**UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK**  
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

**Title of Research Study:**

**Agency, Decision-Making and the Irish Post-Primary Guidance  
Counsellor**

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## **Declaration**

*The author hereby declares that this thesis is entirely her own work. No element of the work described in this dissertation has been previously submitted for any degree in University of Limerick, or in any other institution. I agree that the University of Limerick Library may lend or copy this dissertation on request.*

*Signed:*

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Lesley McKenna

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## **Glossary of Terms**

<b>ASCA</b>	American School Counsellor Association
<b>CAO</b>	Central Applications Office
<b>CAT</b>	Cognitive Ability Test
<b>CPD</b>	Continuous Professional Development
<b>DEIS</b>	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Skills
<b>DRT</b>	Drumcondra Reasoning Test
<b>EHSREC</b>	Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee
<b>ELGPN</b>	European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>IGC</b>	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
<b>IT</b>	Institute of Technology
<b>LCA</b>	Leaving Certificate Applied
<b>NCGE</b>	National Centre for Guidance in Education
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>NCCA</b>	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
<b>SPHE</b>	Social, Personal and Health Education
<b>WSGP</b>	Whole School Guidance Plan

## **Abstract**

The main aim of this research study was to explore the manner in which guidance counsellors enact their agency in their settings. Influences on professional agency in the guidance role are examined as well as identifying how guidance counsellors enact the agency they do have in their practice. Guidance counsellors are tasked with the provision of a holistic guidance service to second-level students, encompassing the areas of personal, educational and vocational guidance (IGC 2017). Neoliberal discourse has shifted the educational agenda of governments toward measures of performativity, efficiency and accountability (Lipman 2009). As a result of various educational cutbacks and reforms, the agency of the guidance counsellor is increasingly contested. This research is framed by Explanatory Sequential Design, in which data was gathered in two phases – an online questionnaire and five semi-structured interviews. Findings of this study indicate that guidance counsellors report they are struggling to engage in all aspects of the holistic guidance model equally and with all students.

Findings on professional agency were framed under three themes. Firstly, the main reported influences on professional agency in the guidance role were the allocation of guidance allocation and the relationship between the guidance practitioner and management in the setting. Secondly, when it came of enactment of agency in professional practice, participants reported an increase in the demand for personal guidance across all year groups. However, in practice, vocational guidance with senior cycle students tends to be prioritised. Finally, this research found that participants demonstrated professional agency in their high levels of professional affiliation with the IGC and engagement with CPD. Professional agency was also demonstrated in high levels of engagement with educational policy development in their settings. The implications of these findings are also explored in this study.

# **Chapter One – Introduction**

## **1.0 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the context and justification for this research study. The positionality of the researcher is identified, aims and objectives of the study presented and research methodology briefly outlined. The structure and plan of the thesis is also presented in this chapter.

## **1.1 Context and Justification for Research Study**

The focus of this research study is to explore how Irish post-primary guidance counsellors enact their agency on a daily basis. Irish guidance counsellors are required to engage in the delivery of holistic guidance counselling, incorporating three areas of provision – personal guidance, vocational guidance and educational guidance (IGC 2017). The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) requires practitioners to be knowledgeable in their practice of these three areas of guidance as well as demonstrate professionalism and competency in counselling skills (IGC 2017).

However, in a global landscape where the educational agenda of governments has shifted toward accountability, efficiency and meeting the demands of the labour market (Lipman 2009), the role and agency of the guidance counsellor is increasingly contested. Research in the practice of guidance counselling in second level schools has been extensive in the last number of years in the wake of the reallocation and cuts to guidance hours by the Department of Education and Skills (DES 2012). This research suggests that guidance counsellors are under increasing time constraints in their role and are constantly engaging in a prioritisation and relegation of tasks (Leahy *et al.* 2017). Charged with the role of providing students with personal, vocational and educational guidance (IGC 2017) in an educational environment characterised by test performance and rote learning (Hennessy and McNamara 2013), guidance counsellors are often challenged in their role. While much research exists outlining the challenge experienced by guidance counsellors aiming to fulfil the full remit of their role, there is a dearth of research available on the enacted agency of guidance counsellors in this context.

## **1.2 Positionality of the Researcher**

This study is framed by an interpretivist paradigm. As such, it is important to acknowledge the positionality of the researcher in the gathering data, analysing and present findings (Thomas 2017). This section highlights the positionality of the researcher in the context of the study. As the researcher has a background in Economics and has taught Business in post-primary schools for the last number of years, there was an interest in how economic policies have affected the role of the guidance counsellor in schools. This interest stems from observations around the exam-driven Leaving Certificate and its effect on students. As a trainee guidance counsellor, the researcher held an interest in identifying how practitioners enact their agency in their school settings given the current educational climate and the aftermath of the guidance reallocation in 2012. This positionality as a trainee guidance counsellor and researcher was considered throughout the study. In order to focus on the emic experience of the sample cohort, the researcher aimed to bracket existing preconceptions about the various stakeholders in a school setting. Engaging with relevant literature and practicing guidance counsellors has provided an opportunity for reflect and a deeper understanding of the researchers own professional identity, both as a Business teacher and a prospective guidance counsellor.

## **1.3 Aims and Objectives of Study**

The main aim of this study was to explore the manner in which post-primary guidance counsellors enact their professional agency in their school settings.

The central objectives of the study were as follows:

- To review the relevant existing literature in the international context of the guidance role, policy and practice of guidance counselling in Irish post-primary school, influences on guidance provision in second level school and the area of professional agency.
- To collect and analyse data representative of the views of Irish post-primary guidance counsellors through the use of an online questionnaire in the first phase of research and semi-structured interviews in the second phase.
- To synthesis the research findings with the literature in order to identify how guidance counsellors enact their agency in their settings. Recommendations for guidance policy, practice and research will be made on the basis of these findings.

## **1.4 Research Methodology**

This research is underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm. An Explanatory Sequential Design (Creswell 2009) structured the research under two distinct phases. The first phase was quantitative in nature and was carried out via online questionnaire. The research questionnaire was based on Biggs' (1993) 3P model. The questionnaire aimed to assess how guidance counsellors engage with practice in their settings, what supports they draw on, what challenges they encounter in their work and what they view the outcomes of their work to be in order to better understand agency enactment from this perspective. Participants were contacted via the IGC branch mailing list and invited to partake in the study. An information sheet was distributed with the recruitment email along with a link to the online questionnaire. Passive consent was acknowledged through the completion of the online questionnaire. Applicants were only be asked to supply contact information if they wished to self-select for phase two of the research. Findings from phase one were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Themes that emerged in phase one supported the development of phase two.

Phase two was qualitative in nature and used interviews to build upon the findings from phase one. An interview schedule was prepared and self-selecting participants from phase one contacted regarding participation in phase two. Five in-depth semi-structured interviews were held in phase two. Interviews were held in a quiet public space for the safety of both the participant and the researcher. All interviews were recorded using QuickTime software on the researcher's laptop and transcribed verbatim directly after interview. All participants were given pseudonyms and voice recordings were deleted immediately after transcription. Transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis approach to draw out themes relating to the enactment of guidance counsellor agency. Findings were then synthesised with the relevant literature to present a discussion of guidance agency. Recommendations for policy, practice and future research were also made in the context of the findings.

## **1.5 Structure of Thesis**

This section will outline the structure of this thesis and the content of the subsequent chapters.

***Chapter Two – Literature Review:*** This chapter will provide an overview of the literature relevant to this research study. The role of the guidance counsellor is defined in the international context, drawing on policy and publications from national governments and

global organisations. The role is examined from an Irish perspective, drawing on policy and guidelines from the Irish government, the IGC and the NCGE. The expectations of the guidance role are also contrasted with the reported realities of practice. Influences on the guidance role are also explored, including the impact of neoliberal discourse and the development of new policies affecting guidance provision. Given the challenges presented to guidance counsellors in the current context of Irish education, the concept of professional agency is explored.

**Chapter Three – Methodology:** This chapter serves to outline the methodological research design chosen for this study. Firstly, the research paradigm framing this study is outlined, before detailing the specific research design chosen to approach this topic – Explanatory Sequential Design. The process of research design, data collection and analysis is also explored. This chapter also identifies ethical considerations of the study, as well as dependability and validity considerations.

**Chapter Four – Findings:** This chapter will discuss the findings of both phase one and two of data collection. The demographics of both phase one and two populations will be examined. Themes that emerged through both phases will be examined under three headings – Inputs, Processes and Outputs.

**Chapter Five – Discussion:** The purpose of this chapter is to synthesise the findings of the literature review with the findings from both phase one and two of this research project. These findings will be discussed in the context of the primary research questions. The discussion is framed under three broad themes. The first theme focuses on the influences that impact on guidance agency in the school setting itself. The subsequent themes explore how guidance counsellors enact the agency that they do have in their settings, both through their professional practice and their professional engagement.

**Chapter Six – Conclusion:** The purpose of this chapter is to discuss conclusions of the study within the aims and objectives of the research. The strengths and limitations of the study are also explored. Based on the research findings, a number of recommendations are made in the areas of policy, practice and future research. Personal learning is examined before concluding the chapter.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

The chapter addressed the purpose of this research study, including the justification and context of the study, the positionality of the researcher and the aims and objectives of the study. An outline of the subsequent chapters was also provided. Chapter two will present the literature review of the study.

## **Chapter Two - Literature Review**

### **2.0 Introduction**

This chapter will provide an overview of the literature relevant to this research study. The role of the guidance counsellor is defined in the international context, drawing on policy and publications from national governments and global organisations. The role is examined from an Irish perspective, drawing on policy and guidelines from the Irish government, the IGC and the NCGE. The expectations of the guidance role are also contrasted with the reported realities of practice. Influences on the guidance role are also explored, including the impact of neoliberal discourse and the development of new policies affecting guidance provision. Given the challenges presented to guidance counsellors in the current context of Irish education, the concept of professional agency is explored.

### **2.1 Defining Guidance Counselling**

This section provides a brief overview on how guidance counselling is defined on the international stage, using examples from different countries and international organisations.

#### *2.1.1 Guidance Counselling from a Global Perspective*

The intended role of a guidance counsellor can vary in purpose and emphasis from country to country. In some countries ‘guidance’ and ‘counselling’ are viewed as separate concepts, while in others they are integrated to form a holistic approach. However, it appears that the dominant global perspective on the role of the guidance counsellor is strongly rooted in vocationalism. This is demonstrated by the OECD (2004 p.7) – a global economic organisation – which refers to the importance of “career guidance” in helping countries to “improve the efficiency of the education systems and labour market; and to contribute to social equity”. The focus appears to lie solely on the vocational aspect of guidance counselling, with the OECD defining career guidance as services provided to individuals in order to aid “educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers” (2004 p.19). This sentiment is echoed in Australia, where the role of the ‘guidance officer’ is primarily career focused, with an emphasis on providing “career planning [...] career information [...] and work experience” (Queensland Government 2015). The European model is similar to that of Australia in its focus on career, education and training. The European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) defines the role of the guidance counsellor as assisting “people to explore, pursue and attain their career

goals” (2012 p.17). However, in the USA, ‘school counsellors’ largely focus on the personal development element of the role (Ryan 1993). School counsellors are employed in elementary, middle and high schools for the purpose of addressing “all students’ academic, career and social/emotional development needs” (ASCA n.d., p.1).

In 2004, the OECD highlighted the need to align career guidance and public policy in order to achieve three main goals. The first goal is to foster lifelong learning in citizens, which in turn links to the second goal of improving the resilience and mobility of citizens in the labour market. The final goal notes the potential role of career guidance in achieving social equity, which promotes citizens from various socio-economic backgrounds having equal opportunity for social inclusion and access (OECD 2004). These goals have filtered down from the OECD and are now evident within EU policy. In 2007, the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) was set up in order to assist EU member countries in implementing lifelong guidance policies in the education and employment sectors (ELGPN 2015). The goals of career guidance outlined by the OECD are mirrored in the Europe 2020 strategy put forward by the European Commission (2010). A review of the work carried out by the ELGPN (2015) stated that the network was successful in working co-operatively with Ireland in order to implement lifelong guidance policies in line with the aims envisioned by the European Commission. As a result of the establishment of the ELGPN, the National Guidance Forum was also established in Ireland in 2007 (ELGPN 2015). Emphasis on lifelong learning and labour market mobility goals is evident in policies such as the Action Plan for Education (DES 2017a) and the National Skills Strategy (2016). The policies address the need to make Ireland’s workforce competitive and adaptable in an ever-shifting global landscape and makes a link between guidance and enterprise in achieving this aim. Social equity is also addressed in the DEIS Plan (DES 2017b), with a larger guidance allocation being provided to schools within the DEIS system to ensure equal educational opportunities to students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Vocational guidance is also identified in policy as one of the three main roles of the Irish post-primary guidance counsellor.

## **2.2 Guidance Counselling in the Irish Context**

This section will detail how the role of the guidance counsellor is defined in the Irish context, drawing on various policies and guidelines, as well as examining research on the practice of guidance counselling in second level settings.

### 2.2.1 Overview of Guidance Counselling in Ireland

Guidance counselling in Ireland is typically provided in educational settings, although access to provision also exists through Local Employment Services and private practice. Educational settings include post-primary schools, further education settings and higher education institutions such as ITs or universities. There is currently no provision for guidance counselling in primary schools in Ireland, unlike the USA. Provision of guidance in Irish post-primary schools was established in 1966, with ex-quota allocation coming into effect gradually from 1972 (Hearne *et al.* 2016). Under the Education Act (1998 s.9c), all schools in Ireland must ensure their students have “access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices”. Despite making the provision of guidance compulsory in the school setting, the Act did not define the term ‘appropriate guidance’, leaving interpretation to the management in each individual school. In an attempt to provide clarity, the Department of Education and Science (2005) issued a circular to set out the minimum requirements of providing an ‘appropriate’ guidance service. The aim of the role is to help students develop a sense of self-awareness and responsibility to make informed choices, through a model that “encompasses three separate, but interlinked, areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance” (DES 2005, p.4). A visualisation of this model can be found in Figure 2.1. This circular also envisioned the development of guidance as a whole school responsibility, with school management and subject teachers taking on guidance roles such as information giving and development of student self-awareness (DES 2005).



**Figure 2.1** Irish Guidance Counselling Model

The OECD have previously been critical of the guidance counselling model in Ireland, stating time spent on personal counselling may be better spent providing vocational information in

order to promote social equity and lifelong learning (OECD 2004; 2008). However, Ryan describes the Irish model as “a compromise between the American model which emphasises personal counselling and the European model which almost exclusively focuses on the narrower concept of career guidance” (1993 p.63).

### *2.2.2 Role of the Irish Post-Primary Guidance Counsellor – Policy Context*

The aim of guidance counselling practice in second level institutions is to help young people “make choices about their lives and to make transitions consequent on these choices” (NCGE 2004). Policy advocates that guidance counsellors engage in a variety of activities with students in order to achieve this aim. This could range from giving advice, conducting psychometric assessments, providing students with information on courses and careers and perhaps referring students to agencies outside the school (NCGE 2004). According to the IGC, theoretical knowledge and skills in the areas of counselling, psychological development, psychometric assessment, educational pathways, labour market information, planning, management and professionalism are an essential foundation in developing professional practice (IGC 2017). Documents published on the role and competencies of the guidance counsellor (IGC 2017) and policies outlined by the Department of Education and Skills, with the input of the NCGE, help inform the guidance role within the framework of personal, educational and vocational guidance. This holistic model recognises that vocational decisions are not made independently from personal circumstance, that educational decisions are not separate from vocational aspirations and so on.

