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## **An exploration of the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement among female students in a single sex post-primary school in Ireland**

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**UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK**  
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

**An Exploration of the Relationship between  
Emotional Well-being and Academic Engagement among female  
students in a single sex Post-Primary school in Ireland.**

A thesis submitted to School of Education at the University of Limerick by:

Valerie O’Gorman

16063333

Supervisor (s):

Dr. Sancha Power

Thesis submitted to the University of Limerick for the award of  
Master of Arts (M.A.) in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis hereby submitted to the University of Limerick for the award of Master of Arts (M.A.) in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development has not previously been submitted, in whole or in part, at this or any other university. I further declare that this is my own work in design and execution and that all material contained therein has been appropriately acknowledged.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

VALERIE O’GORMAN

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

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## Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Figures.....	v
List of Tables.....	v
List of Appendices.....	vi
Glossary of Terms.....	vii
Abstract.....	viii
Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
1.1 Context and Justification of the Research Study.....	1
1.2 The Researcher’s Position in the Study.....	3
1.3 Aims and Objectives.....	4
1.4 Researcher Methodology.....	5
1.5 Plan of the Thesis.....	5
1.6 Conclusion.....	6
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	7
2.1 Introduction.....	7
2.2 The Irish Education System.....	7
2.3 Irish Research and Perspectives on Well-being.....	10
2.4 The work of Guidance Counsellors in Post-Primary Schools.....	16
2.5 Academic Engagement.....	17
2.6 Conclusion.....	20
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	21
3.1 Research Questions.....	21
3.2 Research Methodology and Methods.....	22
3.3 Research Design.....	24
3.4 Data Collection and Data Analysis.....	25
3.5 Validity and Reliability.....	29
3.6 Positionality.....	30
3.7 Reflexivity.....	31

3.8 Research Ethics in Guidance Counselling .....	31
3.9 Conclusion .....	32
Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Findings .....	33
4.1 Data Analysis Strategy.....	33
4.2 Research Demographics .....	34
4.3 Experiences of School and Learning .....	36
4.4 Emergent Themes .....	39
4.5 Conclusion .....	48
Chapter Five: Discussion .....	49
5.1 Overview of Research Findings.....	49
5.2 Experiences of School during Second Year .....	50
5.3. The Second Year Experience and Emotional Well-being .....	51
5.4 The Second Year Experience and Academic Engagement.....	52
5.5 Student Engagement during Second Year .....	54
5.6 Student Engagement during Second Year .....	55
5.7 School Mentoring Programmes and ‘One Good Adult’ .....	56
5.8 The Relationship between Emotional Well-being and Academic Engagement ...	57
5.9 Conclusion .....	60
Chapter Six: Conclusion .....	61
6.1 Overview of the Findings .....	61
6.2 Strengths and Limitations of the Research Study.....	63
6.3 Recommendations.....	64
6.4 Reflexivity and Personal Learning .....	65
6.5 Conclusion .....	66
References.....	67
Appendices.....	74

## **List of Figures**

Figure 3.1 Graphic representation of data collection.....	26
Figure 4.1 Data Analysis Strategy .....	34
Figure 4.2 Word cloud representation of students’ perceptions of school and their experiences as second year students .....	37
Figure 4.3 Quotation bank showing guidance counsellors perspectives on second year students and second year studnets’ experiences of school and learning during second year.....	38

## **List of Tables**

Table 4.1 Details of Focus Groups .....	35
Table 4.2 Details of Guidance Counsellors. ....	35

## List of Appendices

Appendix A: Approval from EHS Ethics Review Committee .....	74
Appendix B: Subject Information Letter for Gatekeeper .....	78
Appendix C: Consent Form for Gatekeeper .....	80
Appendix D: Letter of Information for Parent/Guardian .....	81
Appendix E: Consent Form for Parent/ Guardian .....	83
Appendix F: Student Subject Information Letter .....	84
Appendix G: Student Consent Form.....	86
Appendix H: Student Focus Group Interview Questions .....	87
Appendix I: Guidance Counsellor Information Letter.....	88
Appendix K: Guidance Counsellor Interview Questions .....	91
Appendix L: Research Diary excerpt.....	93
Appendix M: Thematic Map.....	94
Appendix N: Initial Themes from Thematic Map .....	95
Appendix O: Mentoring Programme .....	97
Appendix P: The Cairdeas programme.....	98

## **Glossary of Terms**

DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DES	Department of Education and Science
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
IGC	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
NICE	National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RE	Religious Education
SOL	Statements of \Learning
SPHE	Social Personal and Health Education
UNICEF	United Nations International Childrens' Emergency Fund
WHO	World Health Organisation

## **Abstract**

The overall aim of this qualitative research was to explore the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst students during the second year of post-primary education. Student well-being is of central importance in education (DES 2017) and guidance counsellors are regularly faced with difficulties in second year including issues with friends, loss of interest and motivation, dissatisfaction with school and disengagement from learning. This research study focuses on capturing the lived experiences of students through focus group interviews, and guidance counsellors through face to face interviews, in order to gain insights and inform future policy and practice in guidance counselling. The research is a case study involving 25 second year student participants from the case study school and 3 guidance counsellors from other schools.

The researcher considers that a gap for such interpretivist research exists in light of current literature related to adolescent well-being and mental health promotion (DCYA 2017, DES 2017, OECD 2015, WHO 2016). From a policy and practice perspective, it is clear that adolescents need help with emotional difficulties such as stress and anxiety (OECD 2015). The key findings that emerged confirm that there is a significant relationship between students' emotional well-being and their academic engagement during second year. The study shows that students who are confident, happy, and emotionally healthy (DES 2015) during second year, cope better with life's challenges (WHO 2016) and are more likely to remain academically engaged.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This chapter will introduce the research study and present a justification for the research in the context of current literature relevant to Guidance Counselling. It will describe the aims and objectives of the research project, the methodologies used and the researcher's positionality in the study. Finally, this chapter will present a plan of the thesis.

### **1.1 Context and Justification of the Research Study**

This research study is an exploration of the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst second year students. In 2006, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) acknowledged that the second year in post-primary education is a particularly difficult and challenging year for many students (ESRI 2006). Teachers, students, parents and school managers were consulted and it was found that what happens during second year, with regard to engagement and disengagement from school, can have a long-lasting effect on the lives of adolescents (ESRI 2006). Guidance counsellors are concerned with the well-being of all students (IGC, 2012) and this duty of care is fair and inclusive. However, the reality in post-primary schools is that much of guidance counsellors' time is taken up with preparing sixth years students for their future careers, as well as subject choice, study skills, work experience and psychometric testing. Considering the workload of guidance counsellors in post-primary schools today, second year students are often not a priority group.

Studies show that second year is a crucial time in the educational, social and emotional development of young people (NCCA 2006) Adolescence itself is a challenging time in which many difficulties must be negotiated and overcome (Boyd and Bee 2012). Research in schools highlights that the mid-Junior Cycle year is a time when students can tend to go either of two ways, actively engaging in learning or 'drifting' and disengaging from education (NCCA 2006). This phenomenon of disengagement from education and school has also been identified in other countries. They need to be properly supported with all of their personal, social, emotional and educational development as they journey through this period of rapid developmental change.

This study seeks to explore the educational reforms that have taken place at Junior Cycle, especially with regard to changes in assessment practices and the introduction of 'Wellbeing' as a subject for all Junior Cycle students. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) hope that the key indicators of 'Wellbeing' as specified by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2017)- being *active, responsible, connected, resilient, respected and aware*- will guide schools in safeguarding the mental health and well-being of all of its students. The DES and the Department of Health have shown increased interest in the mental health and well-being of young people over the past decade as Ireland emerged from a recession and extremely high rates of anxiety, depression and teenage suicide. The World Health Organisation estimates that one in four people will experience a mental health condition at some point in their lives (WHO 2001). Children and adolescents in Ireland are suffering emotionally and services, policy and practices are inadequate in several areas (UNICEF 2017). Up to half of all mental health problems have their onset before the age of 14 and the students in second year are generally aged between 13 and 14.5 years.

Current literature indicates that mental health problems are on the increase amongst early adolescents (Cosma *et. al* 2017). Looking at best practice in other countries is interesting in that common themes of 'mind matters' and 'wellbeing matters' link Ireland with Australia, New Zealand, Finland, UK and USA. Ireland's more recent educational reforms acknowledge that healthy student well-being is essential if we want to ensure positive educational outcomes and happy individuals (Wynn *et.al.*, 2000; NCCA 2017). In Scotland, the government's curriculum for excellence asserts that good health and well-being is essential for learning to occur. This theme also permeates the discourses in England and Wales (Spratt 2016).

A recent case study investigating 'well-being-oriented education' in a post-primary school in China found that positive well-being increases students' resilience, positive emotions and engagement in learning (Zhang, 2016). This is important and forms the basis for much of what is known as 'positive education' around the world. Positive education is really the application of positive psychology to promote positive student well-being (Kristjansson, 2012). Many of the ideas in current literature are shared globally to the benefit of many different cultures and educational contexts. It is important, therefore, to be proactive and preventative in schools (NCCA 2017). The

DES encourages schools to be positive, pastoral and kind in all dealings with students and the well-being of students is central to the work of schools (NCCA 2017) This study sets out to investigate the link between emotional well-being and an adolescent's ability to remain motivated, interested and engaged in learning while navigating the course of adolescence. Furthermore, this research explores female experiences of education in an all-female environment and identifies the coping strategies and internalising behaviours of adolescent girls. In 2011, the ESRI found that a quarter of parents consulted were not happy with the amount of guidance counselling provided to their teenage sons and daughters (ESRI 2011). This study, therefore, seeks to gain insight into students' experiences of school guidance counselling services and how the needs of second year students can be more adequately met. If the key stakeholders, teachers, students and their parents, all concur that more can and should be done to support second year students, as a professional educator, I feel it is important to listen. This study seeks to give second year students a voice so that they can express how they feel about the challenges they face. By listening to their narratives, insights can be gained into the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst mid-Junior Cycle students, and this can propel changes to future school policy and practices.

## **1.2 The Researcher's Position in the Study**

Thomas (2013) asserts the importance of acknowledging the position of the researcher, as readers need to know who the researcher is and where the researcher stands with regard to the research topic. I am a trainee guidance counsellor and a post-primary teacher of Spanish and English with 20 years' teaching experience. Having worked in Ireland, Spain and Italy, I have always had an interest in education systems and best practice in other countries. I have been a class tutor and a member of many pastoral care and student support teams so I have a keen interest in student well-being. As a mother of two girls and having worked for over 12 years in an all-girl post-primary school, I am interested in capturing female perspectives in order to gain insights into their experience of school and guidance counselling. As a future guidance counsellor, I want to investigate how emotional well-being affects students' motivation and academic engagement. I want to gain a deeper understanding of the early adolescent

challenges and difficulties that impact on student mental health, happiness and ability to learn and stayed engaged in education.

I acknowledge my professional background and my personal interest in the topic under investigation. I kept a research diary and a reflective journal (Progoff 1977) throughout the research process in order to ensure the highest level of academic rigor. I reflected on my assumptions, biases, preconceptions and predictions prior to beginning the research. I was also cognisant of my position as an insider researcher in the case study school and I took steps to preserve the validity and reliability of the research data. I was not personally acquainted with any of the student or guidance counsellor participants in the study. Although some of the student may have recognised me, I had never had any interactions with any of them prior to the focus group interviews. This was important to minimise any possible familiarity bias (Robson 2007; Thomas 2013).

### **1.3 Aims and Objectives**

**Aim:** The overall aim of this study is to gain increased knowledge and understanding of the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst second year students at post-primary school in Ireland.

#### **Objectives:**

- Evaluate existing literature related to emotional well-being, academic engagement and guidance counselling service provision for students mid Junior Cycle in post-primary schools.
- Examine the phenomenon of student emotional well-being and how this impacts on engagement in education and school, from the perspective of students.
- Examine the uniqueness of the experiences encountered by second year students.
- Gather the narratives of second year students and guidance counsellors through a mixture of one to one and focus group interviews.
- Provide new insights on the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst students in order to inform future guidance counselling practice.

## **1.4 Researcher Methodology**

The researcher used an interpretivist/qualitative paradigm for this research study. The flexible design frame and the use of the case study enabled the researcher gain in-depth insight into the perspectives of students and guidance counsellors (Cohen *et. al* 2013; Thomas, 2013). The case study design allows for holistic treatment of the phenomena, an empathic stance and learning from the particular case (Cohen *et. al* 2007; Yin 2014). The advantage of this design is that it yields rich and holistic data that can advance knowledge in this field of study (Robson 2007). The researcher's desire is to capture the complexity of the relationship between the phenomena under investigation, with detailed attention to contextual factors (Hearne *et. al*, 2016). To obtain the relevant data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with guidance counsellors and focus groups were conducted with students from second year in the case study school.

Throughout each step of the research process, the researcher was mindful to preserve the validity and reliability of the research findings while being reflexive and ensuring rigor during the study. Ethical principles for research, including institutional requirements for undertaking research in the University of Limerick, along with professional ethics as outlined by the IGC (2012) and the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE 2008) were strictly adhered to.

## **1.5 Plan of the Thesis**

The structure of the thesis is as follows:

Chapter 1: This chapter introduces the research topic and provides a justification for the study. It addresses the researcher's position in the study, its' aims and objectives and the methodology. It also provides an overview of the subsequent 6 chapters.

Chapter 2: The literature review examines literature relevant to the topic from a range of sources, in order to provide a contextual background to the study. It provides a critical evaluation of previous research on students' experiences of school, student well-being and academic engagement. Theoretical perspectives on adolescent development,

current policy and practices in guidance counselling and international perspectives on mental health and education, are also presented.

Chapter 3: This chapter outline the methodology and the research design that underpins the study. The research paradigm, the epistemological stance, the interpretivist approach and the use of the case study are described. The research questions are identified together with a rationale for the chosen research paradigm. The data collection and data analysis methods are described. Finally, issues of reflexivity, positionality, validity, reliability and ethical considerations are also addressed.

Chapter 4: The data analysis and findings chapter presents the analytical strategy adopted and it presents the findings of the primary data collection, findings through a number of key themes.

Chapter 5: The discussion chapter provides a critical interpretation of the findings from the primary data in the context of the literature reviewed. It provides some new insights into phenomena associated with the research topic.

Chapter 6: the final chapter concludes the research by reporting the overall findings of the research study and evaluating its strengths and weaknesses. It proposes a number of recommendations for future policy, practice and research and, it outlines the personal learning for the researcher.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

This chapter introduced the research topic, set the context for the study, positioned the researcher's interest and provided a justification for the study. It provided the aims and objectives of the study and the research methodology, along with a structured plan for the thesis. The next chapter will review relevant literature and research related to the research topic.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The aim of this chapter is to explore current literature and research in the areas of education, guidance counselling, emotional well-being and engagement with learning..

### **2.1 Introduction**

The purpose of a literature review is to engage with a broad range of sources in order to critically analyse, evaluate and synthesise existing knowledge and literature (Hart 2018).. This analysis will identify differences in interpretations of key concepts, differences in policies and practices internationally, current trends, and some gaps in the research in the field of education and guidance counselling.

The research is guided by the following research questions: 1.What are the subjective experiences of school and learning for girls in a single sex post-primary school? 2. To what extent is the ‘second year’ experience different from that of first year? 3. Do students feel more engaged with school and learning in Second Year? This study highlights the experiences of girls in one single-sex post-primary school with regard to their well-being and academic engagement.

The literature review is divided into four sections. The first section examines the context of this research study. The second section provides definitions and international perspectives of well-being and the rationale for including well-being in education. The third section examines guidance counselling services in post-primary schools and the current supports available to adolescents. The final section explores academic engagement and its link to student emotional well-being in post-primary school.

### **2.2 The Irish Education System**

This section will explore the context of the research study: the post-primary education system in Ireland.

Education is compulsory for all children in Ireland from the ages of six to sixteen years or until students have completed three years of post-primary education (DES 2018). There are three types of school in the Irish secondary landscape: voluntary secondary

schools, vocational schools, community and comprehensive schools (DES 2018). Secondary schools are privately owned and managed. Vocational schools are state-established and administered by Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Community and comprehensive schools are managed by Boards of Management of differing compositions (DES 2018). They all follow the same State-prescribed curriculum and prepare students for the same State public examinations. Currently there is a broad range of second-level schools in Ireland which reflects parental demand (ESRI 2013).

### **2.2.1 Junior and Senior Cycle Education**

Post-primary education consists of a three-year Junior Cycle, followed by a two or three year Senior Cycle, depending on whether the optional Transition Year is taken. Students usually begin the Junior Cycle at age 12. The Junior Certificate examination is taken after three years. The main objective of the Junior Cycle is for students to complete a broad and balanced curriculum, and to develop the knowledge and skills that will enable them to proceed to Senior Cycle education (DES 2018). The Junior Cycle replaces the Junior Cert which was more exam-focused, less flexible and less process-oriented. It is guided by the twenty-four statements of learning (SOL), eight principles and eight key skills (NCCA 2017).

The Senior Cycle caters for students in the 15 to 18 year age group. It includes an optional Transition Year, which follows immediately after the Junior Cycle. During the final two years of Senior Cycle, students take one of three programmes, each leading to a State Examination: the traditional Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme or the Leaving Certificate Applied (DES 2018). This study will focus on students in the second year of Junior Cycle. Enrolment levels at second-level schools are projected to increase by 31-34% by 2021 (CSO 2012).

Currently, there are 379 voluntary secondary schools in Ireland compared with 254 vocational schools and 92 community/comprehensive schools (ESRI 2013). 61% of students in Ireland attend a voluntary secondary school. Almost all of them are denominational and mostly Catholic. 65% of all voluntary secondary schools are single sex and the majority of these are all girls' schools. Approximately 11% of single sex female voluntary secondary schools are fee paying (Lynch and Lodge 2002). In Ireland in 2016, there were 375 voluntary secondary schools, 265 vocational schools, 81

community schools and 14 comprehensive school (CSO 2016). In recent years, the number of schools across the three sectors has changed. The number of voluntary secondary schools has fallen by 48 between 2000 and 2012 due to amalgamations, school closures and reduced patronage. The voluntary secondary school in this study is public and non-fee paying. However, not unlike similar schools, there is an annual voluntary contribution.

### **2.2.2 Gender Segregation in Education**

Gender segregation in education has a long history and tradition in Ireland. Compared with our European neighbours, Ireland is unusual in that a large number of schools are single-sex at primary and post-primary level (Lynch and Lodge 2002). 42% of post-primary students in Ireland attend single-sex schools and the majority of these are female. In most countries in Europe, and in the USA, where single-sex schools exist, they tend to be for the socially elite (Lynch and Lodge 2002). That is not the case in Ireland where 42% of all post-primary students attend single-sex schools. Girls' schools tend to be associated with high academic attainment as well as control of physical appearance and personal demeanour (Lynch and Lodge 2002). Traditionally, single-sex female schools in Ireland have tended to place a greater emphasis on artistic, musical and social skills than on sports. However, the voluntary secondary school in this study has a very strong tradition in many sports and an excellent record of sporting achievements. Lynch and Lodge (2002) found that academic attainment was prioritised more in single-sex female schools than in any other type of school. Evidently, achieving good examination results, points and third level places are very significant to girls (and their parents) in single-sex schools.

The social class, the gender identity, racial identity and the religious ethos all play a role in determining the culture of the school and the experiences of the students and teachers in it. Examination success is the yardstick by which schools are evaluated in the public eye (Lynch and Lodge 2002). When compared with the other types of schools, single-sex female schools seem to have a strong examination and achievement ethos. Female students tend to be diligent, ambitious and have a strong work ethic (Lynch and Lodge 2002). They also report high levels of pressure to do well in exams and achieve good results. The two State exams, the Junior Cycle and the Leaving Certificate, are the causes of most fear and anxiety for students.

## **2.3 Irish Research and Perspectives on Well-being**

This section will explore research undertaken in Ireland into the experiences of post-primary students in second year.

In 2002, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) commissioned the Educational Policy Research Centre of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) to engage in a longitudinal study of students' experiences of schooling in the first three years of post-primary education. This study, 'Pathways through the Junior Cycle: The Experiences of Second Year Students' (ESRI 2006) was the first study of its kind in Ireland. It explored school from the perspective of students from first to third year in post-primary. The aim of the research was to explore what schools can do to enhance student learning and engagement. The study found that second year is a crucial time in young people's schooling. It is a time when students can take either of two seemingly polar opposite directions, either becoming more engaged in school life and their own learning or, drifting and experiencing disengagement from school and learning (NCCA 2016; NCCA 2006).

### **2.3.1 Adolescents' Experiences of School**

The NCCA commentary on 'Pathways through the Junior Cycle' found that there are significant differences between boys and girls with regard to happiness in school, engagement in learning and expectations for the future (NCCA 2006). Girls were found to have higher career aspirations than boys, with 59% of girls expecting to reach Degree level compared with 39% of boys. Adolescence is a fundamental time of rapid development and change in a young person's life (Boyd and Bee 2012). Early adolescence (ages 10-14) has been identified as a specific stage of development, involving physical, social, emotional and psychological changes. Some of the emotional challenges reported by mid-Junior cycle students include peer relationships difficulties, issues with social media including cyberbullying, conflict with parents, exam anxiety, feelings of stress, low self-confidence, poor self-efficacy and low self-esteem. Some students experience significant difficulties which, if not adequately addressed, can cause further issues in Second Year (ESRI 2004).

Teachers and school managers also identified this developmental stage in education as being particularly ‘difficult’ for students, when compared with first year and third year (NCCA 2016). First years tend to be well supported by schools as they transition from primary to post-primary education. Third year students have the exam focus and seriousness of Junior Cycle to contend with. Second years are the group in-between and mid-Junior Cycle can be a frustrating and challenging place. The NCCA (2016) acknowledge that disengagement at this stage of the Junior Cycle is likely to have longer-term implications for future academic achievement and retention. Not all students experience disengagement but the reality is that what happens during this crucial year can have a long-term impact on engagement with education, motivation to learn, individual self-concept and overall mental health and well-being (NCCA 2016).