In terms of personal guidance, guidance counsellors are required to ensure they are competent in a number of counselling skills and models in order to work with students successfully in the area of personal counselling (IGC 2017). Competency in the area of counselling places emphasis on establishing a “strong, empathetic, trusting relationship” (IGC 2017, p.14) with clients, or students in the case of post-primary. Skills such as active listening, demonstrating congruency and showing unconditional positive regard can help support young people (O’Brien 2013). Other tasks outlined in this area include obtaining a students’ informed consent and developing a counselling contract prior to establishing a counselling relationship, including the limitations of confidentiality (IGC 2017). Educational guidance aims to develop students’ responsibility for information gathering and developing career management skills, as well as fostering self-efficacy (IGC 2017). The guidance counsellor can help achieve this by

“listening, seeking clarification, summarising, giving feedback, giving additional information, answering questions, challenging misconceptions and promoting client self-awareness” (IGC 2017, p.43). The aim of vocational guidance is to ensure students’ “identify strengths, interests, aptitudes, values, abilities, skills and personality factors which influence career decision making” (IGC 2017, p.34). This requires the guidance counsellor to be aware of various policies relating to lifelong learning, theories of development, current labour market and economic trends and have knowledge of a range of occupations and professions. Educational and vocational related activities suggested for post-primary guidance provision are as follows (DES 2005):

- Subject choice awareness, information giving and exploration
- Assistance in choosing suitable educational programmes, e.g. LCA
- Career information giving, exploration and planning
- Assistance in developing study skills
- Opportunities for aptitude assessment, with appropriate feedback.

Educational guidance provision also encompasses assessment of student ability and requires the guidance counsellor to have an understanding of the wide variety of psychometric tests available, their purpose, how to administer and interpret them and how to deliver results to clients (DES 2017b; IGC 2017). For example, in post-primary settings this may mean administration of tests such as the Cognitive Ability Tests (CATs) or the Drumcondra Reasoning Test (DRT). Guidance in post-primary schools differs from traditional taught subjects in that there is no set curriculum for to ensure that all these policy requirements are met. However, Hearne *et al.* (2016 p.13) state that within the guidance programme guidance activities should aim to “instil independence, responsibility and self-awareness in students and the support them to follow through on their choices they make”. These policy documents outline the role of the guidance counsellor from a top-down perspective (Gleeson 2012). Indeed, the sentiments of policy do not always translate into practice in the working context of the school setting (Leonard and Gleeson 1999). The reality of guidance practice has been extensively researched and reviewed in recent years by educational researchers and guidance counselling organisations such as the NCGE and the IGC.

### *2.2.3 Practice of Guidance Counselling in Post-Primary Settings*

The Irish model of guidance, in theory, weighs each of the three aspects of guidance equally, with no differentiation between junior and senior cycle guidance requirements. However, guidance counsellors report that 70% of their time is spent working with senior cycle students (IGC 2018). Guidance hours are allocated between provision of one-to-one guidance sessions, classroom based guidance and other guidance related activities. Practitioners reported that 53% of guidance allocation is dedicated to one-to-one sessions, 20% to classroom based guidance and 15% to activities such as the Wellbeing framework and work relating to the Student Support Team (IGC 2018). Interestingly, guidance counsellors also reported that 12% of allocated guidance hours were dedicated to non-guidance activities such as teaching SPHE or Link Modules (IGC 2018). Swain (2014 p.6) states that “a professional is not a technician who can work according to an established set of impersonal rules, but a decision-maker who is often faced with a complex human situation involving an ethical dimension”. Guidance counsellors today are working in increasingly challenging times. Over the last number of years shifting policy contexts have become more apparent and there has been a dramatic change in the provision and vision of guidance in second level schools, particularly after the 2012 reallocation of hours. The next section will focus on some of the more prominent influences on guidance policy and provision in Ireland.

## **2.3 Influences on Guidance Provision**

### *2.3.1 The Neoliberal Agenda*

Globalisation has seen education become a “global positioning device” (Tang 2011, p.364). Education is a vital element of any economy as it provides citizens with life skills and job skills that provide both personal and economic benefits (Le Grand *et al.* 2008). The crux of these policies is that citizens are envisioned to “serve the knowledge economy and seek to increase individuals’ human capital and capacity to compete” (Plant & Kjaergard 2016). Neo-liberal discourses and policies are focused on the areas of performativity, accountability, marketization and privatisation – essentially modelling the public sector on the private sector, with outcome driven goals and efficiency to the fore (Tang 2011). Over the last number of years, economic and neo-liberal motive is becoming increasingly more noticeable in international and national education policies, with Ball (2003 p.215) describing educational reform as a “policy epidemic”. This is in contrast to the holistic model of guidance provision

envisioned in Irish post-primary schools (Leahy *et al.* 2017). This section will examine the impact of performativity, efficiency and new policy development on guidance provision.

### *2.3.2 Performativity*

Performativity in the context of neoliberalism and education in Ireland demonstrates how the education system has been influenced by theories of human capital and competitiveness (Gleeson and O'Donnabhain 2009; Hennessy and McNamara 2013). Secondary education culminates in the Leaving Certificate examinations and despite a number of educational reforms in the past number of years, the structure of senior cycle has remained largely untouched. The achievement of Leaving Certificate points and engagement in the CAO process, remains the direct entry route to higher education. Hennessy and McNamara (2013) note that this performance driven culture has an exceptional impact on both students and educators, as the exam and the achievement of grades and points become the focal point of senior cycle education. Leahy *et al.* (2017) note the points system and emphasis on delivery of curriculum subjects has impacted the provision of guidance to senior cycle students. This has resulted in a focus on students' career decision making solely in their senior cycle years rather than throughout their journey in second level education (Leahy *et al.* 2017). Performativity has also exacerbated a pressure on engaging in work practices that are "visible and measurable" (McDermott *et al.* 2007, p.248). The annual publication of the Feeder Schools Map by the Irish Times, which tracks the number of Leaving Certificate students who progress to third level education from each school, demonstrates this move toward visibility and accountability in Irish education (McCormack *et al.* 2015). Hearne and Galvin (2015) note that the emphasis on providing evidence of the impact and performance of guidance provision is a key challenge since the 2012 reallocation of guidance allocation and the move toward efficiency.

### *2.3.3 Efficiency*

Neoliberal focus on the efficiency of the public sector and cost-effectiveness of guidance counselling (Sampson Jr. *et al.* 2011) has resulted in somewhat "regressive policy changes" (Leahy *et al.* 2017, p.98) over the past number of years. The impact of the recession was felt in the guidance profession when a DES circular in 2012 removed the provision of ex-quota guidance allocation from schools and allocated hours were cut (DES 2012). The equivalent to 600 guidance posts were lost due to the reallocation (IGC 2018) and responsibility for guidance allocation in schools was devolved to school management. Placing this autonomy in the hands

of school management was viewed as developing efficiency in the school system (DES 2012; Leahy *et al.* 2017). Research has found that as a result of reallocation, guidance counsellors reported working 11-15 hours in addition to their allocated hours (NCGE 2013). The reallocation has also been found to have significantly reduced the provision of individual personal counselling to students (Hearne *et al.* 2016). The IGC (2018) note the restoration of approximately 400 of these 600 lost posts in the last number of years. However, the distribution of regained hours is uneven between different school types, with Voluntary Secondary Schools still dealing with an 18% reduction in guidance allocation, the largest across all school types (IGC 2018). Despite the restoration of a number of guidance posts, research conducted by Leahy *et al.* (2017) found that students are presenting with more personal counselling needs, yet do not have access to guidance provision similar to pre-2012 levels. Guidance counsellors also express frustration around time constraints in their role and report the constant reprioritisation of their workload as having an adverse effect on the service they provide (Leahy *et al.* 2017). Despite making cuts to guidance allocation in the last number of years and reported time constraints on guidance provision, the DES have introduced new policy guidelines which directly impact on the guidance role.

#### *2.3.4 New Policy Developments*

The DES published a 'Framework for Junior Cycle' in 2015, which highlighted the expectation of schools to implement Wellbeing as part of the curriculum. This framework envisions that guidance would be made available to junior cycle students, in keeping with the Education Act (1998) requirement of appropriate guidance for all students (NCCA 2017). Suggested areas for guidance engagement with junior cycle students focus on areas such as the transition from primary to post-primary, subject choice, self-management and career information, which may be approached through one-to-one sessions and classroom delivery (NCCA 2017). The guidelines do not suggest a new model of guidance nor any new activities unfamiliar to the current guidance role. They do however, advocate for the timetabling of guidance classes, particularly in first year. Alternatively, a system, such as short courses, where junior cycle students can interact with the guidance counsellor on a more regular basis (NCCA 2017). The decisions on how guidance is integrated with the new junior cycle lies with school management (NCCA 2017), as is the case with the general allocation of guidance hours. While the framework was developed with the mental health and wellbeing of students in mind, it highlights the juxtaposition between government policy and practice. Guidance counsellors continue to report time constraints and a lack of resources (Leahy *et al.* 2017), while

government policy seems to exacerbate this by introducing new programmes. Guidance counsellors are already reporting engagement in the delivery of Wellbeing (IGC 2018), however the implementation of the framework, which began in 2017, is in its infancy. Full roll out of the required 400 Wellbeing hours will be completed by 2020 (NCCA 2017). The full extent of the impact of the framework on the guidance role may not become fully apparent until that time. The general vision for Wellbeing in schools is that it is a whole-school endeavour (NCCA 2017), with teachers, management and guidance counsellors engaging in its delivery. This is similar to the whole school guidance framework, where all stakeholders in a school are envisioned to engage in guidance delivery (NCGE 2017).

The NCGE published ‘A Whole School Guidance Framework’ (2017) in order to scaffold the facilitation of students learning in three areas – learning relating to oneself, educational opportunities and career decision making (NCGE 2017). The document outlines a vision for whole school guidance where management and other stakeholders in the school environment are actively involved in guidance provision. Previously, the responsibility for guidance provision would have remained solely with the guidance counsellor. This framework once again showcases the autonomy held by school management regarding guidance provision (Leahy *et al.* 2017), as decisions on how the framework is implemented lies with each individual school. Hearne and Galvin (2015) highlighted that the role of the subject teacher in pastoral care and guidance can depend heavily on their altruism. Teachers report little training in pastoral care and a subsequent uncomfortableness around taking on a role in guidance provision (Hearne and Galvin 2015). Once again, the consequences of the 2012 reallocation of guidance become apparent as teachers and guidance counsellors’ express concerns around the already under pressure guidance model and increasing pressure on teaching staff to fill the gaps (Hearne and Galvin 2015). The benefits of the whole school approach are recognised by guidance counsellors. However, the performance-orientated and exam-driven culture of second level education is highlighted as a barrier to its implementation (Leahy *et al.* 2017). Practitioners believe the current education system is “too rigid and academically focused to allow for any real integration of guidance counselling activities within the curriculum” (Leahy *et al.* 2017, p.105). The challenge here is for the guidance counsellors, management and teachers in each school to come up with a system that “respects their distinct roles while providing an opportunity to work together towards the well-being of young people” (O’Higgins Norman 2014 p.16). An outline of this model can be seen in Figure 2.2.

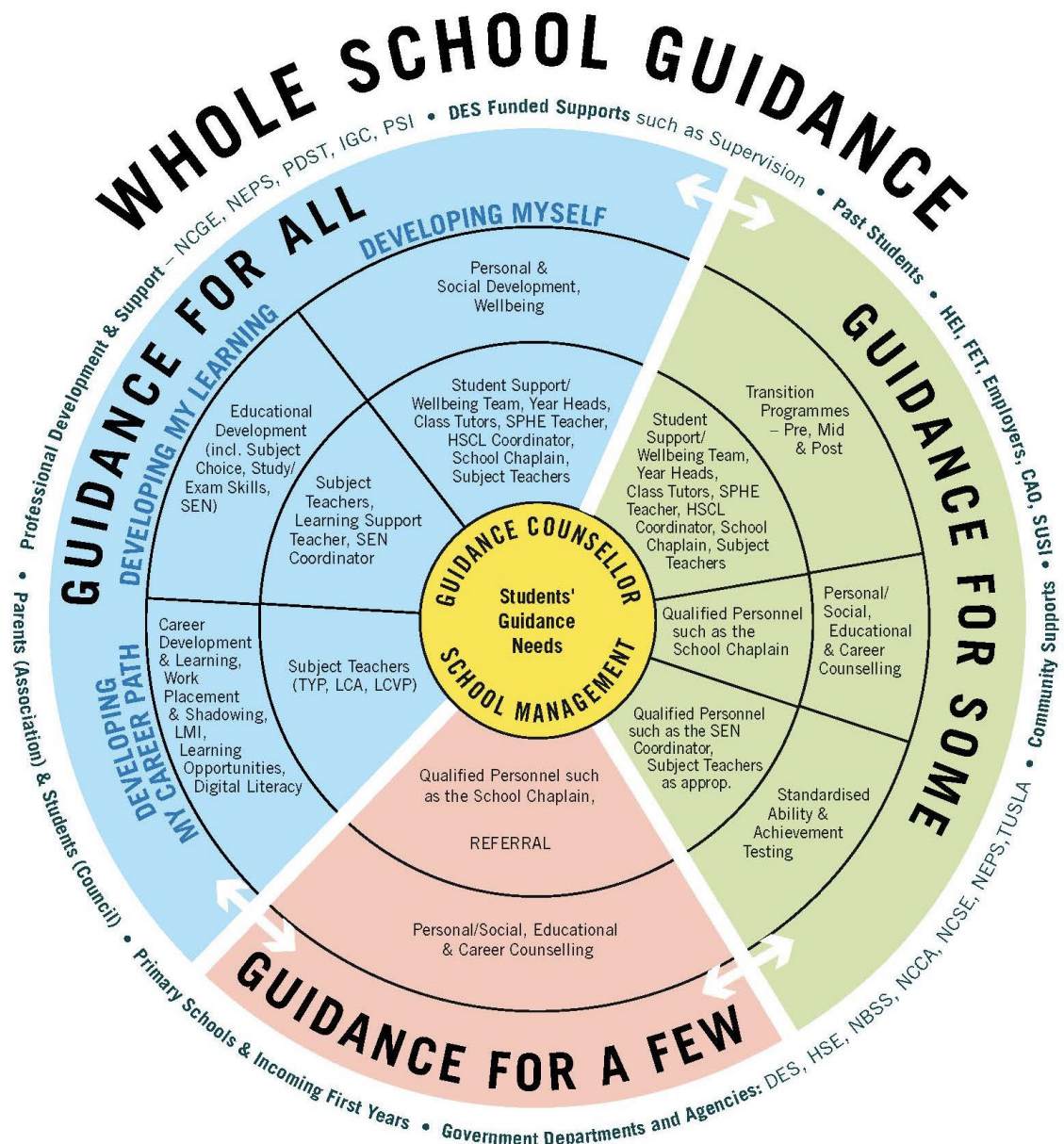


Figure 2.2 Whole School Guidance Model (NCGE 2017)

## 2.4 Educational Agency & Decision-Making

### 2.4.1 Defining Agency

Moje and Lewis (2009 p.18) define agency as the “strategic making and remaking of ourselves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources, and histories, as embedded within relations of power”. What is evident across the literature is that professional agency is not something that individuals simply do, it is something they have that was constructed over time (Biesta *et al.* 2015). Neoliberal discourse has become apparent in the Irish education system over the last number of years, as demonstrated by the performance-orientated senior cycle and recent efficiency and cost-driven measures such as the reallocation of guidance

hours. Current discourse highlights a juxtaposition between economic driven neoliberal policy and the intended role of the guidance counsellor in providing a holistic service that caters for the personal, educational and vocational development of young people in schools (DES 2005; IGC 2017; Leahy *et al.* 2017). New policy developments such as the Wellbeing framework and the Whole School Guidance framework, coupled with the cuts in guidance allocation, are changing the provision of guidance in school. Halford and Leonard (1999) note that individuals can react differently to change - some may resist the new changes, while others may adopt and adapt to them. Given that agency demonstrates how individuals cope with change and make decisions around how to interact with these changes, the issue of guidance counsellor agency is valuable to look at in the current discourse.