### **2.3.2 Experiences of Growing Up in Ireland**

‘Growing Up in Ireland’, the national longitudinal study of children in Ireland (ESRI 2017) found that girls were ‘more likely’ to experience transition difficulties than boys. 13-year-old girls were found to be ‘less confident’ in their academic abilities and less confident as learners facing the demands of Junior Cycle. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development study (2015) found that girls were more likely than boys to want the top grades and therefore, place a great deal of pressure on themselves.

According to the ‘How was School Today?’ report conducted by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2017, almost 90% of the female participants reported feeling either quite stressed (23%) or very stressed (56%) by exams. Exams, homework, pressure to complete difficult tasks such as projects and the tendency to compare themselves to others make post-primary school quite a stressful place for the majority of female students (DCYA 2017). This report also highlights differing levels of happiness, confidence and connectedness in single-sex educational environments when compared to co-educational schools. The ‘My World Survey’ finding that one good adult can make a difference in the life of a young person, has been taken on board by schools (Dooley and Fitzgerald 2012). It is widely accepted that problems addressed early by Guidance Counsellors, working within the Whole School Guidance plan, can result in improved student well-being, better academic engagement and improved student outcomes.

### **2.3.3 International Definitions of Well-being**

This section explores developments that have made way for increased awareness and understanding of student mental health, and the concept of ‘well-being’ internationally and in Ireland.

Following the publication of ‘Wellbeing for Post-Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention’ in 2013 and ‘Wellbeing for Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion’ in 2015, there has been a change in how mental health is viewed in Ireland (DES 2013; DES 2015). ‘Connecting for Life: Ireland’s National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015-2020’ sets out a comprehensive strategy that focuses on improving awareness and understanding of mental health issues, and ways to reduce them. The DES definition of well-being originates from the work of the World Health Organisation (WHO) around well-being and mental health, the two concepts being inextricably linked. The NCGE Whole School Guidance Framework (2017) indicates that well-being is connected with children ‘being confident, happy and healthy’. In primary and post-primary schools, the focus is on the promotion of well-being and mental health among all young people (DES 2013, DES 2015). The decision to introduce Wellbeing as a new area of learning at Junior Cycle shows a commitment to a more holistic education for every young person in Ireland and a high regard for future health and well-being. In response to the research, the Department of Education and Skills introduced a new area of learning called ‘Wellbeing’ in September 2017 (NCCA 2017).

### **2.3.4 The Rationale for the subject ‘Wellbeing’**

‘Wellbeing’ aims to provide learning experiences and opportunities that address students’ personal, social, emotional, physical and cultural needs. It includes physical education (PE); social and personal education (SPHE); civic social and political education (CSPE), guidance, other subjects and learning experiences, extra-curricular and co-curricular learning (NCCA, 2017, p.26). Wellbeing is one of the core principles underpinning Junior Cycle and it is reflected in many of the Junior Cycle statements of learning (DES 2015). The key indicators of well-being as specified by the NCCA (2017) are: being *active, responsible, connected, resilient, respected and aware*. Wellbeing is strongly linked to the Junior Cycle key skill of *staying well*. The NCCA emphasise that ‘student wellbeing is at the heart of the vision of a new junior cycle’

(NCCA 2017 p.20). Wellbeing in Junior Cycle is ‘about young people feeling confident, happy, healthy and connected’ (DES 2015 p22).

The Wellbeing area of learning addresses the physical through P.E, the social and personal through SPHE, the civic, cultural and political through CSPE and the emotional through Guidance. Wellbeing continues throughout transition year and into senior cycle via PE, SPHE, pastoral care, mentoring programmes and the senior cycle key skills (NCCA 2009). By 2020, the DES plan to have 400 hours of Wellbeing for every student in Junior Cycle. This will equate to about 12% of a student’s weekly timetable and will inevitably, result in some reductions in other subjects in favour of Wellbeing. The Wellbeing Guidelines for post-primary schools point to a whole school approach to mental health via support for all, some and a few (DES 2017). This will occur through SPHE, RSE, pastoral care teams/ student support teams, wellbeing classes, school-based initiatives as well as personal counselling. It is hoped that this new subject ‘Wellbeing’ will help to improve the mental health of post-primary school students in Ireland.

Well-being is now regularly on the agenda of educational and political discourse internationally. Over the last two decades, student well-being has become a key part of the global education agenda with more and more countries opting to include well-being in the national curriculum. The United Nations International Childrens’ Emergency Fund (UNICEF) conducted comparative studies of developed countries to highlight the international interest and concern around childhood well-being (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre 2007; UNICEF Office of Research 2013). The OECD Better Life Index report (2017) compares well-being across many countries in the world. The topics selected by the OECD in order to investigate international well-being include: life satisfaction, health, education, income, community, work life balance, jobs, housing, environment, safety and civic engagement. Dodge *et al.* (2012) acknowledge that well-being is difficult to define but shares common qualities with good mental health including life satisfaction, positivity and absence of negativity.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) in the UK, link emotional well-being to being happy and confident, not anxious or depressed (NICE 2013). They argue that emotional well-being forms the foundations for healthy behaviours and educational attainment, and is therefore, important to focus on in children and young

people (NICE 2013, UK Dept Health 2012). The Canadian government, in line with the Canadian Institute of Subjective Well-being understand that well-being is not a state or a place to reach. Well-being is always in progress and needs to be adequately supported.

### **2.3.5 Mental health promotion**

Since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been an increase in interest and awareness of childhood and adolescent well-being. The word ‘well-being’ is used and understood differently in different countries and contexts and with little consensus (Coleman 2009). The word ‘well-being’ is ubiquitous in political and educational discourse in many countries. The World Health Organisation (WHO) holds that mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to her or his community (WHO 2014). The WHO definition of health suggests that health is a continuum, and it extends the notion of health to include states of positive well-being. Health is ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (WHO 2014). The WHO argue that mental health is more than just an absence of mental disorders or the existence of ill-being. Environments matters and ones that respect and protect basic human rights are fundamental to any individual’s state of well-being (WHO 2014). There is no consensus from the WHO around a single definition of well-being because it is defined within mental health. However, general agreement exists that indicates that well-being includes the presence of positive emotions and moods (eg. happiness, contentment), the absence of negative emotions and moods (eg. depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfilment, coping skills, resilience, positive functioning and ability to contribute and work productively (WHO 2014).

Australia’s national post-primary curriculum refers to well-being in terms of “personal and social capability”. This involves the development of empathy through building positive relationships, recognising and regulating one’s own emotions, enhancing responsible decision-making and helping students to learn how to handle challenging situations (ACARA 2018). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlight that today’s children will need a balanced set of cognitive, social and emotional skills in order to succeed in modern life. Their capacity to achieve goals, work effectively with others and manage emotions will be essential to

meet the challenges of the 21st century (OECD 2015). In a recent analysis of national curriculum frameworks across 37 OECD countries, it was found that 72 per cent of countries now explicitly include student wellbeing as a learning priority. It is widely accepted in Canada and USA that emotionally healthy and engaged adolescents can lead to future generations of emotionally healthy parents and children (Patton *et al.* 2016).

### **2.3.6 Rationale for Well-being in Education**

The rationale for well-being in education is varied and may differ from country to country and from culture to culture. There is global concern about the well-being of adolescents and young people. The WHO estimates that one in four young people will experience a mental health condition at some point in their lives (WHO 2001). Much of the current literature relating to adolescents indicates that mental health problems are on the increase (Cosma *et. al* 2017). In recent years, there has been a rapid increase in reports of stress, anxiety and depression in a world that is ever-changing, fast-paced, more volatile, more complex and more uncertain (OECD 2015). It is now known that up to half of all mental health problems have their onset before the age of 14, making early adolescence a crucial time for student support (Cosma *et al.* 2017).

In Ireland, there is pressure to perform well in exams and achieve high points in a very competitive educational system. Considering practices in countries like Australia, Canada, China, UK and USA, Ireland has acknowledged that ‘mind matters’, ‘wellbeing matters’ and that healthy student well-being leads to positive educational outcomes (Wynn *et.al.* 2000; NCCA 2017). In Scotland, the government’s curriculum for excellence asserts that good health and wellbeing is essential for learning to occur. This theme also permeates the discourses in England and Wales (Spratt 2016). In China, the well-being of students in secondary schools is generally quite low due to high academic pressure (Zhang 2016). A recent case study investigating well-being-oriented education in one post-primary school in China found that positive well-being increases students’ resilience, positive emotions and engagement in learning (Zhang 2016).

Today’s adolescents are dealing with an array of issues that pose significant challenges in their lives. This puts a strain on their coping mechanisms and demands perseverance

and resilience. Awareness and understanding of this is particularly crucial for school management, teachers and the whole school guidance service. Decreases in well-being are thought to be associated with rapid social change, stressful conditions, social exclusion and unhealthy lifestyles (WHO 2014). Schools, therefore, must help adolescents manage the rapid societal changes that are a feature of their lives. Guidance counselling services must also support students adequately to manage the pressures and challenges they face. The preferable stance as outlined by the 'Well-being in Post-Primary Schools' should be proactive and preventative (DES 2013). The DES acknowledge that the well-being of our young people is critical to their success in school and in life (DES 2013 p.v).

### **2.3.7 The Real Aims of Education**

Noddings (2003) sees the pursuit of happiness and the achievement of well-being as one of the chief aims of education. Noddings (2003) argues that school systems in the western world are so caught up in assessment of performance and raising standards of achievement that they have little to do with well-being. The ESRI study of Second Years found that exams were the source of much of student's stress and anxiety in school (ESRI 2017). Thinking about education purely as a means through which we serve the needs of the economy via the provision of workers in areas that are required, is no longer adequate. The purpose of education must be to develop healthy, happy, resilient and capable individuals who can function and flourish in their own lives (Noddings 2003). Guidance counsellors are in schools supporting students as they develop through the post-primary education system.

## **2.4 The work of Guidance Counsellors in Post-Primary Schools**

This section explores the work of Guidance counsellors in post-primary schools today.

Guidance counsellors are concerned with the social, personal, vocational and educational guidance. Guidance counsellors have sensible regard for the social contexts, schools and community within which they work (IGC Code of Ethics 2012). Schools are unique microcosms of society where particular stresses, challenges and conditions exist that can impact the daily life of the young adolescent. Post-primary guidance counselling services aim to be student-centred and holistic respecting the dignity,

integrity and welfare of clients (IGC 2012). The Whole School Guidance programme in schools is linked to the key skills of managing myself, managing information and thinking, staying well, communicating and working with others. In post-primary schools, the Whole School Guidance model proposes *guidance for a few*, *guidance for some* and *guidance for all*. This reflects the differentiated approach that exists in schools today and it acknowledges the differing needs of students at the various stages of their development and their journey through school (NCGE 2017).