Toom *et al.* (2015 p.615) state that agency is not just coping with challenging situations, but reacting to them by demonstrating the ability to “act in new and creative ways”. Professional agency is also apparent in how individuals choose to take “intentional action in a way that makes a significant difference” (Toom *et al.* 2015, p.615). Indeed, there appears to be an inextricable link between professional agency and decision-making in the work place as agency is expressed in how individuals “make choices and decisions at work and act accordingly” (van der Heijden *et al.* 2015, p.681) and the ability to make “responsible strong judgements” (Edwards 2015, p.780). However, agency does not just take into account individuals ability to make decisions, but also the ability to reflect and evaluate thoroughly the impact of ones’ actions (Edwards 2015; Toom *et al.* 2015). Responsibility for decision-making in guidance provision and allocation in schools lies in the hands of school management since the reallocation of hours (DES 2012). The identity of the guidance counsellor is also changing with the vision of a whole school approach to guidance with practitioners no longer having sole responsibility for guidance provision. Toom *et al.* (2015) state that the concept of professional agency is interlinked with an individuals’ beliefs, their professional identity, their sense of self and the context in which they operate in. The strong link between agency and identity appears throughout the literature (Biesta *et al.* 2015; Buchanan 2015; Edwards 2015; Toom *et al.* 2015).

#### 2.4.2 Agency and Identity

O’Brien (2013, p.152) defines identity as “the stable, consistent and reliable sense of who one is and what one stands for in the world”. Buchanan (2015) states that a teachers’ professional identity is continually developing and changing through their daily engagement and reflection

on their work, while also integrating past experiences and current circumstances. This is important as it tells us the formation of identity, and therefore agency, is a process that is impacted by internal and external processes. Buchanan (2015) outlines four assumptions of teacher identity formation. The first of these deals with the external contexts aligned with identity formation, including “multiple social, cultural, political and cultural contexts” (Buchanan 2015, p.704). In the case of the post-primary guidance counsellor, identity formation can be influenced by various structures and their experience within them, such as policy structures and school culture. The second assumption of teacher identity formation is based on the beliefs and values held by the education professional and how they interact with others (Buchanan 2015; Toom *et al.* 2015). From the guidance perspective, identity is formed by the values they hold around their role and how they interact with management, teachers and students based on those values. The final two assumptions of identity formation give us an insight into the ever-changing nature of identity as Buchanan (2015 p.702) describes it as the “reconstruction of stories told over time” and “constantly shifting”. As identity is formed and reformed, Buchanan (2015 p.701) states that “agency is carved out”. However, if an education professional feels there is a mismatch between their identity and the school culture they operate in, they may feel somewhat restrained and unable to demonstrate agency in their work (Buchanan 2015). However, while the importance of identity cannot be ignored in the enactment of agency, there are several other influences that must be taken into consideration in order to gain a deeper understanding of the concept.

#### *2.4.3 Influences on Agency*

Agency, and subsequently professional decision-making, can be affected by a number of factors. Biesta *et al.* (2015 p.626) acknowledges that agency is “a configuration of influences from the past, orientations towards the future and engagement with the present”. Influences from the past refer to both life history and professional history and how these experiences shape individuals’ beliefs and values (Biesta *et al.* 2015). The impact of past educational experiences on an individuals’ motivation to become a teacher has been widely researched on a national and international level (Hennessy and Lynch 2015). However, similar research in the guidance profession is scarce. Orientations toward the future relates to the short and long-term trajectories and desires held by the individual (Biesta *et al.* 2015). In other words, agency can be affected by a professionals desired outcomes for their role – what they hope to achieve in the future. Influences from the past and orientations toward the future are strongly rooted in the internal process that also affect identity and agency (Buchanan 2015). However,

engagement with the present (Biesta *et al.* 2015), aligns with the external process of agency described by Buchanan (2015). This describes how professionals enact their agency by making judgements and decisions based on the cultural, structural and material environments they operate in (Biesta *et al.* 2015). This takes into account a variety of variables, such as social structures, current discourses and resources available to the individual (Biesta *et al.* 2015). In the current guidance context, this refers to educational discourse, school culture and guidance resources in the wake of the reallocation.

When discussing agency, the literature tends to focus on how individuals enact their agency. This individual agency may be demonstrated in the form of stepping up agency, in which the individual goes beyond the expectations of their role (Buchanan 2015). Alternatively, agency may be demonstrated by pushing back agency or resistance (Buchanan 2015). This may happen where individuals feel there is a discrepancy between their perceived identity and the conditions they work in. It is important to note that the idea of collectivist agency (Edwards 2015) also exists and this describes individuals coming together to demonstrate agency in their profession. Much of the research conducted regarding agency in the school setting focuses on teacher professional agency – there is a distinct lack of research on agency in the guidance counselling profession in Irish second level education. The aim of this research is to gain an insight into the agency of Irish post-primary guidance counsellors in post-primary settings.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This literature review first examined how the role of the guidance counsellor is viewed in an international context, drawing on definitions and examples from the OECD, Australia and the USA. The role was also explored from an Irish context, drawing on guidance policies and guidelines and also research on the realities of guidance practice conducted by the IGC and NCGE. Various influences on the guidance role and policies were examined, including neoliberal discourse in the areas of performativity, efficiency and the development of new guidance policy. Finally, the idea of professional agency was defined and explored. Chapter three will explore the methodological approach of this research study.

## Chapter Three – Methodology

### 3.0 Introduction

This chapter serves to outline the methodological research design chosen for this study. Firstly, the research paradigm framing this study is outlined, before detailing the specific research design chosen to approach this topic – Explanatory Sequential Design. The process of research design, data collection and analysis is also explored. This chapter also identifies ethical considerations of the study, as well as dependability and validity considerations.

### 3.1 Research Paradigm

#### 3.1.1 Identifying the Researchers' 'Worldview'

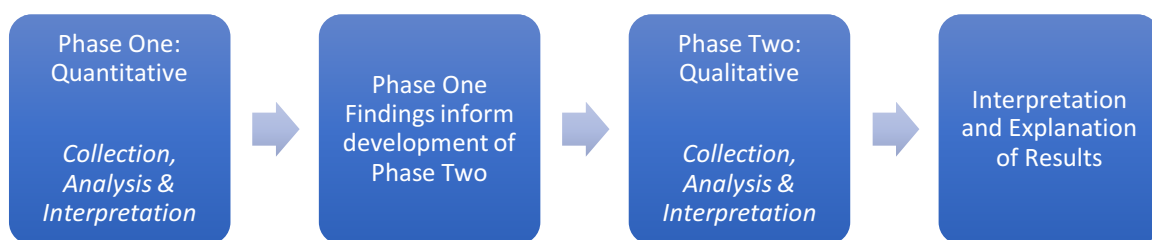
Creswell and Plano Clark (2011 p.39) state that “researchers bring to their inquiry a worldview composed of beliefs and assumptions about knowledge that informs their study”. A researchers’ paradigm is underpinned by a set of ontological and epistemological assumptions (Burton *et al.* 2008). Ontological assumptions are concerned with how reality is defined by the researcher (Mertens 1998), while epistemology questions how knowledge is acquired and experienced (Cohen *et al.* 2000). This researcher holds the ontological belief that reality is created by the experiences of individuals and is “ever changing” (Burton *et al.* 2008, p.61). This belief stems from experience in the education sector and observations that while individuals’ may live in the same geographical area, they possess a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, life experiences and circumstances that create differing realities for each individual. Similarly, the researchers’ epistemological belief centres on the idea that “knowledge is constructed from multiple perspectives” (Burton *et al.* 2008, p.62) and by individuals’ interpretation of their own reality, experiences and context in which they are situated. Thomas (2017 p.110) defines the interpretivist view of the social world as “constructed by each of us in a different way”. By identifying the ontological and epistemological assumptions held by this researcher, it became clear that this research was being framed by a strong interpretivist view.

The interpretivist researcher aims to be an insider in their research – actively interacting with participants (Thomas 2017) in an effort to “understand how others understand their world” (O’Donoghue 2007, p.10). Research framed by the interpretivist paradigm would allow the opportunity to explore how guidance counsellors perceived their roles and how they enacted

their agency within their settings. Just as no two people are alike, no two schools are alike. O'Donoghue (2007) notes that the paradigm adopted by a researcher can affect the approach taken to the research question and in turn the research design. After much consideration on how to best approach the research question, an Explanatory Sequential Design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011) was deemed the best research design fit for the purpose of exploring the research question. As responsibility for the allocation of guidance in schools now lies with school management, the gathering of quantitative data relating to allocation, timetabling and duties was beneficial in order to gain a broad understanding of how guidance provision works in a number of different post-primary settings. This, however, does not answer deeper questions around practitioner agency and how guidance counsellors perceive their roles and settings. This would require a more interactive research tool, which permitted the exploration of participants realities and gain a deeper understanding of their agency.

### 3.1.2 Explanatory Sequential Design

The majority of existing research methods literature links the interpretivist paradigm almost entirely to qualitative research. However, Burton *et al.* (2008) acknowledge that those operating within interpretivism are not exclusively bound to qualitative methods. Qualitative and quantitative methods are typically viewed as opposite sides of the research spectrum. However, Howe (1992 p.254) refers to this divide as an “invention”. Indeed, Creswell and Plano Clark (2011 p.8) argue that using both methods in research can help “provide a more complete understanding of the problem than either approach by itself”. An Explanatory Sequential Design comprises of two distinct phases, the first of which is quantitative and the latter qualitative (Mertler 2016). This research design allows data collected in the first phase to shape research in the second phase – thus allowing a deeper understanding of primary data collected (Mertler 2016; Creswell and Plano Clarke 2011). Figure 3.1 below, adapted from Mertler (2016) and Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), illustrates the explanatory sequential design:



**Figure 3.1** Explanatory Sequential Design

Phase One of the model allowed for data to be gathered from a large number of guidance counsellors, through the use of an online questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather data relating to the hours allocated to guidance counsellors, broad outlines of their work, engagement in planning and perceptions on how they and others viewed their role in their settings. However, the questionnaire alone would not wield a depth adequate enough to answer the primary research question. Mertler (2016 p.152) explains that the data gathered in phase one can allow the researcher to dig deeper “into the thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions of participants during the second phase”. After completion of phase one, in which forty-six responses were returned, analysis identified preliminary themes to explore in phase two. Nine phase one respondents expressed interest in phase two and were contacted via email at the beginning of July. As the academic year was over, some volunteers opted to withdraw from participating in phase two due to other commitments. As a result, five participants were interviewed for phase two. A small sample size was deemed appropriate for the interview stage to allow for a more in-depth and intensive analysis of each case (Robinson 2014). The opportunity to explore the quantitative data further with participants was essential in getting to the root of how guidance counsellors enact agency in their settings. The data analysis technique used was Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis approach. This particular method of analysis fit well with the context of the research question, as themes and findings were drawn from the insight guidance counsellors offered into their individual realities and thematic analysis “can be a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of ‘reality’” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.81). Data was analysed without trying to fit it into any pre-existing preconceptions, theory or framework (Braun and Clarke 2006), instead taking an interpretivist approach of “building a framework of multiple realities” (Thomas 2017, p.114).

## **3.2 Ethical Considerations**

### *3.2.1 Research Study Ethics*

Hearne (2013 p.4) states that in order for guidance research to “be viewed as credible, trustworthy and scholarly”, ethical consideration must be given to the research design, methodology and participants of a study. Consideration must also be given to the potential benefits of the research in contrast to the potential harm it may cause participants (Cohen *et al.* 2000). This research focuses on guidance counsellor agency in the Irish post-primary setting and has the potential to provide insight as to how guidance counsellors reconcile the demands of policy and practice in their individual settings. This, in turn, may be useful in the

development of future guidance policy. Accordingly, this research study adheres to the IGC Code of Ethics (2012) and the NCGE Research Code of Ethics (2008). These documents outline that ethical research must be undertaken with integrity, competence and responsibility. Ethical approval for this research was sought from the University of Limerick Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Approval was granted on 10 April 2018 under Ethics number 2018\_03\_10\_EHS.

### *3.2.2 Ethical Considerations for Participants of Study*

As this research study is focused on the experiences of guidance counsellors, ethical consideration was given to the areas of informed consent, duty of care, confidentiality and data protection for participants. In order to establish informed consent, participants in both phases were made aware of the purpose of the study, its expected benefits and how it was to be carried out (Thomas 2017). When this information was made explicit, participants could choose to opt-in to the study understanding what is expected of them and why. A subject information letter (Appendix A) was developed for phase one and emailed to potential participants via their IGC branch, along with a link for the questionnaire. Passive consent was implied in phase one by completion of the questionnaire and did not require a signed consent form (EHSREC, n.d.). After completion of phase one, respondents who expressed interest in participating in the next phase were contacted via email. This email contained a subject information letter for the interview (Appendix B) and a copy of the participant consent form (Appendix C). Once these documents were received by participants, they had approximately a week to consider whether they would like to participate in an interview. On the day, it was reiterated to participants pre-interview that they had the right to withdraw at any stage. A hard copy of the participant consent form was signed prior to beginning all five interviews.

Hearne (2013) states that all participants who volunteer to contribute their time and knowledge to the research study have a right to receive duty of care from the researcher. Duty of care was ensured on the legislative level by ensuring the study has received ethical approval, on the professional level by ensuring professional codes of conduct are adhered to and on the personal level by practicing continuous reflexivity throughout the data collection phase (Hearne 2013). Additionally, in order to ensure duty of care the researcher was familiar with the code of ethics documents of both the IGC (2012) and the NCGE (2008). Interviews were held in a quiet public place for the safety and comfort of both the interviewer and the interviewee. It was also ensured that adequate supports were signposted post-interview to participants in the event they

felt they required further support. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned an identification code or pseudonym, which appeared on the data collection materials during phase one and two. This ensured the participants right to privacy and protected “the boundary around the shared secret” (Cohen *et al.* 2000, p.62). Data Protection legislation was adhered to, in order strengthen participant confidentiality. Data was recorded using QuickTime software on the researchers’ laptop. All data collected was transcribed verbatim and hard copies stored in a locked cabinet in the principal investigators’ office, while soft copies were kept on the researchers’ password protected computer. Once electronic data was transcribed, the electronic recording was deleted. Data will be retained for seven years and will be destroyed by shredding hard copies and deleting electronic files on October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2025.

### **3.3 Research Design**

As previously outlined, the research design adopted an Explanatory Sequential Design approach. This section will outline the design, implementation and analysis of the quantitative and qualitative phases.

#### *3.3.1 Phase One – Quantitative*

The purpose of this phase was to collect data from guidance counsellors regarding the guidance service in their school, how they ran it and how they perceived and demonstrated agency in their roles. Burton *et al.* (2008) state that questionnaires can be used to gather information quickly and easily while also providing anonymity for the participants. The use of an anonymous medium would illicit honest responses and opinions from potential participants. Thomas (2017) notes that using online questionnaire software can help boost response rates due to its accessibility. This was a key deciding factor in the decision to use online questionnaire tool Survey Monkey. Use of this software would also save time and costs on distribution and collection, as opposed to postal questionnaires. As the questionnaire was distributed via email, it also allowed access to a larger sample than what would be possible with a postal questionnaire.

The questionnaire design was adapted from the work of Biggs’ (1993) 3P Model, which is a model of teaching and learning intended to provide “structure to analyse influences upon and within learning opportunities” (Freeth and Reeves 2004, p.44). The model acknowledges that school environment and teacher characteristics influence learning (Biggs 1993; Freeth and

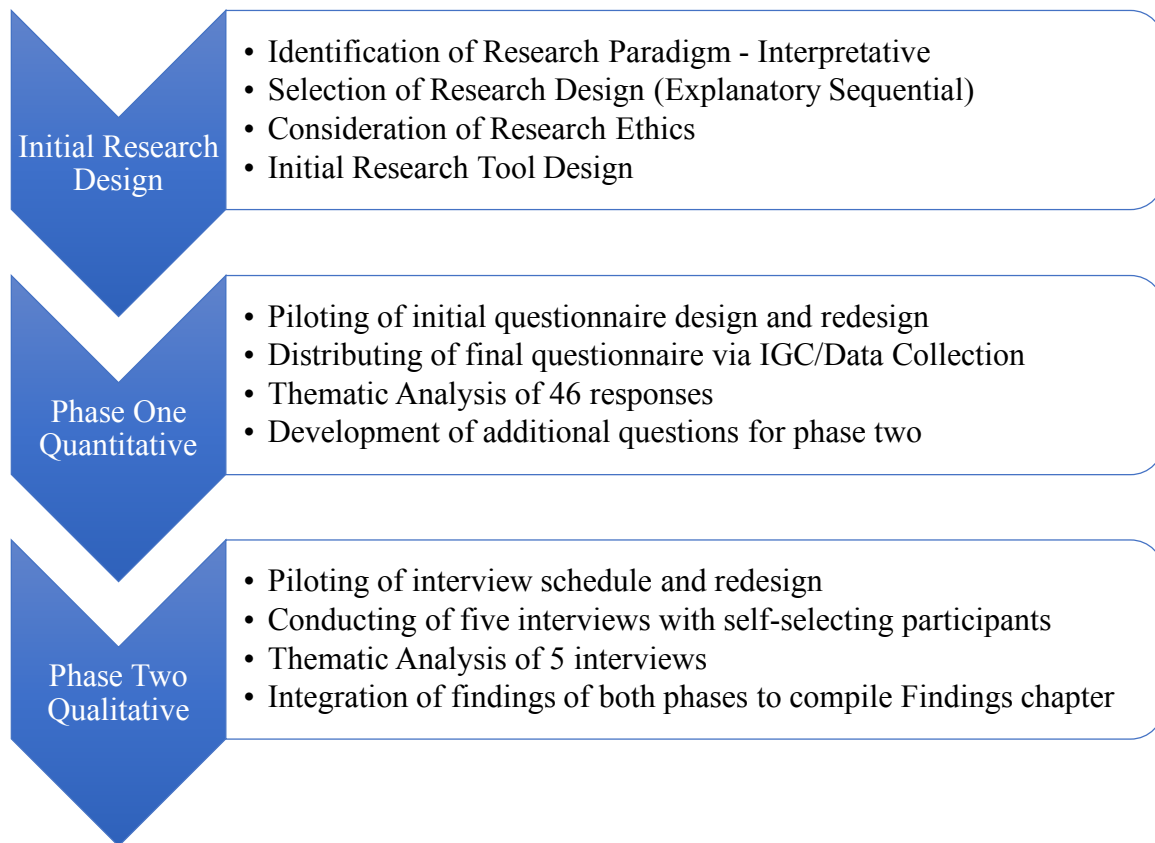
Reeves 2004). The use of the 3P framework would provide a structure for exploring the relationship between guidance counsellors and their role in the context of their settings. By designing the questionnaire based on this model, characteristics and influences that affect guidance counsellor agency would begin to emerge. These emergent themes could be explored in further detail in phase two.

The questionnaire was divided into four separate sections – Demographics, Inputs, Processes and Outputs. The Demographics section sought information relating to the location of participants schools, the number and profile of students who attend and the breakdown of guidance allocation. This information was sought in order to establish the context each practitioner worked in. The Input section focused on participants engagement with planning, policies, CPD, professional organisations and supports in their profession. This section was modelled on the presage factors of Biggs' (1993) model, which focuses on factors that are present which may influence practice and professional behaviour. By identifying how guidance practitioners engaged with their role, a sense of their agentic behaviour emerges. The Processes section explored the participants settings in more detail, linking with process factors outlined by Biggs' (1993). Process factors include facilitation and educational experiences (Biggs 1993; Freeth and Reeves 2004). Information was sought in this regard on how guidance was delivered in the settings, what activities were planned and what resources were available. Participants were also asked how they would describe the attitude of staff and management toward guidance and what they saw as the greatest challenge in their role. Agency emerges here in how practitioners meet challenges within their settings. Finally, the Output section focused on what participants envisioned as the outcomes of their work and where they felt guidance could be improve. This section of the questionnaire was modelled on product factors from Biggs' (1993) model, which focus on the intended outcomes of educational intervention. The intentions of the guidance practice demonstrate agency towards students and how practitioners choose to engage with them.

The questionnaire was piloted with one practicing guidance counsellor recruited via convenience sampling. Feedback was sought from the pilot test regarding the structure of the questionnaire, the relevance of questions and whether any areas were not included (Mertens 1998). As a result of the pilot test, questions were added to obtain more information from respondents in the Processes section around the Whole School Guidance Plan and developing policies in the school setting. The final questionnaire consisted of thirty questions in a mixture

of closed and open styles in order to allow participants to elaborate where necessary. Once questionnaire design was complete, steps were taken to distribute it to the sample. Firstly, contact information for chairpersons and secretaries of the sixteen branches was retrieved from the IGC. Sixteen separate emails were sent to each branch containing the subject information letter developed for branch chairpersons (Appendix D). This letter outlined the purpose of the study and specified that a pre-requisite for completion of the questionnaire was that IGC members work in a post-primary setting. The email also contained a link to the online questionnaire and an attachment of the questionnaire subject information letter for participants, which secretaries could distribute to their branch members. Branch chairpersons and secretaries were initially contacted in mid-May and twice more in early and mid-June. The online questionnaire remained live until the end of June, allowing six weeks for IGC members to respond. Creswell and Plano Clarke (2011) state that under Explanatory Sequential Design, in order for individuals to participate in phase two of the research, they must have participated in phase one. Applicants were asked at the end of the questionnaire to supply an email address if they wished to self-select for phase two.

Forty-six responses were collected in phase one. Data gathered was mostly qualitative, with some quantitative data relating to allocation of hours and demographics of participants schools. Where appropriate, basic descriptive statistical analysis was conducted and graphics were developed using statistical software package Microsoft Excel. In terms of qualitative analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach was utilised for the analysis of open ended questions in phase one. All responses to the questionnaire were read several times in order to identify similar responses. Common responses were highlighted and colour coded, an example of which can be found in Appendix E. Emerging themes, such as lack of time and the importance of a positive relationship with management, became apparent and this in turn informed the restructuring of preliminary questions for phase two. Once data analysis of this phase was complete, an interview schedule was developed for phase two. An outline of the research design can be seen in Figure 3.2.



**Figure 3.2** Outline of Research Design

### 3.3.2 Phase Two – Qualitative

The qualitative phase of the research design consisted of five semi-structured, face to face interviews, with twelve questions on the schedule. In developing the interview schedule, a number of questions from phase one were mapped to phase two. Creswell and Plano Clarke (2011) state that the same concepts must be addressed in both phases of research in order for analysis of both phases to be integrated for discussion. Similar questions from phase one focused on the attitudes of staff and management, challenges in guidance counselling and how participants were involved in planning and policy in their settings. Additional questions were included based on emerging themes in phase one, including the issue of time in the guidance role. The semi-structured interview design also allowed flexibility to follow up any points for development relevant to the study (Thomas 2017). As per phase one, the interview schedule was piloted with one guidance counsellor through convenience sampling. This provided valuable feedback regarding the structure of questions. Some questions were found to be too broad by the pilot participant and the interview schedule was restructured as a result of this feedback. For example, the pilot participant found it confusing when asked about the attitude of ‘stakeholders’. This was made more specific in the interview schedule. The final interview

schedule can be found in Appendix F. It was estimated that interviews would be approximately forty-five minutes in duration. This was initially estimated by the complexity of the questions, the number of key questions, level of discussion required and to allow for response flexibility (Bolderston 2012). The experience of the pilot interview also helped determine this estimation.

Interviews were arranged with each of the five participants and took place over the course of a week in mid-July. Data analysis in this phase was within the framework of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, as with phase one. By using a coding system, colour coding in this case, patterns emerged in the data that reduced the volume of data gathered in to broad themes (Thomas 2017; Mertler 2016). Themes were framed using Biggs' 3P Model in order to structure the identification of agency in participants responses. The meaning of the themes, the assumptions that underpin them, their implications and what they reveal about the research topic were questioned (Braun and Clarke 2006). Data analysis from phase two was integrated with analysis from phase one. These themes were used to construct a thematic map, which can be found in Appendix G and findings from the data analysis can be found in Chapter Four.

### **3.4 Reliability, Validity and Reflexivity**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016 p.238) state that validity and reliability of a study must be established through careful consideration of "the way in which the data is collected, analysed and interpreted". This section will discuss how reliability, validity and reflexivity was ensured during this research study.

#### *3.4.1 Dependability*

Reliability is defined as the "extent to which a research instrument such as a test will give the same result on different occasions" (Thomas 2017 p.144). However, this is difficult to achieve in qualitative research as no two individuals would emerge from an interview with the exact same transcript (Thomas 2017). Reliability in qualitative research is likened with dependability (Mertens 1998). Dependability of data refers to the stability of data as the researcher takes into account changing context, which includes the individual differences of participants (Mertler 2016).

Cohen *et al.* (2000) suggest that dependability can be ensured in qualitative research by designing questions that are clear and not leading. The pilot questionnaire and interview helped develop such tools by taking on board the feedback of the pilot participants in the design phase. This allowed for the restructuring of questions that were deemed too broad or confusing. The dependability of the study was also protected by treating all participants in the same manner, transcribed data was checked to avoid mistakes that may have been made (Creswell 2009). Across phase one, all respondents were contacted in the same way and completed the same questionnaire. All respondents were given the same option to self-select for participation in phase two. Participants in phase two were interviewed in similar settings, using the same interview schedule while allowing for flexibility to explore areas they brought up during interview. Transcribed data was rechecked against recordings to ensure no mistakes were made during transcription. The same data analysis and colour coding approach was applied across both phases. In order to ensure dependability, reflexivity was practiced throughout the data collection and analysis phases. Hearne (2013 p.5) states that reflexivity could be achieved through a willingness by the researcher to “ask critical questions of themselves”. Bearing this in mind, a research diary was kept throughout the data analysis phase. This was used to record observations made during analysis and, critically, notes pertaining to the researchers own assumptions and biases (Mertler 2016). This engagement in philosophical self-reflection (Bryman 2004) creates an awareness of researcher assumptions around the guidance role and how this may impact analysis. Engaging in reflexivity also helps in establishing validity in research (Thomas 2017).

#### *3.4.2 Validity*

Bell (2010 p.102) defines validity as “whether an item measures or describes what it is supposed to measure or describe”. In other words, it refers to the data’s quality and trustworthiness. Credibility was added to the study by engaging in peer debriefing with the principal investigator, which involved reviews and questioning of the research (Creswell 2009). Contact was kept with the principal investigator through meetings and email in order to discuss the progress of this research, as well as receiving feedback. Triangulation also adds to the credibility of this research as data was obtained from different sources – an online questionnaire and face-to-face interviews (Mertler 2016). Each participant was forwarded a copy of their interview transcripts to check for accuracy. As this research involved two stages of data collection, validity was established in how the two phases were integrated for analysis (Mertler 2016). All phase two participants also engaged in phase one of this research. This

allows for justified comparisons between the two sets of data, with phase two building on phase one (Mertler 2016). Once again, both phases were analysed using the same thematic analysis approach to identify themes. Common pitfalls, such as not supporting themes with relevant data or mismatching data analysis with theory, were avoided by ensuring reflectivity (Braun and Clarke 2006). Findings from both phases were integrated in order to present the overall data findings found in Chapter Four.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has set out the paradigmatic stance and methodological research design adopted for this research study. Justification for the selection of Explanatory Sequential Design was provided and details were given on the development of research tools. Ethical issues surrounding the study were considered, as well as highlighting how dependability, validity and reflexivity were ensured throughout research. Chapter Four will discuss findings from phases one and two of this research study.

## Chapter 4 – Data Analysis and Findings

### 4.0 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings of both phase one and two of data collection. The demographics of both phase one and two populations will be examined. Themes that emerged through both phases will be examined under three headings – Inputs, Processes and Outputs.

### 4.1 Profile of Research Participants

#### 4.1.1 Phase One Participants

Altogether, forty-six individuals participated in phase one. As Figure 4.1 shows, the majority were located in the Leinster and Munster regions. Sixty five percent of participants taught in co-educational post-primary schools (Figure 4.2). Of the 46 respondents, 63% were the sole guidance counsellor in their school. The remaining 37% worked in settings with two or more guidance counsellors.

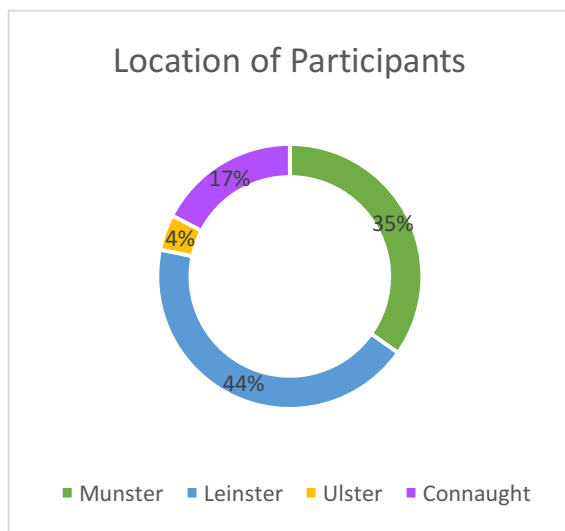


Figure 4.1 – Location of Participants

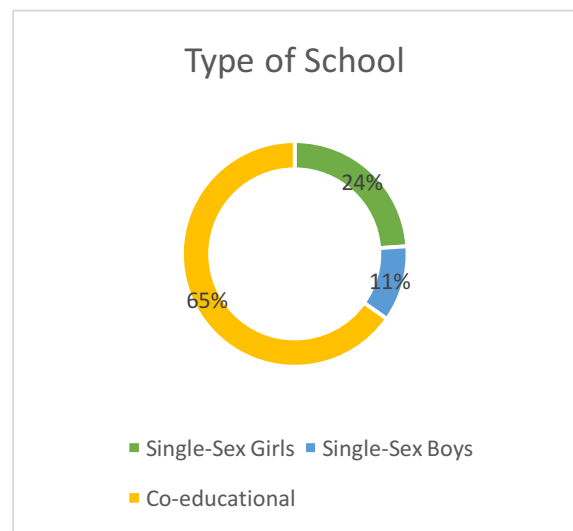


Figure 4.2 – Type of School

#### 4.1.2 Phase Two Participants

There were five participants in phase two of this research study. Similar to phase one, each answered questions relating to their setting, guidance counselling experience, type of school and how many hours of guidance they were allocated per week. Reflective of phase one, three of the five participants worked in co-educational settings, with one working in an all-girls school. One participant, however, differed to the other participants in that she worked in two

schools, the first an all-boys school and the other a co-educational tuition centre as outlined in Table 4.3 below. All participants were located in the Munster region. It is also worth noting that none of the participants had a full 22-hour guidance allocation. Kate, Margaret, Ruth and Ann all had subject teaching hours in addition to their guidance role. Margaret and Michael both also held Assistant Principal 1 roles in their settings.

<i>Participant Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age Range</i>	<i>Years of Guidance Experience</i>	<i>Type of School</i>	<i>Approximate number of students</i>	<i>Guidance of Hours</i>	<i>Interview Length</i>
<b>Kate</b>	F	30-35	5+	All Girls	700	14 hours	47 min
<b>Margaret</b>	F	50-55	15+	Co-ed, DEIS	70	11 hours	42 min
<b>Ruth</b>	F	40-45	3+	Co-ed, DEIS	260	11 hours	45 min
<b>Michael</b>	M	60-65	15+	Co-ed, DEIS	500	18 hours	43 min
<b>Ann</b>	F	50-55	15+	1 – All Boys 2 – Co-ed Tuition Centre	All boys School -260 Co-ed Tuition Centre - 120	1 – 9 hours 2 – 4 hours	53 min

*Figure 4.3 Profile of Phase Two Participants*

## 4.2 Findings

### 4.2.1 Inputs

Inputs in the context of this research refer to participants engagement with policy development, CPD and professional affiliation and support. By identifying these inputs, the development of guidance counsellor agency becomes apparent in how they align their internal process with their professional role.