#### **2.4.1 Supports for Second Year Students**

Second year students are supported by a large number of people in schools. Many schools operate a Tutor and Year Head system through which students are supported daily. Special Educational Needs (SEN) teachers look after students who may need extra support to fully engage with the curriculum. Many schools have school liaison officers, chaplains, tutors, year heads, mentors and guidance counsellors who aim to cater for students' individual needs. Many schools run mentoring programmes where younger students are matched with more senior students who mentor, guide and assist with issues and challenges in school. All students have SPHE classes where the focus is personal, social, pastoral and non-academic. Some schools run intervention programmes such as 'Friends for Youth', a programme aimed at reducing anxiety amongst early adolescents. Whole School Guidance plans include Care Teams and Student Support Teams where the needs of students are regularly assessed and reviewed. Action plans are put in place to meet individual student's needs. The approach is holistic and student-centred, aimed at supporting each student to engage with learning and to achieve her potential.

### **2.5 Academic Engagement**

This section focuses on the concept of student engagement and academic engagement, acknowledging the importance of the quality of student engagement and its impact on student learning and student outcomes.

### **2.5.1 Definitions of Academic Engagement**

Student engagement first emerged as a concept in the late 1980s when it belonged primarily to the domain of psychology. However, in 1990, Csikszentmihalyi identified student engagement as a growth-producing activity through which the individual allocates attention in active response to the environment. This shift conceptually also located student engagement within the domain of teaching and learning, while remaining connected to psychology, particularly through the work of Carol Dweck (2006).

Literature relating to the concept of engagement describe it in terms of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement and Fredricks *et al.* (2004) recommend that engagement is studied as a multifaceted construct (2004). In their work on defining student engagement, Ashwin and McVitty (2015) acknowledge the importance of the quality and depth of student engagement and its' transformational potential. Academic engagement is defined by Libby (2004) as the extent to which students are motivated to learn and do well in school, whereas, school engagement is defined as emotional (positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school), behavioural (participation in school), and cognitive (academic investment) by Fredericks *et al.* (2004).

For many years, the term student engagement has been thought of by many as a vague, chaotic and confused concept (Ashwin & McVitty 2015; Trowler 2014; Zepke 2014). Interestingly, the vagueness of the term may even have suited policy makers in the field of education. With regard to higher education, Vuori argues that the meaning of student engagement is shaped by the particular context in which it operates and by the meaning of non-engagement (2014). This may also be the case at post-primary level, when it is considered that student engagement means something slightly different when it is contrasted with passivity or alienation (Ashwin & McVitty 2015). Ashwin and McVitty (2015) propose three broad objects of engagement: engagement to form individual understanding; engagement to form curricula and engagement to form communities. For the students in this study, the academic engagement is to form individual understanding. In post-primary education, students engage with school and with learning in order to develop and improve their personal academic outcomes. To do this,

they need to be motivated to learn; have good self-efficacy; be self-confident, independent learners; be able to persevere and be resilient in the face of challenges.

### **2.5.2 Education in Ireland and Academic Engagement**

It has been reported that schools in Ireland matter less for personal development than for academic outcomes (Opendakker and Van Damme 2000). However, schools also support all aspects of students' personal, social and emotional development. Students themselves have reported that relationships with peers and with teachers have a significant impact on their self-image and stress levels in post-primary schools (Smyth 1999). Relational pedagogy or connective instruction, where students feel both supported and cared for by their teacher, is associated with enhanced motivation and achievement (Martin & Dowson 2009). Academic engagement, therefore, is broad and multidimensional, linking emotion, behaviour and cognition.

This research focuses on academic engagement which is defined here as the extent to which students are motivated to engage with learning and do well in school. Both school engagement and academic engagement appear to decline in early adolescence along with academic achievement (Anderman et al. 1999). This is also a time when parental involvement is in decline as young teenagers assert their independence and autonomy more. According to Weare (2000), there is overwhelming evidence that students learn more effectively, including their academic subjects, if they are happy in their work, if they believe in themselves, and if they feel their school is supporting them. Those who seek to promote high academic standards and those who seek to promote positive mental health and well-being are working together for the ultimate good of the young person (Weare 2000). Stoep et. al (2003) found a link between mental health problems and an adolescent's ability to learn. It seems logical that if a student is not emotionally healthy, happy, confident or connected with school, then her engagement with learning will suffer. The ESRI study of second year students found that students are less positive, more likely to misbehave and are less engaged in second year (ESRI 2006).

## **2.6 Conclusion**

This study sets out to investigate the link between student emotional well-being and academic engagement to provide an insight into the lived experiences and perspectives of second year students in a female post-primary school in Ireland. This study aims to give students a voice and to hear their perspective on their own education. As student voice is an essential step towards positive mental health and well-being (Flynn 2013; Flynn 2014), giving students an opportunity to voice their opinions and be heard, is a good thing in itself. The hope is that guidance counsellors, teachers and school management may benefit from the insights gained from this study regarding student well-being, academic engagement and overall happiness.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This chapter aims to discuss the philosophy, methodology and methods used in educational research. Starting with the research aims and research questions, the first section seeks to provide a description of the methodological approach, and a rationale for the chosen method of data collection and analysis. This chapter will then highlight the challenges in undertaking research and the importance of conducting research in an ethical manner. Issues of validity, reliability, positionality and researcher reflexivity are considered within, in a reflective manner.

### **3.1 Research Questions**

Research is about disciplined, balanced enquiry, conducted in a critical spirit (Thomas 2009, p.21). The aim guiding this research is to investigate the link between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst female students in an all-girls post-primary school during the mid-Junior Cycle year. Having specified an issue to study, developed a justification for studying it, the research questions are central to the organization of the research and the direction the researcher will follow (Creswell 2005; Punch 2009; Mertens 2010; White 2008). The chapter will now explore the questions which have driven this research.

#### **3.1.1 Primary Research Question**

Ascertaining the primary research question is known to be a writing challenge that is only achievable following an in-depth and detailed exploration of past and present literature in the area (Punch 2009; Bryman 2012). Bryman (2012) asserts that formulating research questions is a challenging part of research design. Merriman (2012) observes that prior to selecting an appropriate methodology, it is necessary to select a number of key questions to address the phenomena being researched.

Following a thorough exploration of the relevant research literature, the researcher identified the primary research question as:

‘What is the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst Second Year students in a girls’ post-primary school?’.

The importance of adolescent and student well-being dominates a large body of literature and well-being affects all aspects of the student experience of school. The ESRI commissioned research, *'Pathways through the Junior Cycle'*, found that second year is a crucial time in young people's schooling, a time when students can take either of two seemingly polar opposite directions- either becoming more engaged in school life, or 'drifting' and experiencing disengagement from school and learning (NCCA, 2016; NCCA, 2006). The reality is that what happens during this crucial year can have a long-term impact on their engagement with education, their motivation to learn, their self-concept and their overall mental health and well-being (NCCA, 2016).

In order to explore the phenomenon of emotional well-being and academic engagement, a number of secondary research questions were identified to capture the views of students and guidance counsellors.

### **3.1.2 Secondary Research Questions**

This research and the secondary questions sought to harness the student voice (Cook-Sather 2006; and to explore the perspectives of guidance counsellors who work with female students in mid-Junior cycle. These secondary questions provide a clear framework for the research, marking out its boundaries and point to the data that will need to be collected (Punch 2009).

1. What are the subjective experiences of school and learning for girls in a single sex post-primary school?
2. To what extent is the 'second year experience' different from that of first year, with regard to emotional well-being and academic engagement?
3. Do female students feel that they are more engaged or less engaged with school and learning in second year?
4. What are the factors that contribute to this?
5. How can guidance counsellors and the whole-school guidance counselling service better support second year students during this mid-Junior Cycle year?

### **3.2 Research Methodology and Methods**

Research methodology demonstrates the philosophical stance, the paradigm choice and the methodology underpinning the study (Hart 1998; Hearne 2013; Robson &

McCartan 2016). The research methodology chosen by the researcher takes account of the information required by the researcher, the context in which the researcher is working and the research paradigm being used. The research methodology in this study reflects the ontology of interpretivism. Thomas (2013) observes that a research paradigm is a set of basic belief systems or a framework representing the worldview of the researcher. In research, a paradigm refers to the way in which a researcher carries out her investigation and uses the data to explain the phenomena being studied (Thomas 2013).

### **3.2.1 Research Paradigm**

In undertaking this research, consideration was given to the two key paradigms- positivist (quantitative) and interpretivist (qualitative). Each paradigm has its own unique and distinctive worldview with regard to research (Creswell 2009; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Quantitative research involves the collection of numerical data and the testing theories whereas, qualitative research involves inducing new concepts from detailed non-numerical data (Bryman 2012). The ontological approach of quantitative is objectivism whereas qualitative research is subjectivism (Bryman 2012; Punch 2009). The paradigm that best fits with the aims of this study is that of a qualitative nature. This research aims to understand what Cohen et, al (2011) called ‘the subjective world of human experience’. This research is not focused on numerical outcomes but seeks to give students and guidance counsellors a voice and illuminate our understanding of the school experience for a specific group of students. The interpretivist research paradigm acknowledges that reality is socially constructed and that social realities are context specific, multi-dimensional and ever-changing (Bryman 2013). In the context of this study, the researcher believes that there is more than one truth to the phenomena in the study.

### **3.2.2 Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is used to understand the ‘subjective world of human experience’ (Cohen et. al. 2011). Qualitative research relies on thick descriptions of ‘lived and felt experiences’ to represent the multi-layered complexity of social situations (Robson & McCartan 2016). According to Bryman (2012), there are several strengths in using qualitative research methods for educational research. As this type of research relies on thick and detailed description, the researcher gets the opportunity to immerse herself in

the culture and lived experience of the participants in order to gain insights and elicit meanings (Bryman 2012). Hammersley (2013) highlights a key strength of qualitative research is the essential role of subjectivity in the research process. As a form of social inquiry, qualitative research tends to have a flexible and data-driven design that enables the study of complex situations (Cohen et al 2011; Hammersley 2013). Most importantly, due the flexibility of the research design, qualitative research has the capacity to produce outcomes that can lead to forging new paths to improving our understanding of particular phenomenon (Bryman 2012).

Qualitative research has several limitations that must be acknowledged also. The volume and richness of the data collected demand both time and commitment on behalf of the researcher. Rigour and validity need to be strong in order to address issues of subjectivity and researcher bias (Bryman 2012). The sample size is another limitation - 25 students and 3 guidance counsellors. The sample size is small but it provided a comprehensive insight into the experiences of second year students. Although qualitative research tends to lack predictive power, thus making generalizability difficult (Bryman 2012), this research points to typicality for similar groups in similar contexts.

### **3.3 Research Design**

A research design provides a framework for the collection and analysis of data (Bryman 2012). The particular research design chosen by a researcher reflects many decisions made during the research process. It also reflects what is best suited to the research question under investigation (Bryman 2012).

#### **3.3.1 Case Study**

A case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g. an activity, phenomenon, event, process, individuals) based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 1998). 'Bounded' means that the case is separated out for research in terms of time, place, or some physical boundary. Thomas (2013) points out that case studies allow researchers to look more deeply and get a three-dimensional view of complex social phenomena. Case studies are anchored in real-life situations and result in a rich and holistic account of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam 1998). Case studies have

proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, for evaluating educational programs and for informing policy and practice (Merriam 1998; McLeod 2010; Yin 2009; Yin 2014). Although the lack of generalizability criticism exists with regard to case studies, Punch (2009) argues that properly conducted case studies, especially in situations where our knowledge is shallow, fragmentary or incomplete, have a valuable contribution to make. According to Punch (2009), firstly, we learn from the case itself its own right. Secondly, Punch (2009) believes that only an in-depth case study can provide understanding of the complex social phenomena. Thirdly, the case study can make an important contribution in combination with other research approaches. Case studies can help ‘flesh out’ the picture in a way that other approaches cannot (Punch 2009). The case study design allows for holistic treatment of the phenomena, an empathic stance and learning from the particular case (Cohen et. al, 2007; Yin, 2014). The advantage of this design is that it yields rich and holistic data that can advance knowledge in this field of study (Robson 2007).

### **3.4 Data Collection and Data Analysis**

This section will describe the method of data collection and how the participants were accessed and sampled. It will also provide a description of the data analysis method used by the researcher. The two methods of data collection used in this study were focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews. The timeline of data collection is shown in Figure 3.1.

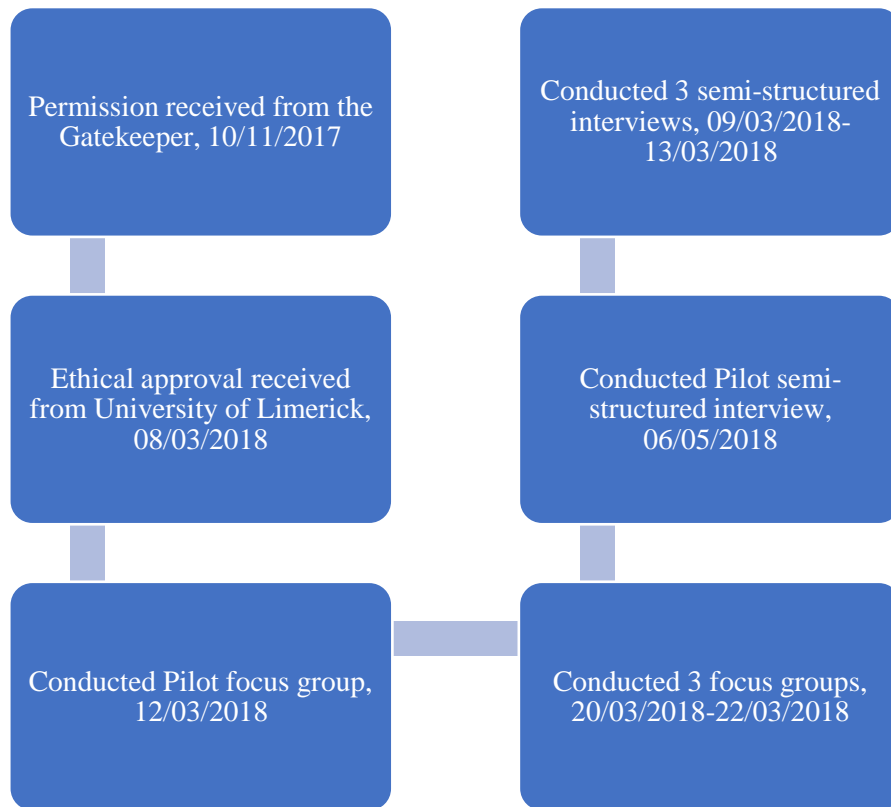


FIGURE 3.1 GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF DATA COLLECTION

### 3.4.1 Access and Sampling

Following institutional ethical approval received from the University of Limerick on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018 (2018\_02\_20\_EHS), one post-primary school was chosen as the case study site (Appendix A). The gatekeeper, the Principal, received a Subject Information Letter and a Consent Form, to confirm school involvement (Appendix B, C). Having consulted with the school board of management, the gatekeeper consented on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2018 to the researcher accessing the sample of student participants. Purposeful sampling was used to access a sample of second year students at this site. Letters of Information and Consent Forms were sent to the parents of the second year' participant sample (Appendix D, E). Once sufficient consent forms were received, the focus groups were planned. Students who opted to take part were provided with an information sheet and consent form to allow them time to understand what was involved in more detail (Appendix F, G). The focus groups were held on three consecutive days- 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2018 (Appendix H).

The guidance counsellors were contacted separately by sending information letters to guidance counsellors in 44 single-sex girls post-primary schools in the greater Dublin area, including Kildare and Wicklow (Appendix I). These schools were identified following a search for all-girl school in the Greater Dublin area on the Department of Education website. 6 responses were received and 3 guidance counsellors were chosen at random for a face to face interview. The interviews were held at the guidance counsellors' place of work, with participants acknowledging consent prior (Appendix J). The location of the place of work was convenient for both interviewer and interviewee. The interviews were held on 9<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> of April 2018 (Appendix K).

Participants and sites, in qualitative research, are identified based on places and people that can best increase our understanding of the central phenomena (Creswell, 2005). For this study, the researcher used purposeful sampling, intentionally selecting individuals and sites in order to learn and understand the central phenomena (Cohen *et al.* 2013). It is important to choose participants and sites that are 'information rich' (Patton 1990, p.169).

### **3.4.2 Focus Groups**

Focus groups are special groups that are brought together to gather information through 'focused discussion' (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Focus groups can be used to collect shared understanding from a group of people as well as to get views from specific people (Creswell 2005). Focus groups were used in this study because the researcher wanted to gather different perspectives and study their complexities. The three focus groups were used with the student participants. The age range was 14-15 years old. The researcher conducted one pilot focus group and then, three focus groups from which the data for this study was collected. There were between 8 and 10 students in each focus group and each focus group interview was conducted in the participants' school. Each of these interviews was audio-recorded and lasted approximately 40 minutes. A total of 25 second year students participated in the focus groups. The main advantage of using focus groups is that it is possible to probe for further information and get clarity on issues raised by the participants. Also, people tend to open up in groups and there is high face validity (Krueger & Casey 2009). Some limitations of using focus groups with student participants is their maturity level and the impact of peer influence on group dynamics (Krueger & Casey 2009; Robson 2002).

### **3.4.3 Semi-structured interviews**

Face to face interviews involve the construction or reconstruction of knowledge rather than the ‘excavation’ of it (Mason 2002). Semi-structured face to face interviews are open-ended in their focus and dialogical in their process (Thomas 2013). Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow flexibility to adapt to issues and themes as they arise over the course of the interview. They also allow the researcher to respond to the reactions of participants and to probe if required (Bell 2010; Thomas 2013). The advantage of conducting semi-structured interviews is the depth of the insights into the complexity of the issues under investigation. The main disadvantage is reactivity between the trainee guidance counsellor and the experienced interviewee. Due care was taken after the interviews to record any bias or assumptions on behalf of the researcher. The researcher conducted 1 pilot interview and then, 3 semi-structured face to face interviews with 3 different guidance counsellors working in 3 different locations in the Greater Dublin area (Kildare, Dublin and Wicklow). The pilot proved to be very useful to the researcher as questions were made shorter and more concise. All guidance counsellor participants had more than 5 years’ experience working with female students in a post-primary school. One of the guidance counsellors had more than 20 years’ experience and had worked in both mixed and single-sex schools. All 3 guidance counsellors were working in all-girl post-primary schools at the time of interview. Each interview took place in the guidance counsellor’s place of work and each interview lasted between 35 and 55 minutes.

### **3.4.4 Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is a process and a rigorous systematic procedure that requires immersion in the data so that larger meanings can be interpreted (Burton et.al. 2008; Creswell 2009). Due to the nature of the qualitative research methods used in this study- focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews- the data was constantly under analysis from the moment data collection began. In each case, and in line with best practice, transcribing was done as soon after each audio recording as possible (Krueger & Casey 2009). There were two reasons for this. Firstly, to allow the researcher reflect on the interview and what was learned. Secondly, this reflection enabled the researcher modify any question that needed modification and know where to probe for further details. Even though pilots had been done in advance of both the focus groups and the semi-structured interviews, the research found that some slight

modification was required in terms of clarifying the focus on ‘student emotional well-being’ and not ‘Wellbeing’, the new Junior cycle area of learning.

The data collected in the study was initially analysed by the researcher using the constant comparative method which involved going through the data again and again, comparing each element, coding the data using abbreviations, looking for emerging themes and developing a map of these themes to help discover interconnections. Both overarching themes and some subthemes emerged and these became building blocks for the researcher who mapped out the themes to enable interconnections to be revealed (Thomas, 2013). Thematic data analysis provides a robust, systematic framework for coding qualitative data and for then using it in order to identify ‘patterns’ across the data collected in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2014; Thomas 2009, 2013). The themes and subtheme that emerged from the data analysis related strongly to the research focus and to the research questions. When mapping the themes, the researcher looked for repetition of words, ideas and patterns, the use of metaphors and analogies, similarities and difference, transitions or shifting of topics in the data, and missing or omitted data (Bryman 2012).

### **3.5 Validity and Reliability**

Robson (2007) defines validity as ‘trustworthiness’ and ‘credibility’. Validity generally refers to the extent to which the findings from one study can be applied to another situation (Merriam 1998), whereas Bell (2010) defines validity in terms of whether or not an instrument measures or describes what it is supposed to measure or describe. “Reliability is concerned with the question of whether the results of a study are repeatable” (Bryman 2012, p.46). Merriam (1998) asserted that ‘all research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner’. Punch (2009) observes that reliability basically means consistency- consistency over time (or stability) and internal consistency. With regard to stability, Punch (2009) believes that if the same instrument were given to the same people, under the same circumstances, at a different time, they should get the same results. In the constructivist paradigm, researchers also want to know how stable the data will be over time and if multiple data are used, are they internally consistent.

The research instruments designed by the researcher were designed with both validity and reliability in mind. With regard to case studies, Bassey (1981) asserts that 'reliability' is much more important than 'generalizability'. With regard to validity, Bassey states that if case studies are carried out systematically and critically, if they are reliable, and if the publication of findings leads to an extension of the boundaries of existing knowledge, then they are valid forms of educational research (Bassey 1981). Punch observes that cases deserve to be studied in their own right and the objective is not always to make generalizations (Punch 2009). Notwithstanding, much can be learned from studying one case in detail and by ensuring rigor in the research process, new concepts can be realized (Punch 2009).

In the interpretivist paradigm, validity, reliability and generalisability are more difficult than in the positivist paradigm. However, the qualitative paradigm and its subjective process do have their own research quality (Savickas 2001; Bryman 2012; Thomas 2013). For example, the findings of this study may be transferable to other similar contexts. This clearly underlines the potential generalizability of knowledge built from case studies. If knowledge and insight can be gained through interpretative research, case studies have value and findings may inform best practice in similar contexts. To ensure academic rigor, the researcher gave due consideration to issues of validity and reliability throughout the research process.