#### *4.2.1.1 Engagement with Policy Development*

While the Whole School Guidance framework (NCGE 2017) is a national policy, implementation of a Whole School Guidance Plan (WSGP) is the responsibility of each individual school. An overwhelming 94% of respondents in phase one confirmed the presence of a WSGP in their settings, with 81% of these stating they compiled the entire document or lead its development in collaboration with management and other staff. This involvement in the development of the WSGP demonstrates a strong sense of professional agency by ensuring practitioner input on policy that directly impacts their role. This was also corroborated in phase two as 100% of participants reported engaging in the development of the WSGP in their setting. When implementation of the WSGP was explored with participants of phase two, their experiences were varied. The presence of the WSGP in participants settings largely had a positive impact on the guidance role, with the majority of respondents reporting feelings of support and empowerment in their role.

Ruth and Michael reported extremely positive feedback on the implementation and engagement in the WSGP from all stakeholders in their settings. The engagement of staff and management has had an empowering effect on their roles. Ruth explained how the plan has supported her by introducing a check and connect system between staff and students, which in turn means less issues are being referred straight to the guidance office:

*“If the same kids keep popping up then they are assigned a teacher to link with them. That saves me an awful lot of time.”*

(Ruth)

Kate and Michael expressed the importance of ensuring the roles of the various stakeholders are clearly defined in the development of the WSGP. As a result, stakeholders had a clear sense of what was expected of them within their roles, which it turn led to less issues being referred directly to the guidance service. Michael outlined some of the stakeholders in his settings WSGP:

*“Our school plan involves the guidance counsellor, home school liaison officer, SEN coordinator, year heads – all their roles are defined in the plan”.*

(Michael)

Michael, who has been in guidance for approximately 16 years, felt empowered by the WSGP and spoke enthusiastically of how it has changed his role within his school. When he became a guidance counsellor he felt the role was very isolating. Now, however, he feels that guidance counsellors are “*centre stage*” and are working with other staff as opposed to working by themselves, thus having a positive impact on his agency. When asked what he felt had changed, Michael replied, “*Policies have changed. ... The inclusion of the word ‘whole’. It changed everything*”. Ann, however, did not report the same level of engagement by stakeholders in both of her schools. She felt that staff, particularly in the all-boys school, were uncomfortable with the idea of being involved in guidance as they did not have proper training. As a result, her opinion on the WSGP became quite negative, thus impacting on her agency and engagement around the implementation of the policy in her setting. She appears frustrated by the expectation put on the WSGP:

*“The Minister is telling us that everybody in the school should be involved in this but the reality is that teachers don’t feel qualified and so they pass it on to us”*

(Ann)

Engagement in the development and implementation of the WSGP was not a unique experience for participants, however. Across both phases, participants demonstrated active engagement in policy development in their schools. Eighty-seven percent of phase one respondents reporting having the opportunity to engage in policy development. Ruth spoke highly of the collaborative approach management took to policy development in her school, recognising the expertise of various stakeholders in developing effective policy:

*“For different policies, some people have a better take on it. [...] Leadership recognises the expertise and collaborates a lot, which is great”.*

(Ruth)

Participants reported engaging in a variety of policy developments, such as anti-bullying, pastoral care, homework and critical incident policy.

#### *4.2.1.2 CPD & Professional Affiliation*

As participants in this research study were contacted through the IGC, all participants were members of the organisation. However, it became clear throughout phase two of research that

membership of the IGC was very important to guidance counsellors as interaction with their colleagues provided feelings of support and empowerment. Kate and Ruth, who had the least guidance counselling experience of the five phase two participants, spoke very highly of their IGC branches and the support they received when starting out. Kate described them as “*fantastic*” and “*very much pro CPD*”. All phase two participants spoke very highly of the support they felt from their fellow guidance counsellors in their local IGC branches and the opportunities this provided them to collaborate and communicate with one another. Membership of the IGC also gives members the opportunity to participate in branch-led counselling supervision sessions. Supervision groups provide guidance counsellors with a space to speak to each other regarding issues they deal with at work and draw on the support and advice of colleagues to help them deal with these issues - “*You get the opportunity to bring up these issues and everyone has similar issues*” (Margaret). This engagement in their professional body and sense of collaborative support in dealing with professional challenges demonstrates agency in the guidance profession.

An overwhelming 100% of participants across both phases reported in engaging in continuous professional development (CPD) in the last five years. Kate explains – “*CPD is so important, it really opens your mind*”. Ruth felt CPD was important in learning to deal with new challenges in the role, but also to refresh the basics of the role – “*It’s crucial, there’s always new stuff coming up. There’s always a need to refresh as well*”. Engagement in CPD as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of professional and student issues demonstrates professional agency in how practitioners engage in the challenges of their work. For example, Ruth, Kate and Margaret spoke of the usefulness of CPD on transgender issues:

*“It just opened my mind to the whole area of transgender and understanding how to handle it if a student ever came in to me looking for support”.*

(Kate)

Ruth showed agency in her decision to actively seek out CPD on the area of adolescent anxiety, as this is a recurring issue in her practice. Participants noted the role their local IGC branches played in providing CPD for them on a regular basis - “*I find the local branch of the IGC are fantastic and are always looking for different ideas*”. Margaret noted that the majority of CPD opportunities were focused on personal guidance as opposed to vocational and educational.

This is corroborated by the types of CPD engagement reported in phase one, with personal counselling CPD in the areas of mental health, suicide, sexuality and eating disorders among the most common. However,

### 4.2.2 Processes

Processes in the context of this research refer to environment that guidance counsellors work in and how this affects their agency in their role. Environmental factors such as relationships, timetabling issues and students needs are explored. This section will also examine an external factor originating beyond the school that affects provision – the Wellbeing framework. How guidance counsellors engage with challenges and external processes demonstrates professional agency.

#### 4.2.2.1 Relationships in the School Environment

As guidance provision moves toward the implementation of a whole school approach, it is important to explore how guidance counsellors engage with other staff in their settings and the impact these relationships may have on professional agency. In phase one, respondents were asked how they would describe the attitude of teaching staff and management toward the guidance service in their setting. The responses are demonstrated in Figure 4.4. The key message extracted from the findings shows that a relationship with management that demonstrated an understanding of the guidance role and placed value in it was an important factor in how practitioners enacted their agency within their role as they felt a greater sense of autonomy.

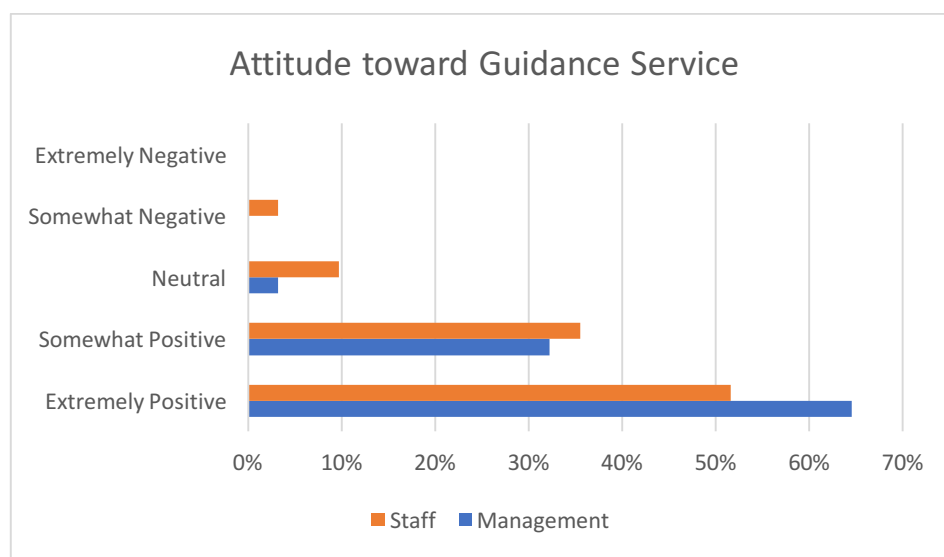


Figure 4.4 Attitude toward Guidance Service

The value placed on a positive and collaborative relationship with management became apparent in phase one. Participants valued the acknowledgement of the difficulties of their role:

*“I feel that management are very supportive toward the work that I do and are aware of the pressures and time constraints I am under.”*

(R26)

Kate also expressed appreciation that management valued the guidance role in her setting:

*“We knew our service was valued and we knew because they were keeping our hours and had verbally said the importance of it to us numerous times”.*

(Kate)

Phase two participants all reported positive collaboration with management in their schools, which provided a sense of autonomy in how they provided their service. Margaret and Kate expressed this autonomy by organising speakers, events and lessons they felt met the needs of their students. There was an overwhelming consensus by participants that having a positive relationship with management, which is embedded in respect, understanding and appreciation, is key for guidance counsellors in carrying out their role and thus has an impact on their professional agency. Ann explained the consequence of guidance not being valued by management - *“If you don’t have the support of management I think your job is undoable”*. While no participants in this research study reported experiencing a mainly negative relationship with management, frustrations were expressed around timetabling in the guidance role, which is the responsibility of management. This will be explored in more detail in the next section.

In terms of relationships with staff, most negatively perceived experiences seemed to be rooted in a misunderstanding of the role of a guidance counsellor. However, participants found engaging in practices that provided transparency and accountability in their role key in combatting this misunderstanding. Margaret felt that this staff members presumed she was not working if she was not in a class or a one-to-one session. To tackle this, she stressed the importance of educating staff and students in the purpose of the role – *“The more opportunity you get to do some PR around what you do, the better really”*. Kate felt that she needed to

prove to colleagues she was doing a good job– “*you need to show you are running a really good service so that they trust you*”. Ann also spoke about feeling that teachers perhaps do not see the full picture when it comes to troublesome students and tended to focus on discipline issues in the class. While she understood this point of view, she felt that teachers became annoyed when she did not sympathise. She explained “*I can see the full story, the full circle ... Teachers talk about you*”. As a means of transparency, four phase two participants kept logs of all their one to one appointments in an attempt to demonstrate the amount of work they were doing behind the scenes. Ruth explained why she felt this was important:

*“Sometimes you have people questioning what you are doing and you can actually say this is what I’ve done or who I’ve worked with, the referrals that I’ve made, the follow up I’ve done and the linking with other agencies”.*

(Ruth)

#### 4.2.2.2 Allocation of Guidance Hours

Seventy-one percent of phase one respondents cited time as their biggest challenge in their role:

*“I feel that the amount of time I am allocated to complete the work is not enough. I finish the school year concerned about the amount of work I got to complete and annoyed with myself that I did not get to do more”.*

(R26)

Michael explains that in order to tackle the large number of tasks within his role, he tends to work more than his allocated eighteen hours:

*“I don’t know how many hours a week I work ... It’s not 18 and it’s not 22 either. I just work right through, sometimes lunch time, sometimes until five o’clock”.*

(Michael)

Even though management in Kates’ setting had provided a guidance allocation larger than the guidelines outlined by the DES, she highlights:

*“In relation to the ground, the service, you could say we are under allocated. There’s never going to be enough hours there for guidance”.*

(Kate)

Despite responsibility of guidance allocation in schools being in the remit of school management, very few participants across both phases lay blame for their time constraints on management itself. Ruth felt that current time constraints stemmed from the cuts to guidance allocation in 2012:

*“I think Ruairi Quinn got it very wrong thinking that guidance counselling wasn’t essential at all. I think the government are looking at that ... and the effect it had on the whole pastoral care system in the school”.*

(Ruth)

When asked how they dealt with the challenge of time, participants were unsure and expressed frustration around the issue. Ann spoke about the usefulness of making lists to help her prioritise tasks, while Ruth noted the importance of setting boundaries and self-care. All participants across both phases reported engaging in classroom based guidance delivery, primarily with senior cycle students. Michael notes the usefulness in using classroom based sessions is dispensing general vocational information to students, freeing up time for him to deal with more specific issues – *“At times the individual stuff will come out of those general group classes”*. Michael and Ruth in particular highlighted how engaging with the WSGP has helped alleviate some of the time constraints they felt. Despite engaging in classroom guidance and the WSGP, participants reported that time constraints are being further exacerbated by the increase in personal counselling demands.

#### *4.2.2.3 Demands of Personal Counselling*

The second greatest challenge in the guidance role amongst phase one respondents was dealing with student anxiety, with 23% highlighting the issue. The challenge lies within how to manage this anxiety and time constraints around the ability to provide one-to-one personal counselling sessions.

Very interestingly, all phase two participants also relayed observations of a perceived increase in anxiety amongst students of all year groups. Four of the five phase two participants stated anxiety was the most common issue students came to them with - *“It’s probably a third of what I deal with in the one to one side of things. Anxiety is top”* (Ruth). Ann also felt very strongly that the issue of anxiety has been exacerbated by the 2012 reallocation of guidance hours and the subsequent time constraints within the role:

*“The cutting of the hours to such an extent has made the problem of anxiety worse. The supports just weren’t there for the people coming in with anxiety and going home with the same anxiety because it just couldn’t be dealt with”.*

(Ann)

Margaret strongly believe the increase in anxiety is driven by social media:

*“It’s the only correlation that you can see really. A lot of anxiety does stem from this social media activity and stuff that’s being posted about them”.*

(Margaret)

As a means of tackling this issue, both Margaret and Ann expressed a desire to see mobile phone access restricted more in their settings and have repeatedly engaged with parents around restricting access to electronics at home. However, despite demonstrating agency in seeking to deal with this challenge, there was a reported lack of parental support. Ann was frustrated by this, stating guidance counsellors are *“fighting a losing battle”*. Kate observed a lack of resilience across the student population as a challenge in the guidance role – *“Some students find it really difficult and lack resilience and coping mechanisms and find themselves quite anxious then”*. In order to combat the issue of anxiety in students, classroom based guidance delivery was once again utilised by participants. Ruth, Kate and Ann all spoke of the importance of Friends for Life, a resilience building programme. Ann explained, *“That’s why we’re doing the Friends for Life programme, in the hope of building resilience ... Resilience is the mantra”*.

#### *4.2.2.4 Wellbeing Guidelines*

In phase one, 97% of respondents stated they had class contact with senior cycle students, including Transition Years. This statistic dropped to 50% when it came to class contact with junior cycle. However, participants noted that due to the introduction of the new Wellbeing framework, classroom guidance with junior students was increasing. Once again, guidance counsellors demonstrated a willingness to engage in new policy relating to guidance, with mostly positive feedback. Concerns exist around the expansion of the role to timetabled junior guidance in light of the already reduced hours guidance counsellors work with. Further demonstrating participants willingness to become involved in the implementation of

Wellbeing, 52% of phase one and 100% of phase two participants sought continuous professional development (CPD) to further their understanding of the programme.

At the time of interview, the phased implementation of Wellbeing in the junior cycle curriculum had just completed its first year. Ruth acknowledged that the programme was in its infancy and was excited to see how Wellbeing and Guidance would become more intertwined in her setting in the coming years. Michael, Margaret and Ann were all involved in delivering career related guidance modules to first year students in their respective settings. Positivity was reported in relation to engaging in classroom guidance with younger students - *“It’s a good starting level I think”* (Michael). Ruth believed the Wellbeing programme would allow students to *“become more active in their goal setting and motivation and aspirations”* and encourage career exploration at a younger age. This in turn would benefit both the student and the guidance counsellor in the future – *“I think it’s nearly too late when they are in fifth and sixth year”* (Ruth). Agency is demonstrated in how guidance counsellors engage with this new policy and adapt to their changing role. Ann, however, seemed dubious about being regularly timetabled with junior cycle students. This concern lay in the fact she was only contracted for nine hours guidance in one of her schools, which she felt she needed to spend with senior cycle students – *“You have to have regular contact with senior cycle”*. She had combatted this issue by only sporadically engaging with classroom based Wellbeing and not taking on a first-year group for the duration of the year.