### **3.6 Positionality**

An interpretivist research requires that the researcher state their positionality (Thomas 2013). The researcher has worked as a teacher in the case study school for the past twelve years. The researcher has a personal interest in female coping strategies, student emotional wellbeing and its relationship to educational and life outcomes. "Student voice" was important to the researcher who was drawn to its' respect for, and empowerment of students (Cook-Sather 2014). The researcher wanted to give both students and guidance counsellors a voice in order to better understand the challenges faced by second year students in schools. The hope is that better and more appropriate guidance counselling supports can be identified for mid-Junior cycle students in future.

### **3.7 Reflexivity**

This research study implemented a critical reflexive approach. As Berger (2015) highlights, it is important to be aware of researcher bias and of researcher reflexivity. Ethically reflexive methodology requires critical self-scrutiny in methodology, data collection, analysis and interpretation (McLeod, 2010). Critical self-reflexivity was very important to the researcher who kept her own research diary with detailed notes of meetings, discussions and personal reflective notes throughout the study (Appendix L). The researcher felt that this provided greater awareness of her own preconceptions, assumptions and biases, thus allowing her to act in good faith throughout the research process so as not to compromise the findings. Bryman (2012) states that reflexivity refers to a reflectiveness about values, decisions, biases and the presence of the researcher in the situations they investigate. As such, reflexivity is thorough self-appraisal and self-examination (Berger 2015). As an ‘insider’ researcher and teacher in the case study school, I was aware of my ‘insider knowledge and understanding’ (Punch 2009). Equally, I was an outsider with regard to the subjective lived experiences of the student participants and the guidance counsellors.

### **3.8 Research Ethics in Guidance Counselling**

Bell (2014) argues that research ethics is about being clear about the nature of the agreement you have entered into with the research participants. At all times during the study, participants’ needs took precedence over the actual process of the research (Punch, 2006) and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time. The researcher worked in adherence with the National Centre for Guidance in Education (2008) Research Code of Ethics, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors Code of Ethics (2012), the Psychological Society’s Code of Professional Ethics (2000) and University of Limerick guidelines for ethical research. In line with these, it was important to protect the integrity of the research; from planning stage, to implementation, to reporting of findings. The researcher was granted ethical approval by the University of Limerick Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018.

Cohen *et. al* (2013) observe that ethical regulation exists on three levels- legislative, professional and personal. The researcher was guided by the five ethical principles of

research- beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, fidelity and justice. Hearne (2013) argues for the importance of the dignity and rights of the person, competence, responsibility and integrity in conducting ethical research. McLeod (2010) asserts that paying attention to ethical issues in case studies allows for the creation of a moral space where effective inquiry can take place and where all participants feel safe.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the methodology which underpins this research. The qualitative research paradigm and the ontological and epistemological approach are thoughtfully explored. Issues of validity, reliability, positionality, reflexivity and ethical practices are discussed. Chapter 4 will explain the data analysis strategy, and the research findings from the focus group and semi-structured interviews will be presented.

## **Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Findings**

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the main findings from the data gathered through focus groups and one to one interviews. It will also outline the data analysis strategy used and explore the predominant themes that emerged from the data. To preserve anonymity of participants, pseudonyms are used and specific locations are not disclosed. The data collected gives an insight into the unique experiences of early adolescents in the second year of post-primary education from two perspectives- their own, and that of the guidance counsellor. The themes and sub-themes that emerge deepen our understanding of the relationship between emotional wellbeing and academic engagement of female post-primary students in Ireland today.

### **4.1 Data Analysis Strategy**

The data analysis strategy that is selected has to be the one that best suits the needs of the individual research (Thomas 2013). In this particular research project, the constant comparative method (Thomas 2013) and Braun and Clarke's thematic data analysis framework were used by the researcher. The first step was the constant comparative method. This involves going through the data again and again, comparing each element, coding the data using abbreviations, looking for emerging themes and developing a map of these themes to help see interconnections (Thomas 2013). Some overarching themes as well as several subthemes emerged from the data collected. The second step involved use of Braun and Clarke's six step Thematic Data Analysis Framework (2012). Thematic data analysis provides a robust, systematic framework for coding qualitative data and for the identification of 'patterns' across the data (Braun & Clarke 2012).

The last step was the codes that emerged are the features that appear interesting and meaningful (Braun & Clarke 2012). The researcher was able to make links between the themes that emerged (Bryman 2012) and this led to the researcher's preliminary findings. Next, the researcher clarified a deeper review of the themes identified and this became the basis for the thematic map that was generated (Appendix M). Following some critical scrutiny of the analysis process and the thematic map (McLeod 2012), finally, the researcher refined and clarified the themes and subthemes in order to present the initial themes and issues (Appendix N).

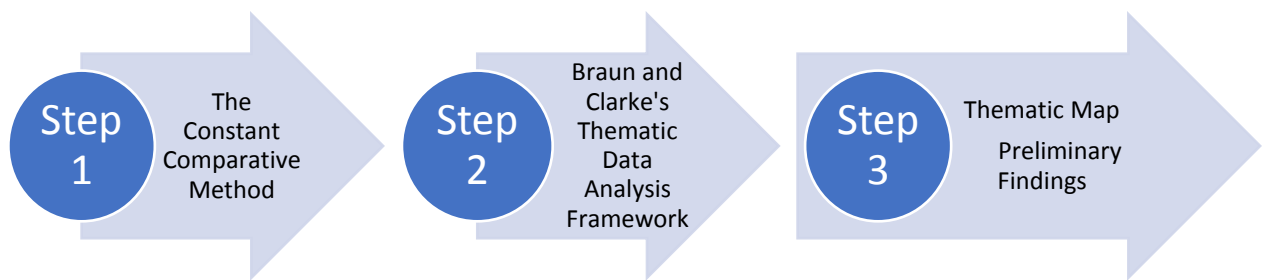


FIGURE 4.1 DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGY

## 4.2 Research Demographics

The research demographics refer to the characteristics of the research participants in the study (Cohen *et al.* 2011). Selection of the participants was done by random sampling to avoid selection bias and to increase validity.

### 4.2.1 The Students

The students in this research are all female and from second year in a single-sex post-primary school. The age range of the student participants was 14-15 years old. Each participant had been involved in a school mentoring programme while in first year (Appendix O). This programme was continued into second year. At the time of focus group interviews, all students had completed 1 meeting with their mentor. The students are a random sample from this school's second year student body, comprising 120 students. Volunteers were sought from the 120 students and 44 parental consent forms were received. From the 44 volunteers received, 30 second year students were chosen at random. This number allowed for absences on the days of the focus groups. In total, 25 students participated over the 3 days of focus group interviews. Each student was assigned a pseudonym to protect her identity. *Table 4.2a* below shows the dates conducted, the number of participants and the names of the participants in each focus group.

TABLE 4.1 DETAILS OF FOCUS GROUPS

Student Focus Groups	FG 1	FG 2	FG 3
<b>Conducted:</b>	20/3/2018	21/3/2018	22/3/2018
<b>No. of Participants:</b>	8	10	7
<b>Names of Participants</b>	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H	I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R	S, T, U, V, W, X, Y

#### 4.2.2 The Guidance Counsellors

The guidance counsellors were recruited by sending information letters to guidance counsellors working in the 51 all-female post-primary schools in the Greater Dublin area (Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow). The list of schools was obtained from the Department of Education and Skills website in February 2018. From the 51 letters sent, 8 responses were received and 3 participants were chosen at random. The guidance counsellors in this study are from three different all-female public post-primary schools in the Greater Dublin area. Each one has more than 5 years' experience working with female students in an all-female school. Each guidance counsellor was working in all-female school at the time of interview. Each guidance counsellor was given a pseudonym to protect her identity. *Table 4.2b* below shows the locations, school sizes and contexts worked in by each of the guidance counsellors in this study.

TABLE 4.2 DETAILS OF GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS.

Guidance Counsellor	GC1	GC2	GC3
<b>County</b>	Dublin	Wicklow	Kildare
<b>No. of years working as GC.</b>	8	20+	7
<b>Training</b>	1 yr Maynooth	1 yr Maynooth	2 yr University of Limerick.
<b>Size of school</b>	1000+	1050+	1050+
<b>Countries worked in</b>	Ireland	Ireland England	Ireland
<b>Current School:</b>	Single-sex (female) (Non-Deis)	Single-sex (female) Mixed, (Non-Deis)	Single-sex (female) Mixed, (Non-Deis)

### **4.3 Experiences of School and Learning**

In order to understand the relationship between student emotional well-being and their academic engagement during the second year of post-primary education, it is necessary to establish a baseline for this investigation. The baseline helps the researcher understand the experiences of second year in post-primary education for both groups of participants.

#### **4.3.1. Students**

To establish the baseline for students, a series of questions were asked to enable students to describe their experiences of school and learning during second year (Appendix H). Students were encouraged to reflect on how happy they are in school, the challenges they face and their levels of engagement with school and learning during second year. The word cloud (Fig. 4.2) depicts the students' perceptions of school and their experiences as students during second year in post-primary school.

#### **4.3.2 Guidance Counsellors**

To establish the baseline for guidance counsellors, a series of questions were asked to enable guidance counsellors reflect on and explore their individual experiences of working with second year students (Appendix K). Guidance counsellors were encouraged to consider their own perspectives on how well-being affects students' ability to engage with education and maintain motivation during second year. Figure 4.3 is a graphic representation of the perspectives of the Guidance Counsellors.





**FIGURE 4.3 QUOTATION BANK SHOWING GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS PERSPECTIVES ON SECOND YEAR STUDENTS AND SECOND YEAR STUDNETS' EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL AND LEARNING DURING SECOND YEAR.**

## 4.4 Emergent Themes

The following are the overarching themes that emerged from both the focus group interview data and the semi-structured interview data:

- i) Student Workload and Junior Cycle
- ii) Friendships and Online Socialising
- iii) School Supports

Direct quotations from the transcribed interviews will provide clarity and credence to the emergence of each theme which originated from the data.

### 4.4.1 Student Workload and Junior Cycle

It is evident from the students' feedback that second year is a very different from first year in post-primary school. Students feel this difference in terms of their school workload and what is expected of them in Junior Cycle. They refer to stress and exam pressure as well as more homework and preparation for CBAs:

I think it's more stressful because the teachers know you're not as new and you're used to everything. There's not as many excuses accepted, and eh, you have to have everything done

(FG1 Student E)

It's a lot more work than First Year, a lot more homework and I feel like I don't have a lot of time in the evenings, like some down time to watch Netflix and go on my phone...(laughs)...yeah, it's just more work and it's getting more stressful.

(FG2 Student O)

Some students are positive about the workload, however, this is only in terms of preparing for other future higher stakes examinations:

It's good. We're passed settling into school and we're starting to get ready for the Junior Cert which is good because when it comes to Leaving Cert we'll know what to be expecting.

(FG3 Student X)

Well, in second year, you're a lot more familiar with the surroundings and it's more exam focused so you're learning a lot more.

(FG3 Student Y)

It is clear that the majority of students do not enjoy the academic challenges or the pressure of the workload in second year. Worry is common amongst second year students and many fear not performing well in exams:

I found it very stressful cos like they are talking about the Junior Cycle a lot and like, all the CBAs and exams aswell. Like, there's just a lot of work'

(FG2 Student N).

Last year, I would have been like A's in all my tests but now I have gone down because they've been making things harder, they've been scaring us with the Junior Cert and CBAs

(FG3 Student M)

In general, students find second year harder than first year because the workload increases and teacher expectations are noticeably higher. Despite the increase in workload and the reported stresses and pressures, many students say that they are either 'as happy' or 'happier' in school during second year when compared with first year:

I'd say I'm as happy and a little bit more confident. You've kind of, you've had a year to get used to it and now, you know all the people in your class better and the teachers better.

(FG 3 Student X)

I'm a lot happier in second year and more confident. I've met some really good friends that I'm gonna stick with and ...In first year, I was just kind of more self-conscious and scared

(FG2 Student O)

Student confidence levels tend to increase during second year primarily due to familiarity with the school environment, the establishment friends and a successful transition from primary to post-primary school:

I think that I'm much more happier and more confident this year cos, last year, you know, there was more of a divide between people. There were much different groups of people and there was like a popularity status and it was like you wanted to try and fit in

(FG 2 Student P)

With regard to academic engagement and students' own perceptions of their engagement in learning during second year, students differ greatly. Some believe that their continued engagement is due to ongoing assessment for Junior Cycle while for others, levels of motivation, focus and interest have declined.

I think I'm probably less engaged in learning this year cos last year, I just really wanted to do really well, and... I still do want to do really well but like, I don't care as much. There's just so much stress so it puts me off... There's just so much to learn this year. So sometimes you zone out and when it comes to tests, you leave it all til the last minute and then you panic and the stress...

(FG2, Student R)

I'd say I am as engaged as I was last year. I do like, I'm more engaged in class but I don't do as much work at home. But, I still do work if we have tests in class.

(FG3, Student V)

Yeah, I'm a little bit more like, laid-back with the work. A little bit less engaged with learning and more laid-back and em, relaxed.

(FG3, Student S)

I feel a bit more engaged because like all the project work and stuff we have to do. Like, we actually have to do like, more activities and stuff. Like, it's more engaging I think. It's more because of the projects and the research that we have to do.

(FG1, Student F)

From the guidance counsellors' perspectives, second year is an important year in students' educational trajectory. Guidance counsellors concur with the increased workload and the associated stress and anxiety that students feel.

It is such a critical stage in their secondary schooling. If you can get them through second year in a good state, then they have weathered the worst of the storm. Second year is crucial.

(GC1)

And the project work in Junior Cycle too is another stress on both the teacher and the student. I actually question whether it will have the desired effect at all...I think it will actually increase the overall stress in the students, particularly girls and I'm not sure... I mean, that is going to affect their well-being

(GC2)

One of the guidance counsellors feels very strongly that the recent educational reforms may not be good for girls because girls process information differently and their coping strategies differ from their male peers:

They take things very seriously, they do. It does not matter if you tell them 'this is worth 10%'. They take things very seriously and that feeds right

down through everybody and the various levels of academic ability in the class.

(GC2)

But if you have a cauldron of girls in a school who are already trying to achieve, particularly the highly academic ones, we are going to increase their stress, unless they are so very good that it does not particularly bother them. I do think that the weaker student would find continuous assessment very stressful until they get to the end of it.

(GC2)

Guidance counsellors agree that second year is challenging for students, teachers and schools. They tend to meet second year students via referrals from teachers, tutors or year heads, for issues regarding friends, social media, anxiety and stress.

#### **4.4.2 Friendships and Online Socialising**

It is very evident from the focus groups that friends and friendships are very important in the lives of students during second year. Cultivating friendships and socialising in a fast-paced digital-driven world are at the centre of friendships for adolescents in second year.

I feel like it's better and I'm more confident in second year and I've found my friend group who I feel happy around and is good friends to me

(FG 2, Student M)

'I think that being in school and around your friends is really good.'

(FG1, Student C).

Both guidance counsellors and students concur that friendships bring feelings of happiness, confidence, security, satisfaction, connectedness, identity and belonging as well as an increased sense of emotional well-being. In addition, guidance counsellors are keen to highlight a reality that second year students prefer to downplay. That is, the high levels of energy and time that they dedicate to friends, online socialising and social media:

In second year, they're falling in and they're falling out of friendships...  
'relationships are huge for them in second year. If it goes well, it's brilliant

(GC2)

I have met very few students who don't have a social media account. It is an epidemic throughout the school. That is where they get their sense of affirmation from. I hear of Snapchat stories all the time and streaks and if you break the streak, that is the worst thing in the world

(GC3)

It takes up a huge amount of their time and into the night time. I certainly think it impacts things like sleep. And obviously, if they are not sleeping substantially, their concentration and ability to focus in class is diminished as well

(GC3)

From the guidance counsellors' feedback, second year is a year in which problems such as bullying and other friendship difficulties come to their attention:

Big issues tend to hit in second year and what I mean by that is that I tend to deal with more bullying issues in second year rather than first year. There are more issues regarding friendships and things going wrong on them in second year.

(GC1)

One of the main issues in second year that might affect academic engagement would be bullying, obviously peer and friendship issues'

(GC3)

Building relationships raises its head a lot in second year. In first year, they can be a little bit timid and they're all trying to find their feet. I think in second year, they either become close as a junior class or something will start to go wrong.

(GC2)

When talking about what they like to do in their free time, interestingly, several students mention Snapchat, Instagram and '*going on my phone*' as activities, while others talk about tennis, hockey and dancing. It is evident that students spend a great deal of their time socialising online, using Instagram and Snapchat to communicate with large numbers of people. Some are close friends and others may be people they may not even know:

I'd say I am as engaged as I was last year... I'm more engaged in class but I don't do as much work at home...I'm on technology, going on my phone, watching TV, getting distracted....'

(FG 3, Student V)

If you removed the phone from them, it would be like removing a limb from them. It is their connection to the outside world.

(GC3)

Guidance counsellors deal with the many issues that stem from student use, over-use and abuse of their mobile phones and social media. The desire to be constantly connected, involved in the group chat or maintaining the '100 day streak' is very real for second year students. Unsurprisingly, excessive online socialising can be linked by students to lack of sleep and disturbed sleeping patterns. Consequently, students are often tired and more irritable during their school day when socialising face to face:

Of course, it affects their sleep, exhaustion... A student who is tired is also much more irritable, much more likely to pick a row with someone else who is maybe reading about herself on the internet, maybe something she is not quite happy about.

(GC2)

According to guidance counsellors, student concentration, motivation, engagement and performance in school are all impacted when students are consumed by their online world. Their physical, emotional and mental health can suffer, as well as their self-esteem and self-concept:

It's like an invisible competition going on. Really their confidence issue and self-esteem are significant then as a result. It is no wonder then that their academic engagement suffers. Their thoughts are focused, not on schoolwork, but on a Snapchat story, a streak or an Instagram feed.

(GC3)

And if I think of social media, it is huge, in all years of course but when I think of second years and juniors in general, it would frighten you to think of the amount of time they are spending on their phones, on apps and Snapchat.

(GC2)

A girl told me that she leaves her phone on all during the night in case there would be something going on. I said, 'surely, you could put it away'. Her response was: 'No, that would be very bad, I have to be there for them'. And it's almost treated as if I were speaking to you and you looked away. It's like bad manners. Not to be on the end of your phone and available is bad manners.

(GC2)

They are getting their affirmation from numbers and likes, rather than living in the everyday, the here and now. I hear from lots of students, especially

second years, 'I have x number of friends on a social media platform' and I might ask them 'Well, how many have you actually met in person?'. They may have never met the person... in some cases, they might have a boyfriend but they have never met them beyond the social media platform.'

(GC3)

Both students and guidance counsellors in this study acknowledge that online socialising can be detrimental to personal, social and emotional health and well-being. Students love social media but like guidance counsellors, they are worried by negative effects like cyberbullying. Both students and guidance counsellors agree that mobile phones and social media are complicated issues for schools and society to tackle.

#### **4.4.3 School Support**

Students are aware that the support available to them during second year is noticeably different from that experienced by these students during first year. They feel that the supports, care and attention given to them in first year are noticeably absent during second year:

In first year, everyone was looking out for us. But then, as soon as we went on to second year, we were kind of left on our own.

(FG3, Student X)

In First Year, we had a form where we filled out stuff about ourselves to our Guidance Counsellor and there was one assigned to our year and to our class, to get to know us, but that was the only time they ever came to our class

(FG1, Student C)

Guidance counsellors agree that the level of support they are able to give to second years is much less than they would like. Senior students and career's work tend to absorb most of the guidance counselling time in schools:

In my role as guidance counsellor, I don't have second year students as much, as most of my time is made up of one to one appointments

(GC2)

The priority is at the top end of the school' and 'like most guidance departments, the majority of the time is taken up with the higher end of the school, the sixth year, for CAO, UCAS...

(GC1)

Second years can really go under the radar a little bit. It's not that there's nothing happening for them but they are an intermediary year. First is all about transition, third is all about Junior Cycle. We sometimes just assume

that second years can just get on with it. And maybe that's a little bit misplaced.

(GC3)

Student V feels that '*sometimes second year is kind of like the forgotten year*' and there are less supports for second year students even though they say they 'need support'.

In first year, like, you're the newbies and everyone is like, looking out for you. In third year, you've your exams. In fourth year, you have all these trips going on. In fifth and sixth year, you're for Leaving Cert. Second year, you're just kinda like in the middle.

(GF3, Student V)

Like most of her peers, Student V would like greater access to guidance counselling services during second year:

It would be easier to, like, if you had a fight with your friend, it would be easier to go there rather than telling someone in your class cos they could easily spill it.

(FG3, Student V)

The majority of students in the case study school say that access to and availability of school support in the form of the guidance counsellor, is limited:

I don't even know where they are. If we need to talk to them.

(FG3, Student W)

'I've never known where the Guidance Counsellor is, if I ever really did need them, cos it's kind of like hidden.

(FG1, Student B)

'Well, I've never spoken to the Guidance people, I don't even know where their office is.

(FG 3, Student S)

This lack of visibility and awareness of the guidance counselling service brings several problems for students who may need help or support:

Sometimes, when I have like something weighing me down, yeah, I would like to just talk to someone and just let everything out, before class... but maybe not during class time, it's better at lunch or at break or whenever you feel down or if there's something on your mind.

(FG2, Student I)

I think they need to make us more aware and make it more common to go to a Guidance Counsellor. I think there's a stigma too, I wouldn't want everyone knowing. I wouldn't know where to go to talk to someone if I had a bad day.