### **4.2.3 Outputs**

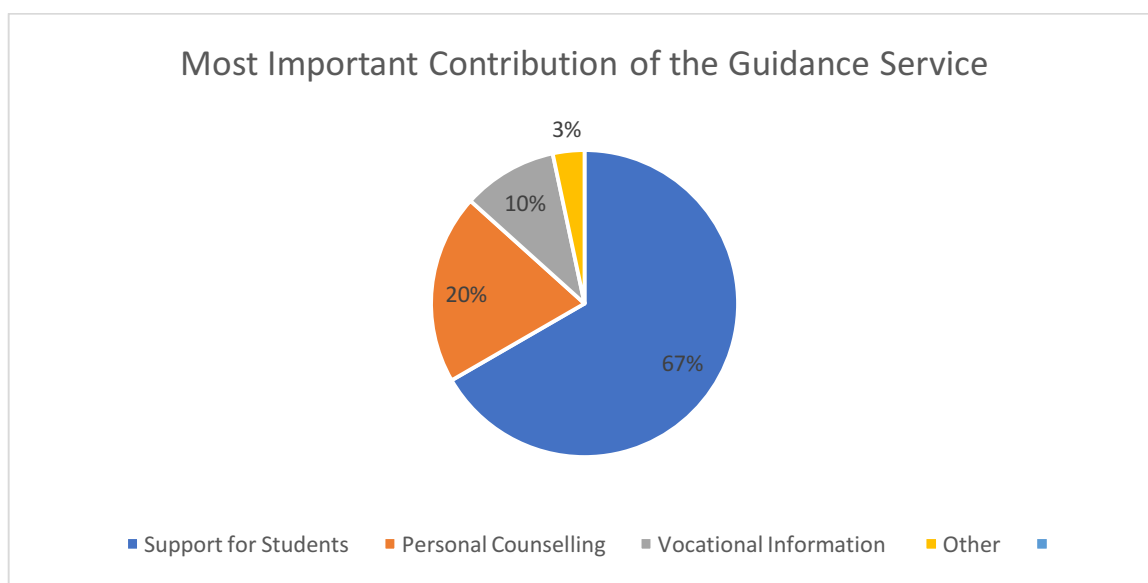
Outputs focus on what outcomes guidance counsellors envision as a result of their work. In this section, both guidance counsellors’ intended outcomes and reported outcomes are explored. Agency is demonstrated in how practitioners reconcile their perception of their role with the reality of it.

#### *4.2.3.1 Practitioners Intended Outcomes of Guidance Provision*

Participants of this study reported that providing emotional support to students was the most valuable contribution of the guidance service in their settings, with 67% of phase one respondents expressing this belief (See Figure 4.5):

*“Just being there to listen when they need support. A problem shared is a problem halved and a lot of the time they are just looking for a space to communicate their emotions”*

(R44)



**Figure 4.5.** *Most Important Contribution of the Guidance Service*

Given this perception, it is not surprising that participants stressed the importance of providing personal counselling to students. Indeed, 20% of phase one respondents highlighting personal counselling provision as the most important contribution of the guidance service. The importance of providing support to students was reiterated in phase two. Participants envisioned achieving this outcome in different ways. Kate and Ruth wanted to provide students a safe space in school where they could vocalise their thoughts and feelings, to which Ruth noted the importance of having an open-door policy. Kate explained why this was important, “*Some students might not have that space at home and can only get it in school*”. Ann reflected that her vision within her role has evolved in recent years. In the past, she would have focused on the vocational aspects of guidance, whereas now she is mindful of supporting students through personal issues. Providing support to students was the dominant intended outcome of the guidance service and participants reported differing ways in which they felt that support could be provided. As outlined above, participants report actively engaging in a wide variety of CPD related to supporting student through personal issues and engaging in one-to-one counselling with students. However, what participants report as their desired outcomes of the role appear to be in juxtaposition with the realities of it.

#### *4.3.3.2 Reality of Guidance Outcomes*

Participants in phase one reported that issues dealt with on a one-to-one basis were dominated by personal counselling (50%) and vocational guidance (43%). Participants also reported the

vast majority of their day-to-day planning and activities were dominated by the provision of vocational guidance to senior cycle students. Typical activities that phase two participants reported engaging in were CAO preparation, booking guest speakers, work experience preparation, visits to colleges and career investigation. Kate and Ann were only timetabled for weekly class contact with senior cycle students in their settings, with Michael, Ruth and Margaret engaging in both senior and junior cycle classroom guidance in the past academic year. This once again came down to the allocated time given to guidance. Participants felt that vocational guidance for senior cycle students had to be prioritised in order to prepare them for the transition from second level education to their own respective paths. Kate explains:

*“I would always say what are my vocational priorities? It’s about getting as much information as I can to as many students about what they want to apply for”.*

(Kate)

Margaret felt strongly that the current guidance model was not sustainable as younger students were not being prioritised:

*“They need to be prioritised and there needs to be a better system in place so there’s an adequate amount of guidance for all students”.*

(Margaret)

Not surprisingly, when asked what areas they felt the guidance service could improve on their setting, 57% of phase one respondents and 100% of phase two participants felt the service would improve if they were allocated more hours to work with students.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

Findings in this chapter were analysed through the lens of Inputs, Process and Outputs. Under inputs, participants in this study demonstrated their engagement with policy development in their settings and the importance of CPD and IGC membership emerged. Guidance counsellors showcased their eagerness to upskill and develop in the provision of their service. Under processes, the relationship between the guidance counsellor and their setting was explored. The key issue that emerged in this section was the reported time constraints practitioners found in their role. This impacted on how they dealt with the changing demands of their role, such as the introduction of the Wellbeing framework and the increase in student anxiety. Participants relationship with management also impacted their autonomy within their settings.

Under outputs, a juxtaposition emerged between participants vision of providing support for all students in the setting and the reality of having to prioritise vocational guidance with senior cycle students above all else. Chapter five will discuss these findings in the context of literature.

## **Chapter 5 – Discussion**

### **5.0 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to synthesise the findings of the literature review with the findings from both phase one and two of this research project. These findings will be discussed in the context of the primary research questions. The discussion is framed under three broad themes. The first theme focuses on the influences that impact on guidance agency in the school setting. The subsequent themes explore the manner in which guidance counsellors enact their agency in their settings, both through their professional practice and their professional engagement.

### **5.1 Influences on Guidance Counsellor Agency**

This section will examine the factors that influence guidance counsellors' agency in their settings. These factors may restrict practitioners' ability to enact their agency or encourage it. Two broad factors are explored in this section; the impact of the reallocation of guidance hours and the subsequent effect this had on timetabling of guidance in schools and relationships in the school setting and their importance to the guidance counsellor's role.

#### *5.1.1 Impact of Guidance Re-Allocation*

Findings from this research indicate that guidance counsellors experience time constraints in their roles. A number of participants reported feelings of frustration as they believed they were not allocated enough time to do their jobs effectively. Issues around timetabling and allocation resulted in practitioners having to make decisions on what to prioritise in their role. This challenge resulted in participants reporting discrepancies between their own intended outcomes of the role and the reality of constrained provision.

The issue of time in the guidance profession stems from the DES (2012) reallocation of guidance hours, which were enforced in the midst of the economic downturn in Ireland. These cuts abolished the ex-quota provision of guidance counselling in schools and reduced the number of guidance posts by 600 (DES 2018). A number of participants in the study note the negative impact of the reallocation on their roles. The implications of these cuts have been extensively researched, with guidance counsellors reporting increasing pressure and time constraints in their changing roles (IGC 2016; NCGE 2013), similar to this study's findings.

Just as participants in this study reported a lack of time to effectively fulfil the full remit of their role, guidance counsellors in existing literature spoke of a “struggle to prioritise work-related issues” (Leahy *et al.* 2017, p.104). Practitioners report that the primary consequence of this struggle is a decrease in personal counselling provision with students (Leahy *et al.* 2017). This is reiterated by the findings of this research as participants reported feeling they were not meeting their students’ needs with the time they were allocated. Guidance counsellors in this study felt strongly about their role in providing emotional support to all students, which they view as their most important contribution to school life. However, timetabling constraints have resulted in practitioners actively making decisions on which elements of their work to prioritise. More often than not, this has led to personal counselling issues falling down the list of priorities, with vocational and educational guidance taking preference. Participants were pessimistic about resolving or improving time constraints in the future as they felt there would never be enough time to meet all the demands of the role. Evident from the findings of this research is the influence that guidance allocation has on practitioners’ perception of their agency.

### *5.1.2 Importance of Relationships*

Guidance counsellors in this study placed considerable value on relationships within the school setting, particularly with management. Positive relationships in the school setting are characterised as being supportive and empowering for the guidance counsellor. The consequence of this empowerment for the guidance practitioner is a reported sense of autonomy in their role, which in turn has implications for the enactment of agency.

The vast majority of participants in this study reported a positive relationship with management in their settings. Hearne *et al.* (2016) noted that since the devolution of guidance allocation to school management, guidance allocation is now somewhat based on the value principals’ place on the guidance service. There is potential for conflict between guidance practitioners and management in this context, given the findings in this study and existing literature noting that issues around guidance allocation and timetabling were very concerning for practitioners and a source of frustration for them. However, findings in this study indicated that practitioners did not lay blame for the reported time constraints in their role at the feet of school management, but rather the Department of Education and Skills itself. This appears to be in contrast to existing literature on relationships between guidance counsellors and management in school settings. Kimber and Campbell (2014) noted that the differing responsibilities and

values of school principals and guidance counsellors is a potential source of conflict in the school setting. This is due to school managements tendency to focus of the school as a whole, while guidance counsellors tend to focus on the needs of individual students. Kimber and Campbell (2014) suggest that in order to avoid tensions between the two roles, it is vital that each understand each other's roles and work together to determine common approaches to ethical dilemmas and decision making in their settings. From the findings, it appears that many guidance counsellors in this study feel that management have a good understanding of their role in the setting. The majority of participants spoke of feeling valued by management and asserted that principals understood the strain they were under in their roles. Participants also spoke of the collaborative nature of their relationship with school management, acknowledging that their input is sought and valued in the development of school policies. This mirrors what Harris (2004) describes as distributed leadership in the school setting, where expertise of others in the school is sought out. Participants who reported positive relationships with management also reported a sense of autonomy in their role when it came to making decisions about guidance provision in their settings. As a result, it appears from these findings that the relationship between guidance counsellors and management has a significant impact on guidance counsellor agency and their perception of it. A negative relationship that lacks value and restricts the ability to demonstrate autonomy is viewed by guidance counsellors in this study as restraining their ability to make decisions in their role. Vahasantanen (2015 p.10) notes the control that management structures have over teacher agency and suggest that "leadership of professional organisations should [...] promote teachers' professional agency" as excessive control result has negative implications on agency.

Overall, guidance counsellors in this study reported a positive relationship with teaching staff in their settings. However, this research found that participants did not place as strong a value on the relationship with staff as the relationship with management. Guidance counsellors in this study reported that at times there appeared to be a lack of understanding of the guidance role among staff, which had a negative impact on the relationships between them. Several participants noted that some staff had demonstrated a lack of knowledge around their roles and felt that guidance counsellors were not working if they were not in a class or one-to-one session. This misunderstanding appeared to stem from the differing focus of the roles. Participants reported that teachers had a tendency to focus on disciplinary issues in the classroom, while guidance counsellors focus on the bigger picture of the student, which in turn resulted in frustration by some teachers. Similar findings were reported by Hearne and Galvin (2015

p.236), who found that some teaching staff felt the guidance service was “shrouded in a veil of secrecy”. Guidance counsellors in this study cited the importance of educating staff about the guidance role in their settings as a way to tackle the lack of understanding around the function of their role. In order to demonstrate accountability and transparency in their practice, practitioners in this study spoke of how they kept records of their appointments and issues they dealt with or referred. Some participants suggested that showing these statistics to all staff members in the school setting would help contextualise their role and demonstrate the variety of issues and tasks that fall under the remit of guidance counselling. Practices such as this are a demonstration of agentic behaviour in meeting a challenge in the workplace (Toom *et al.* 2015). This could help create more positive relationships with staff, rooted in a mutual understanding each other’s roles. Compiling statistics related to ones’ work as a way of measuring output and productivity is reflective of a wider movement in education, where accountability and efficiency are becoming increasingly more important (Lipman 2009).

## **5.2 Agency in Professional Practice**

The model of guidance counselling in Ireland is deemed a holistic one, with equal emphasis on personal, educational and vocational counselling (IGC 2017). However, findings from this study suggest that practitioners are struggling to engage in all three aspects of the model equally and with all students. This struggle to find a balance between all aspects of guidance is not unique to this role and is reflective of a wider educational struggle (Hargreaves 2003). In this study, participants noted an emphasis on vocational and educational counselling in their settings, while speaking very little about engaging in educational guidance. As a result, section 5.2 focuses on participants reported levels of engagement in vocational and personal guidance. What became apparent in this research was a pattern of engaging with students on a classroom based level regarding broad issues in vocational and personal guidance.

### *5.2.1. Vocational Guidance*

Findings from this study indicated two decisions made regarding vocational guidance. Firstly, the prioritisation of vocational guidance over personal and educational counselling and secondly, the prioritisation in provision of vocational guidance to senior cycle students. This corroborates with research conducted by the IGC (2018) which found that practitioners were spending 70% of their allocation with senior cycle students.

Participants repeatedly noted the importance of having regular contact with senior cycle students in order to prepare them for the transition beyond post-primary education and to ensure they make well informed decisions regarding their educational or career choices. An emphasis on providing vocational guidance is reflective of the vocational driven guidance models championed by the OECD (2004; 2008) and the European Union (ELGPN 2015). Neoliberal discourse has brought performativity, efficiency and accountability to the fore in guidance policy, with an increased emphasis on governments creating a knowledge society that is adaptable to the cyclical nature of the economy (Hargreaves 2003). In the Irish context, this has resulted in an exam driven culture focused on students' achievements in the Leaving Certificate exams (Hennessy *et al.* 2011). This has had an effect on how teachers approach their role as educators, with research showing a tendency to narrow the curriculum and teach to the exam (Hennessey *et al.* 2011; Hennessy and McNamara 2013). Given the time constraints guidance counsellors work under, in a system that places emphasis on the achievement of points, it appears guidance counsellors in this study are choosing to prioritise vocational guidance in order to meet the demands of the current system. Vahasantanen (2015) describes this as enacting agency through adaption to educational discourse and practices. By prioritising Leaving Certificate students' vocational guidance needs, guidance counsellors may be inadvertently playing a part in social reproduction and the strengthening of the current hegemony of exam focused schooling in Irish education (McLaren 2009).

If guidance counsellors are choosing to prioritise vocational guidance, the provision of educational and personal guidance suffers by default, meaning the provision of holistic guidance is not realised. Gleeson (2009) notes that focusing on economic driven goals as opposed to holistic goals can have a negative impact on education and that schools "are too often the causalities" in the pursuit of a knowledge society (Hargreaves *et al.* 2003, p.53). This is due to a tendency to solely pursue economic goals *or* holistic ones, even though both goals are worthwhile and valuable. Teaching toward economic goals prepares students for contributing effectively to the economy, while teaching toward holistic goals can create caring, strong individuals (Hargreaves *et al.* 2003). However, it is the reconciliation of the economic and holistic goals of education that appears a difficult task for policy makers and teachers alike (Hargreaves *et al.* 2003). From these findings, this struggle is also apparent in the guidance profession, where practitioners are already reporting time constraints as a barrier to the provision of a holistic service. This has potentially negative implications on the holistic guidance model moving forward.

Many participants reported that engagement in vocational guidance with senior cycle students was in the form of weekly classroom based guidance sessions, which were part of the guidance counsellors' timetables. Findings suggest that these classes are utilised for the deliverance of general vocational counselling and the dispensing of information to students. It was reported by participants that classroom based vocational guidance covered areas such as CAO applications, interview skills, preparing CVs' and information on various education pathways. Taking the decision to approach vocational counselling in this manner was reported by participants as a means to free up time for one-to-one appointments. One participant noted that dispensing general information to senior cycle students allowed one-to-one vocational sessions to become more focused and specific as students came to the service informed. Findings from this study strongly indicate that guidance counsellors choose to focus on vocational counselling as a priority in their practice. However, participants also noted the increasing pressures on personal counselling provision over the last number of years.

### *5.2.2 Personal Counselling*

A number of participants expressed a belief that the reallocation of guidance affected the pastoral care system in their schools, which in turn has led to an increase in the number of students presenting to their service with personal counselling needs, especially anxiety issues. This corroborates with previous research conducted by Leahy *et al.* (2017), which found that guidance counsellors reported an increase in demand for personal counselling in school in the wake of the 2012 reallocation of hours. Participants in this study noted that younger students were presenting to the service more often, further exacerbating time demands, especially given the tendency to prioritise vocational guidance with senior cycle students. This increase has implications on practitioners' agency as it broadens the range of issues that need to be prioritised in a setting. Participants also reported that being present as a support for students in their settings was the most important aspect of their role and their planning was driven primarily by students' needs. It appears that providing emotional support to students is a strong part of the guidance counsellors identity. This presents a strong contradiction between what guidance counsellors strive to provide and the dominance of senior cycle vocational guidance provision in their settings.

Similar to vocational guidance provision, it appeared from these findings that practitioners were choosing to engage with students at a classroom based level regarding broad personal issues. For example, anxiety issues were cited as the most common personal counselling issue

emerging in practice. A number of participants reported engaging in programmes such as My Friends Youth (MFY) to combat rising anxiety issues. MFY is an anxiety prevention programme aimed at junior cycle students that focused on resilience development, another personal guidance issue highlighted by participants in this study. Leahy *et al.* (2017) noted that in schools today a large amount of guidance work was based in preventative programmes. These programmes aimed to reduce issues around student wellbeing, such as anxiety. Choosing to engage in preventative programmes with students, such as MFY, demonstrates an enactment of agency around tackling these issues with students on a broad level, similar to the provision of broad vocational guidance. However, over reliance on classroom based guidance may have negative implications for students, especially those who would not necessarily seek to engage with the guidance service outside of class or perhaps misinterpret information given to them in a class setting. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that an increase in guidance allocation would help them in improving their service, particularly in the area of personal guidance.

### **5.3 Agency in Professional Engagement**

Findings in this research demonstrated participants eagerness and willingness to actively engage in continuous professional development within their roles. Guidance counsellors also reported mostly positive attitudes toward adapting to the educational changes that were effecting their role. Guidance counsellor agency in this respect is demonstrated through a willingness to engage in the changing educational landscape and ensure the voice of the guidance counsellor is heard in the developing of new school policy. Although participants in this study have reported that their agency is heavily influenced by time constraints and their relationship with management, it appears that guidance counsellors feel strongly about professional engagement in their practice as a means to stay connected with developments in changing policies and student issues.

#### *5.3.1 Engaging with a Changing Educational Landscape*

The whole school guidance framework and the Junior Cycle Wellbeing framework were repeatedly mentioned by participants as influencing their current role in their settings. The Wellbeing framework outlines guidance as one of its main pillars (NCCA 2017). Guidelines recommend increased guidance accessibility for junior cycle students (NCCA 2017), which has implications on an already squeezed guidance allocation and may increase practitioners

reported time constraints. However, the Wellbeing framework was met with positivity by the majority of guidance counsellors in this study, as they felt it was important for students to engage in career exploration prior to senior cycle. Ruth believed that introducing vocational guidance in senior cycle was perhaps too late for some students. The Wellbeing framework allowed her to highlight career development at an earlier stage, which she reported as positive. The adaptability of the guidance counsellors, demonstrated by their largely positive attitudes toward Wellbeing in this research, seems to contrast slightly to the responses of teaching staff to the same educational changes. Murchan (2018) reports opposition of teachers to some aspects of the junior cycle, particularly around assessment and implications of changes to student-teacher relationships. This, of course, is not to say that guidance counsellors are not concerned by current educational changes. Indeed, some participants noted concerns around the impact of Wellbeing on timetabling. However, attitudes and approaches demonstrated by participants in this research focused on the benefits of the framework for students, while teachers in Murchan's (2018) study focused on the implications of the framework on their own role. Vahasantanen (2015) stated that professional agency in the face of educational reform can be demonstrated by mental stance toward it. It appears that guidance counsellors in this research study have adopted a positive mental stance, more so than subject teachers have reported in existing literature. Participants also reported a high level of engagement in Wellbeing related CPD, further enacting their agency by choosing to develop their knowledge around the framework and its expectation of guidance counsellors.

The development of a Whole School Guidance Plan in schools intends to remove the sole responsibility for guidance provision from the guidance counsellor and turn it into a school wide endeavour (NCGE 2017). This has implications on provision as it has the potential to alleviate reported time constraints on the guidance role (Leahy *et al.* 2017). While the idea of a whole school guidance approach has been promoted since the 1990s', emphasis on the approach grew following the 2012 re-allocation of hours (Hearne and Galvin 2014). Findings in this research suggest that the integration of the whole school approach in second level schools is well underway, with an overwhelming majority of participants reporting the presence of a WSGP and the primary role they played in its development. Primary findings from both phases demonstrate guidance counsellors' willingness to participate in the implementation of this policy in their settings and report a lessening of issues being referred to the guidance office as a positive consequence of the plan. For example, the integration of a check and connect system allows students to connect with a member of staff to speak to instead

of direct referral to the guidance counsellor. Michael felt this policy had changed the role of the guidance counsellor, integrating the service into the heart of the school as opposed to operating on the periphery by an isolated practitioner. Hearne and Galvin (2015) reported concerns held by some staff members in schools around their changing roles within the whole school guidance approach. Participants in this study noted the importance of a well-developed plan, with well-defined roles to ensure staff are clear on their duties, as paramount to the implementation of the approach. Some guidance counsellors reported that the plan was helping to alleviate the time pressure on their service as issues were being dealt with outside the service by some teachers. This has huge implications moving forward in the guidance role as it may help alleviate issues around time constraints and struggles of prioritisation currently reported in the profession (Leahy *et al.* 2017).

Guidance counsellors are indeed demonstrating agency in their decision to embrace the framework, lead its development and acknowledge the current and potential positive effects of the plan easing the time pressures of practitioners. However, in order to push the development of the framework toward the next level with full implementation, a dialogue between staff and management around expectations and roles could be a useful exercise. Ruth felt that the engagement in the whole school guidance plan by all staff in her setting has strengthened its successful implementation. She described it as incredibly collaborative between all stakeholders, with well-defined roles and an active approach that allows staff to contribute in ways that they are comfortable.

### *5.3.2 Professional Engagement*

An overwhelming 100% of participants in both phases of research reported engaging in guidance related continuous professional development in the last five years, as well as being members of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors. Existing literature seems to suggest that CPD participation rates amongst teachers are not as high. For example, recent findings presented by Clerkin *et al.* (2018) stated that 57% of post-primary Science students in Ireland were taught by a teacher who had engaged in between zero and six hours of CPD in the last two years. Guidance counsellors in this research felt CPD was important to keep up to date and informed on best practice in dealing with personal counselling issues, with CPD engagement in transgender and anxiety issues being highlighted. With personal issues on the rise, especially in anxiety, guidance counsellors are ensuring they are adequately equipped to continue providing support in an educated and caring way. This agency in seeking out CPD in

order to combat the increasing challenges in personal counselling is strong in the guidance profession links strongly with participants primary reported intended outcome of providing emotional support to students. Guidance counsellors in this research study identified student needs and a desire to support those needs as a motivating factor in their role. This does seem to be in contrast with subject teachers, however. Research conducted by Hennessy and Lynch (2017) found that while working with children was high on the list of factors that led individuals to the teaching profession, prior learning experiences and a love of their teaching subject also heavily influence their decision. Given that all guidance counsellors in second level settings are also qualified subject teachers, an interesting observation emerges here. The findings suggest that motivation to support students is what instilled the agency to pursue guidance counselling and continues to drive the need to engage continuously in upskilling in their role. As guidance counsellors often work alone in their settings, membership of the IGC and the opportunities that provided for collaboration and support for participants was another key finding. Membership of the IGC not only provided guidance counsellors with counselling supervision support, but also CPD opportunities and meetings provided an outlet for practitioners to come together in order to discuss and collaborate on their practices. This is characteristic of collectivist agency as outlined by Edwards (2015), which is described as individuals coming together to demonstrate agency in their profession. It appears from this research that guidance counsellors are exceptionally active and engage in how they engage with their profession and how they demonstrate agency in this regard.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

This chapter served to synthesise the primary and secondary research findings in the context of guidance counsellor agency. Findings indicate that guidance counsellor agency is heavily influenced by two factors – allocation of guidance hours and relationships in the school setting. Guidance allocation has been affected by the reallocation and cuts of 2012. Participants in this study expressed frustration around time constraints in their role and this in turn had an influence on the amount of agency they had in their settings. A positive, collaborative relationship, which acknowledged the importance of the guidance role, was cited as key by participants. This heavily influenced the amount of agency practitioners had in their role. When it came to enacting the agency they had, participants noted the prioritisation of vocational counselling with senior cycle students in their practice. This was despite an increase in the demand for personal counselling in their settings and is reflective of the wider emphasis on senior cycle

education in the Irish school system. To combat time constraints around guidance provision, participants reported in utilising class based guidance session in order to communicate general information to students. Practitioners also engaged in classroom based programmes such as My Friends Youth as a means of tackling the issues around student anxiety. Guidance counsellors demonstrated their greatest enactment of their agency in their professional engagement, through professional membership, CPD and adapting to changes in the educational landscape such as junior cycle reform. This research study found that guidance counsellors demonstrate strong agency in engaging with their role. Chapter six will present the conclusion to this research study.

## **Chapter Six – Conclusion**

### **6.0 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss conclusions of the study within the aims and objectives of the research. The strengths and limitations of the study are also explored. Based on the research findings, a number of recommendations are made in the areas of policy, practice and future research. Personal learning is examined before concluding the chapter.

### **6.1 Overview of Findings**

This section examines the overall findings of this research in the context of the study's aims and objectives. The main aim of this study was to explore how post-primary guidance counsellors enact their professional agency on a daily basis. This aim was underpinned by three secondary research questions. These questions sought to establish the factors that influenced practitioners' agency within their settings and also to explore how they enacted and made decisions with the agency they had. Several objectives were also identified in this research. The first involved reviewing literature relevant to the research study through a critical lens. Literature around the definition and role of a guidance counsellor were explored from an international and Irish context, including key areas such as Irish guidance policy and guidelines and research on guidance practice. Wider influences on guidance counselling, such as neoliberalism, were also examined. The concept of professional agency was also defined and factors that may affect agency were explored. The second objective required the gathering of information from guidance counsellors in second level schools regarding their perceptions around their role and agency. Data collection was conducted in two phases, through an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Data was analysed and findings were synthesised with literature to identify the enactment of professional agency in the post-primary guidance profession.

The Irish guidance model (DES 2005; IGC 2017) suggests the provision of guidance in post-primary schools consist of three interlinked, equally weighted areas – personal guidance, vocational guidance and educational guidance. Policy also states that appropriate guidance should be available to all students (DES 2005). Findings in this study indicated that participants were struggling to engage with all three areas of guidance equally.

Two issues were reported as heavily influencing practitioners' agency in their settings. Firstly, the issue of timetabling and time constraints very much affected how practitioners approached their role. This is reflective of research carried out in the wake of the 2010 DES reallocation of guidance in schools (Hearne and Galvin 2015; Leahy *et al.* 2017), which found that guidance professionals reported frustrations around time constraints in the role and subsequently a constant need to practice reprioritisation of tasks and student issues. Leahy *et al.* (2017) noted the impact this on the provision of personal counselling, which participants in this study also reported. The second influence of guidance agency is the relationships with staff and management in the school setting. Participants spoke strongly about and value they place in their relationship with management in their settings. It appears from this research that practitioners perceived this relationship as having significant influence on the amount of agency they have within their roles. Positive, collaborative relationships were correlated with an increased sense of autonomy and agency, while negative relationships rooted in a misunderstanding of each other's roles had a negative impact on autonomy and agency. Literature suggests that the differing focus within the roles of management, guidance and teaching staff provides potential for conflict in the setting (Kimber and Campbell 2014; Hearne and Galvin 2015). While findings suggest this is generally not the case for guidance practitioners and management, participants reported some incidents of tension with teaching staff due to a misunderstanding of the guidance role. Agentic action taken to tackle this misconception was evident in practitioners' decisions to engage in educating stakeholders in the school about the role and developing practices that demonstrated accountability and transparency.

Participants in this study reported that the majority of guidance provision in their settings was aimed at senior cycle students and heavily based in vocational guidance activities. This corroborates with findings from the IGC (2018) which show that guidance counsellors spend 70% of their allocated hours engaging with senior cycle students. Vocational guidance provision was reported by participants as being largely classroom based, providing students information on the CAO process and pathways to further education. It appears from these findings that guidance professionals are making decisions around provision and practice that are reflective of the current neoliberal discourses within Irish education. Namely, the performativity driven Leaving Certificate examination system, which emphasises the importance of achieving results and pursuing higher education (Hennessy and McNamara 2013). As well as vocational guidance being classroom based, participants reported engagement in

programs such as My Friends Youth in an attempt to tackle personal guidance issues on a class based level. While this may be viewed as agentic action in meeting the challenge of reported time constraints, developing an overreliance on classroom based guidance delivery may have negative implications for some students who may be hesitant to engage with guidance outside the class or misinterpret information given to the group.

All participants in this study had engaged in CPD in the last five years and all were members of the IGC. This engagement in upskilling and engaging with colleagues through branch meetings and supervision demonstrates professional agency in practice. The high level of engagement in CPD by participants in this study appeared to be at odds with CPD engagement in teaching staff (Clerkin *et al.* 2018). Practitioners also demonstrated agency and adaptability in how they chose to engage with new policy developments that affected their role, namely the Whole School Guidance Plan and the Wellbeing framework. Participants reported assisting in the development of these policies in their school and spoke positively of the affects they may have for the guidance role. While it appears from this study that guidance practitioners are willing to actively engage in professional and policy development in their roles, their ability to provide a holistic guidance service is somewhat constrained in their settings. Time constraints have led to an adhering of the neoliberal agenda and the prioritization of vocational guidance provision to senior cycle students, despite practitioners repeatedly mentioning the rise of personal guidance issues in their settings. While delivering classroom based guidance allows practitioners to distribute information to a large number of students at once, this may not be adequate for those students who would not seek to engage with the service outside class or misinterpret information. It is clear from these findings that the importance of having a positive relationship with management, who control the guidance allocation, is a key influence in guidance counsellors' perception of agency in their settings.

## **6.2 Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

### *6.1 Strengths*

This research study was framed under the interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist researcher recognises the individuality of humans and appreciates that each person has their own sense and interpretation of their lived realities (Thomas 2017). Exploring participants realities with them allowed for the gathering of rich data in phase two of research, which in turn broadened the researcher's understanding of professional agency in the guidance role (Thomas 2017).

The adoption of Explanatory Sequential Design meant that both quantitative and qualitative data was collected, thus providing potential for a deeper insight than either method on their own (Creswell and Plano Clark 2009). The use of an online questionnaire in phase one provided a larger sample of potential participants and removed geographical barriers in this phase (Thomas 2017). Furthermore, this study contributes to the area of practice in Irish post-primary guidance provision in the area of professional agency. There is currently a lack of specific research in this area.

### *6.2 Limitations*

A limitation of conducting interpretivist research lies in its very assumption that reality is different for all individuals. This makes it difficult to generalise the study findings outside the context of the research (Thomas 2017). Another limitation of the research was the small sample size in phase two of data collection. A larger study with a bigger sample size would provide a more comprehensive insight in to professional agency on a wider scale and is recommended by the research. In this instance time and financial constraints precluded phase two data collection from a larger sample cohort.

## **6.3 Recommendations for Policy, Practice and Research**

### *6.3.1 Policy*

- Although some progress has been made in restoring the reallocation cuts in 2012, it is clear that guidance counsellors are still struggling with the issue of time in their roles. Full restoration and a further increase of allocation would be recommended in order to alleviate this pressure on practitioners and support to provision of holistic guidance. Restoration of ring-fenced hours is also recommended as this would offset the apparent reductionism of the guidance role in schools.

### *6.3.2 Practice*

- Schools should ensure they clearly define the roles of all stakeholders within the context of the Whole School Guidance Plan. This will ensure that all stakeholders are clear of the expectations in the roles of teachers, management and guidance counsellors in the whole school approach to guidance.
- Training should also be provided to staff who feel uncomfortable in dealing with guidance issues in the context of the whole school approach. This uneasiness amongst

some staff was cited by some participants as hindering the implementation of the WSGP in their settings.

### *6.3.3 Research*

- Further research in the area profession agency in the guidance profession would be beneficial as there is a lack of research in this area. Potential exists to build on these findings using a larger number of participants to broaden data collection.
- Research could be conducted in to the link between agency and guidance counsellor's identity. Agency stems from our identity and how this is constructed in the Irish guidance context has not been extensively researched.
- As the Wellbeing guidelines are still in the early stages of implementation in schools. As participants in this study reported varying approaches to the integration of guidance into the Wellbeing framework in their settings, research as to how guidance is being integrated into junior cycle Wellbeing would be beneficial.

## **6.4 Reflexivity in Relation to Personal Learning**

Initially, when undertaking this research, I felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the task that lay ahead. I was concerned that guidance counsellors would not volunteer to be a part of my study and that I would struggle with interpreting findings and linking them effectively with the literature. To ensure reflexivity throughout the research process, I kept a research diary in which I took note of observations, important points from literature and questions that emerged for me throughout the process. Engaging in reflective conversations with my research supervisor was also extremely helpful in challenging my perceptions and assumptions around the research. This study also has implications for my future practice as a guidance counsellor. I am mindful of the influences that affect guidance agency such as time constraints and relationships with other stakeholders in the school setting. The importance of good communication and collaboration with staff and management is something I will endeavour to engage in within my practice. The importance of regular CPD, to ensure I remain knowledgeable and engaged with student issues, is also a lesson I will take into my future practice. Given the challenges reported by participants in a performativity driven education sector, remaining mindful of personal guidance and issues that students present with is important in the guidance role. Professional engagement with the IGC and the opportunities provided by membership, as highlighted by research participants, will be an important feature

of my practice moving forward. The opportunity to engage in the development and implementation of policy in the school setting also stands out as a key learning in this study for me as this ensure the voice of the guidance practitioner is heard in the school setting.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

Guidance counsellors in this study reported high levels of professional engagement in their role in the areas of CPD, professional affiliation and policy development. However, while practitioners have demonstrated a strong enactment of agency in these areas, their agency in their setting is hugely influenced by a number of factors. Time constraints have led to a prioritisation of vocational guidance provision to senior cycle students, mostly in a classroom based setting. An increase in personal guidance issues among the student population was also reported by participants. Findings indicated that some practitioners were implementing classroom based programs in their settings as a means to tackle issues such as anxiety. While this demonstrates agentic behaviour, a reliance on classroom based interventions may have negative implications on some students. It appears that the relationship with management in the setting was a key influence on guidance counsellor agency, which is not surprising given the control they have over the guidance allocation. Guidance counsellors in this research felt strongly about their role in providing support to students, however it appears that this was difficult to given the various factors influencing their agency around doing this and a reported frustration around not having enough time to do their role effectively. From this research, a restoration of guidance allocation and the ring fencing of hours is suggested in order to support the provision of holistic guidance. This chapter also addressed the strengths and limitations of the study and recommendations for policy, practice and research presented. The researchers own personal learning and reflexivity were also addressed.

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## Appendix A – Subject Information Letter (Questionnaire)

EHSREC No: 2018\_03\_10\_EHS



**UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK**

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

### Subject Information Letter – Questionnaire

#### Agency, Decision Making and The Irish Post-Primary Guidance Counsellor

##### **What is the project about?**

This research aims to explore the logic model to the guidance counselling profession in post-primary schools. This study will examine:

- What supports and resources guidance counsellors utilise in everyday practice?
- How practice is shaped by external social factors, including school culture?
- What activities and services are provided and for whom?
- What outcomes guidance counsellors envision as a result of their work?

##### **What will I have to do?**

You will be asked to complete an online questionnaire. Responses will be anonymous. If you are willing to volunteer to participate in phase two of the research, which will involve a 45minute audio recorded interview, opportunity will be provided at the end of the questionnaire to do so.

##### **What are the benefits?**

It is envisioned that this research will:

- Provide an insight to the role of the guidance counsellor within their settings and how they view themselves in this role.
- Explore areas such as professional identity, relationships in the guidance setting, resources, support and outcomes within the current Irish context.
- Highlight opportunities and challenges in the guidance counselling field in relation to these areas, which may inform future practice.

##### **What are the risks?**

It is not anticipated that the research will pose any risk to participants. However, a participant may recall a personal experience in their line of work, which may be upsetting. Should this happen, participants are free to withdraw from the questionnaire at any time.

##### **What if I do not want to take part?**

Participation in the questionnaire is voluntary, you are under no obligation to take part.

##### **What happens to the information?**

The information gathered from the study will be handled in complete confidence. Results of the participants as well as their confidentiality are the first priority of the researchers carrying out the study. Data from questionnaires will data will be stored in locked cabinet in the principal investigators office and on the researchers' password protected computer. The data will be analysed using Microsoft Excel. Data will stored for seven years as per Data Protection Guidelines and destroyed on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2025.

**What if I have more questions or do not understand something.**

If you do not understand any aspect of the research please contact either of the researchers and discuss any questions that you might have. It is important that you feel completely at ease during the research.

**What if I change my mind during the study?**

Should you feel at any stage that you want to stop being a participant in the research, you are free to stop and take no further part.

**Project Investigator Contact Details:**

**Principal Investigator:**

Dr. Jennifer Hennessy,  
School of Education,  
University of Limerick.  
Email: [jennifer.hennessy@ul.ie](mailto:jennifer.hennessy@ul.ie)  
Tele:061-202701

**Other investigators:**

Lesley Moore McKenna,  
MA Guidance Counselling & Lifespan Development Student,  
University of Limerick  
[13020064@studentmail.ul.ie](mailto:13020064@studentmail.ul.ie)

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

***This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (quote approval number). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:  
Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
EHS Faculty Office  
University of Limerick  
Tel (061) 234101***

## Appendix B – Subject Information Letter (Interview)

EHSREC No: 2018\_03\_10\_EHS



**UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK**  
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

### Subject Information Letter – Interview

#### Agency, Decision Making and The Irish Post-Primary Guidance Counsellor

Thank you for your participation in phase one (questionnaires) of this study and for indicating a willingness to take part in phase two (interviews). This information sheet will provide you with full details of this final stage of the study to inform your decision on participation.

#### What is the project about?

This research aims to explore the logic model to the guidance counselling profession in post-primary schools. This study will examine:

- What supports and resources guidance counsellors utilise in everyday practice?
- How practice is shaped by external social factors, including school culture?
- What activities and services are provided and for whom?
- What outcomes guidance counsellors envision as a result of their work?

#### What will I have to do?

You will be asked to participate in a 45minute audio recorded interview exploring the above listed items. You will be required to sign an informed consent form before taking part in an interview. The interview will take place at a time convenient to you within your school.

#### What are the benefits?

It is envisioned that this research will:

- Provide an insight to the role of the guidance counsellor within their settings and how they view themselves in this role.
- Explore areas such as professional identity, relationships in the guidance setting, resources, support and outcomes within the current Irish context.
- Highlight opportunities and challenges in the guidance counselling field in relation to these areas, which may inform future practice.

#### What are the risks?

It is not anticipated that the research will pose any risk to participants. However, a participant may recall a personal experience in their line of work, which may be upsetting. Should this happen, participants are free to take a break from interviewing or withdraw participation at any time. The interviews are voice recorded. If you do not wish to be audio recorded you will not be able to participate in the study as transcription of the interviews for the purpose of analysis is required.

#### What if I do not want to take part?

Participation in the interview is voluntary. If you wish to withdraw, you may do so without providing any reason or explanation. All data collected can be destroyed on your request.

#### **What happens to the information?**

The information gathered from the study will be handled in complete confidence. Results of the participants as well as their confidentiality are the first priority of the researchers carrying out the study. Audio recordings will be transcribed and deleted following transcription. All data will be stored on the researcher's password protected computer. Data will be stored for seven years as per Data Protection Guidelines and destroyed on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2025.

#### **What if I have more questions or do not understand something.**

If you do not understand any aspect of the research, please contact either of the researchers and discuss any questions that you might have. It is important that you feel completely at ease during the research.

#### **What if I change my mind during the study?**

Should you feel at any stage that you want to stop being a participant in the research, you are free to stop and take no further part without reason or explanation.

#### **Project Investigator Contact Details:**

##### **Principal Investigator:**

Dr. Jennifer Hennessy,  
School of Education,  
University of Limerick.  
Email: [jennifer.hennessy@ul.ie](mailto:jennifer.hennessy@ul.ie)  
Tele: 061202701

##### **Other investigators:**

Lesley Moore McKenna,  
MA Guidance Counselling & Lifespan Development student  
[13020064@studentmail.ul.ie](mailto:13020064@studentmail.ul.ie)

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

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

*Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
EHS Faculty Office  
University of Limerick  
Tel (061) 234101*

## **Appendix C – Consent Form (Interview)**



**UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK**  
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

**PARTICIPANT CONSENT: INTERVIEWS**

**Agency, Decision Making and The Irish Post-Primary Guidance Counsellor**

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

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

**This study involves audio recording. Please tick the appropriate box:**

- I am aware that my participation in this study may be recorded (audio) and I agree to this. However, if I feel uncomfortable at any time I can ask that the recording equipment be switched off. I understand that if I decline to be audio recorded I will not be able to participate in the study as transcription of the interviews for the purpose of analysis is required. I understand that I can ask for a copy of my recording. I understand what will happen to the recordings once the study is finished.
- I do not agree to being audio/video recorded in this study.

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

Name: (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix D – Subject Information Letter (IGC Chairpersons)**



**UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK**

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

**Subject Information Letter (IGC Branch Chairperson)**

**Date:**

**EHS REC no: 2018\_03\_10\_EHS**

**Agency, Decision Making and The Irish Post-Primary Guidance Counsellor**

Dear IGC Branch Chairperson,

I am a student of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Hennessy. I am undertaking a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling as part of my studies. In my research, I aim to explore the various professional inputs (supports), processes (structures) and outcomes, as identified by the guidance counsellor, related to their practice in second level settings.

In order to recruit volunteers, I would greatly appreciate your support in accessing IGC members by disseminating the attached Volunteer Information Letter and the following questionnaire link (insert link) to your Branch members through the IGC mailing list.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure the anonymity of participants. Questionnaires will be completed anonymously and will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Participants will be invited to contact me should they wish to engage in follow up interviews. The interviews will be audio recorded and extend to approximately 45 minutes. The electronic data will be destroyed after transcription according to UL guidelines. All electronic data will be stored securely on the researchers; password protected computer.

Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. If you have any queries or require further any further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Lesley Moore McKenna  
UL Email address: 13020064@studentmail.ul.ie

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jennifer Hennessy

Telephone number: 061202701  
Email address: Jennifer.hennessy@ul.ie

*This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (quote approval number). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:  
Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
EHS Faculty Office  
University of Limerick  
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## Appendix E – Example of Colour Coding in Phase One Analysis

Q8 What informs your pedagogical planning as a Guidance Counsellor?

Answered: 33 Skipped: 13

RESPONSES	DATE
R45 While school guidance plan, Economic trends, Location	5/31/2018 12:32 PM
441 I find the Reach+ programme from careersportal an invaluable resource for planning. We use the work experience booklet with the 4th yrs. and the main book for 5&6th yrs. the whole programme is designed to meet the needs of our students. To help reinforce learning 'classroom guidance' has some fantastic PowerPoints to support the structure of the senior cycle plans. For 1st years induction and subject options the NBSS have fantastic resources for transitioning and transfer as well as subject options. 'Classroom Guidance' is an invaluable resource for planning.	5/31/2018 10:15 AM
R43 Student centred approach	5/31/2018 9:50 AM
R42 Colleagues	5/31/2018 9:19 AM
R40 Igc nge planning documents, Jct	5/30/2018 11:14 PM
R39 Curriculum	5/30/2018 9:15 PM
R38 Needs of the school	5/30/2018 9:08 PM
R35 Theory of good guidance.	5/30/2018 8:29 PM
R34 Whole school guidance template IGC guidelines	5/30/2018 8:00 PM
R29 Variety of students needs and NCGE and DES documents and legislation	5/22/2018 10:42 PM
R28 .	5/22/2018 10:21 PM
R27 NCGE IGC DEPT OF ED	5/22/2018 8:22 PM
26 I keep up to date with different practices on how students learn best. I also try to keep my knowledge informed of different updates and information to ensure that I can plan classes that all students can take something from.	5/22/2018 7:15 PM
R25 Students needs Mgt	5/22/2018 7:02 PM
R24 Student needs	5/22/2018 4:42 PM
23 To help students develop the skills and confidence to be able to make sound career (and other life) decisions throughout their lives	5/14/2018 6:41 AM
22 Keeping up to date with trends in courses, careers & labour market information	5/11/2018 11:53 AM
21 theory learned on MA programme, Experience and advice of colleagues	5/11/2018 10:40 AM
18 DEADLINES CHOICE THEORY AND STUDENT CENTRED.	5/8/2018 3:35 PM
7 My Initial Masters for Education training combined with my years of experience as a teacher. Resources sought from a range of areas such as IGC, NCCA, JCT, Careersportal, Classroom Guidance all assist in my pedagogical planning.	4/30/2018 2:56 PM
6 IGC, OTHER GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS, DOE	4/30/2018 10:27 AM
Experience	4/27/2018 10:21 PM

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## Appendix F – Final Interview Schedule

Q1. Tell me about the school you work in:

- a. In terms of size, gender, rural/urban etc.
- b. In terms of guidance provision – Number of guidance counsellors, hour allocated.

Q2. What are the typical:

- a. activities you plan in your setting?
- b. resources you would draw on in guidance provision?

Q3. Are you timetabled for guidance classes with groups in your settings? If so, how is this delivered and to what year groups?

Q4. What does a typical day/week look like in your service?

Q5. Do you feel you are allocated adequate guidance hours to carry out your role?

Q6. What are the most common issues that students present with in your setting?

Q7. What policies (internal or external) impact how you provide your service in your setting?

Q8. In your role as guidance counsellor, have you had the opportunity to become involved in the developing of policy in your school?

Q9. In your opinion, what is the most important contribution of the guidance service to the students in your school?

Q10. What areas, if any, do you feel the guidance service in your school could improve on?

Q11. How would you describe the attitude toward the guidance service in your setting from?

- a. parents
- b. students

- c. teaching staff
- d. management

Q12. Do you feel the role of the guidance counsellor in a second-level setting is understood by these stakeholders?

## Appendix G – Thematic Map

Inputs	Processes	Outputs
Engagement with Policy Development in the Setting	Relationships in the School Environment – Management and Teaching Staff	Intended Outcomes of guidance service – providing support to all students
Whole School Guidance Plan	Allocation of Guidance hours and reported time constraints in the role	Reality of guidance practice – senior cycle and vocational guidance prioritised
High Engagement with CPD	Increase in the demand for personal counselling from students of all year groups	
IGC membership and engagement with supervision	Wellbeing Guidelines being implemented in schools over the next number of years	