(FG1, Student F)

According to the students, organisationally, a good support structure appears in place in the case study school. The students refer to the tutor and year head, as well as guidance counsellors, a pastoral care team, a mentoring programme (Appendix O), a Cairdeas mentoring programme (Appendix P), a school Wellbeing programme, SPHE and Wellbeing classes. Despite the support structure, several students highlight the need for more support during second year. The need to raise the profile of the guidance counselling service and the necessity of building rapport with students are also evident.

I think it would be good if you could go up to them at lunchtime instead of during classes cos everyone is like, 'oh, is she is trouble cos she left during class time?'. If it was at lunchtime, you could just go talk to someone if you need to.

(FG2, Student M)

Yeah, it's kinda like just having a person to go to when you feel stressed, that can really help. When you feel really stressed, it's good and it's needed in second year, sometimes

(FG2, Student K)

Both the students and the guidance counsellors agree that there is a '*need for more support for second year students*', from the perspective of both their emotional well-being and their engagement in learning. The students want to reach their full potentials in school and emerge as happy, confident and connected human beings. However, from the research findings, it is evident that second year students want and need support in school to achieve this.

## **4.5 Conclusion**

This chapter presented findings from 3 focus group interviews containing 25 female participants from one post-primary school and 3 semi-structured individual interviews involving guidance counsellors from different post-primary schools. The data analysis aims to answer the primary and second research questions. It also highlights a number of key themes pertinent to the research topic. The data itself provides rich insights and perspectives on student well-being in school and academic engagement during second year. The research findings illuminate the fact that there is a significant relationship between the emotional well-being and the academic engagement of second year students. In chapter 5, the primary data analysis and findings are discussed relative to previous research.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion**

The purpose of this chapter is to synthesise the research findings in light of the original research questions and the literature review (Thomas 2013). It will discuss the overarching themes and insights that emerged and elucidate the experiences of second year female students in post-primary education with regard to their emotional well-being and their academic engagement.

### **5.1 Overview of Research Findings**

The primary research question of this study asked ‘What is the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst second year students in a girls’ post-primary school?’. The findings highlighted the unique experiences of learning for second year girls in post-primary education. The perspectives of guidance counsellors working with mid-Junior Cycle students enabled a fuller and deeper understanding of the issues affecting female students’ emotional well-being during second year. The secondary questions delved into the students’ experiences of the difference between first year and second year and their experiences of changing levels of engagement and motivation, as well as disengagement during second year. The secondary questions addressed students’ overall happiness, confidence and connectedness in school, and questioned how school guidance counselling services can more adequately support students during second year.

The findings in this exploratory study identify a number of key issues that are central to the research topic. Significant personal, social, emotional and educational challenges are experienced by students in second year. As well as personal developmental changes, second year students are managing varying levels of stress and anxiety. According to both the students and guidance counsellors in the study, stress and anxiety can adversely affect students’ ability to concentrate, to maintain motivation and to actively engage in school work. The students in this study are also impacted by the school context, which is considered by the students themselves to be quite academic. Students report that they put pressure on themselves to do well academically, in order to make parents, teachers and each other happy. Equally, the guidance counsellors acknowledge the current increased level of reported stress and anxiety amongst Junior Cycle students.

Guidance counsellors highlight the organisational issues regarding a lack of time and resources to devote to second year students. The findings indicate that both the students and the guidance counsellors believe that there is a need for greater supports for second year students.

The findings will now be considered in light of the research questions:

## **5.2 Experiences of School during Second Year**

*What are the subjective experiences of school and learning for girls in a single sex post-primary school?*

This section will consider the students' reported experiences of school during second year in Junior Cycle. It will consider how the students experience their school and their education. Students report that second year is a 'big step' from first year and they notice that subjects are more difficult during second year. They report that they have more homework and study but they lack the skills to manage this well. They acknowledge that their school helped them with the transition from primary to secondary education. However, they indicate that they do not receive much help or support with the transition from first year to second year. As they start second year, they are no longer considered 'the babies of the school' (FG 3, Student N) and they feel that they are 'left to their own devices' (GC1).

Second year students and guidance counsellors express mixed feelings about Junior Cycle and its' assessment process. The majority of students report that the workload for Junior Cycle during second year is immense. Many students assert that the workload causes them to feel either 'quite stressed' or 'very stressed'. Several students identified feeling constant pressure to meet assignment deadlines and complete classroom-based assessments. The research findings indicate that this reportedly 'large workload' is affecting the emotional well-being of second year students. Guidance counsellors report that they regularly deal with the effects of student stress and anxiety. They also indicate that students worry a great deal about their own academic performance and this negatively impacts their confidence, self-efficacy and emotional well-being.

### 5.3. The Second Year Experience and Emotional Well-being

*To what extent is the 'second year experience' different from that of first year, with regard to emotional well-being?*

The literature reminds us that another consideration is how boys and girls differ in their approach to dealing with stress. McIntosh *et. al* (2018) identify that “girls tend to ruminate a lot more about tests and test results and it can take a long time for the upset caused by a low-test score to subside”. Boys tends to handle stress differently and they are less likely to internalise the effects of a poor exam grade (McIntosh *et al.* 2018). The research findings concur with the assertion that girls in an all-girl school where academic attainment is seen as very important, tend to be competitive (McIntosh *et al.* 2018). Lynch and Lodge point out that female students tend to be diligent, ambitious and have a strong work ethic (2002). As is evident from the students’ commitment to 2 hours of voluntary after-school study each day, the achievement of very good examination results, high points and third level places are very significant to girls in single-sex schools.

A combination of persistent stress caused by pressure to attain academically and a host of other personal, social, emotional, developmental, educational and societal factors, can adversely affect a student’s emotional well-being over time. Internationally, there have been large increases in reports of stress, anxiety and depression in recent years (OECD 2015). National and international concern for the emotional well-being of young people today has never been greater (DES 2017). The findings of this research support the assertion of the DCYA’s assertion that due to academic pressure, peer pressure and increased levels of anxiety, schools can be very stressful places for girls (DCYA 2017). The present reality for second year students does not entirely align with the vision of the DES for students who are ‘confident, happy, healthy and connected’. Students are unhappy with the change from first year to second year with regard to the workload and the expectations placed upon them. While some students are managing with effort and perseverance, others are floundering and a minority seem overwhelmed and unable to cope efficiently. This begs the question of whether students are being taught the necessary coping skills that are required to do well in Junior Cycle.

The WHO (2014) state that well-being is present when individuals can cope with the normal stresses of life, when they can realise their own potential and when they can work productively and fruitfully. The research findings show that second year students regularly feel *'lost'*, *'confused'*, *'scared'*, *'stressed'* and *'overwhelmed'* in school. These are not desirable educational outcomes for young people and they do not support healthy emotional well-being.

#### **5.4 The Second Year Experience and Academic Engagement**

*To what extent is the 'second year experience' different from that of first year, with regard to academic engagement?*

The students in this study are experiencing the more open and flexible Junior Cycle programme that encourages students to take more responsibility for their learning. Although it is believed that Junior Cycle is more likely to secure students' engagement, motivation and interest (NCCA 2017), the findings of this study do not readily support this. The NCCA and DES have worked for a long time to bring about this reform at the lower end of post-primary education. However, teachers and parents are accustomed to the former Junior Certificate and the change to Junior Cycle is a gradual and evolving process for all stakeholders.

Part of the rationale for the change to Junior Cycle stemmed from research carried out by the ESRI (2006) on behalf of the NCCA, into the experiences of students in the first three years of post-primary schooling. In the ESRI reported (2006) problems of disengagement bullying, stress, anxiety, mental health problems and lower levels of overall happiness during second year. The teachers, tutors, year heads and school managers consulted, all agreed that second year is a crucial year for students; a year when they can take one of two paths- becoming either more engaged or 'drifting' and becoming academically less engaged (ESRI 2006). The research findings of this study indicate that second year is a challenging and difficult year for many students. Changes in concentration, focus, interest and motivation were reported by the majority of the student participants. Some students claimed to cope well with these changes whereas

others indicated that they felt overwhelmed, or they had completely disengaged without support.

In the case study school, the 25 students who participated in the focus groups all agreed, to varying degrees, that they felt pressure to do well in school. Whether this pressure came from themselves, each other, from teachers, parents or siblings, their experience of it was very real. Some students were frequently 'stressed out' whereas others reported constant anxiety, worry and fear. One of the guidance counsellors concluded that 'everything is serious' for girls and despite a teacher telling students that a particular test is worth 10% of the overall grade, students will prepare for it and worry about it in the same way as if it were a terminal exam worth 100%. From this guidance counsellor's perspective, students do not 'get' the concept of continuous assessment because for them, 'every exam is high stakes' and they do not differentiate. Some students report that they have disengaged during second year because of the perceived pressure of the Junior Cycle workload. Many students, however, are convinced that they remain academically engaged during second year because of the CBAs and class projects. With regard to academic engagement, the views of students in this study were found to be very mixed.

To summarise, the subjective experiences of school and learning for girls in a single-sex post-primary school are very varied. Students share common experiences such as: increased workload, pressure, anxiety, stress, high expectations, competition with peers and a desire to do well academically. Students in the case study school differ in their responses to school and learning during second year. Some embrace the challenges and opportunities, whereas others report feeling disheartened or overburdened. Many students openly admit to constantly comparing themselves to others and to being upset and disappointed when they do not '*measure up*'. Guidance counsellors report that students' experiences during second year can affect their self-esteem and emotional well-being. The research findings from both students and guidance counsellor indicate that emotional well-being has a significant impact on student resilience, motivation, perseverance and engagement with school and learning.

## 5.5 Student Engagement during Second Year

*Do female students feel that they are more engaged or less engaged with school and learning in second year?*

What are the factors that contribute to this?

This research findings showed that some students report being more engaged during second year while others are less engaged. The findings reveal that there are many factors that affect students' ability to remain engaged in learning during second year- friendship issues, Junior Cycle workload, higher expectations from teachers, ongoing assessment practices, project deadlines, higher levels of individual accountability, stress, test anxiety, sleep disturbance, overuse of social media and online addiction. The research findings indicate that friendships are central to second year students' lives and a major factor in their self-reported engagement and /or disengagement with learning during second year. Guidance counsellors emphasise that friendships and the negotiation of relationships are a key preoccupation for young people during adolescence. Many of the student participants in this study spend the majority of their free time communicating with friends. Some of this communication is face to face, but the findings show that a great deal of communication takes place online, predominantly on *Instagram, Snapchat* and *WhatsApp*.

Making new friends and settling in to school is a big preoccupation for students during first year, and this does not end when students enter second year (GC1). However, the students in this study were all born between 2003 and 2004 and have grown up in an ever-connected digital age. All the student participants in this study have a mobile phone or smart phone, and constant internet access. Most of these students also have iPads, laptops and personal computers at home. These young people are in constant communication with one other. It is the norm amongst this student group to be always online and available. It is critical, therefore, that guidance counsellors understand the impact of online communication on adolescent friendships and relationships during second year. It is evident from the findings that friendship problems amongst second year girl can cause a great deal of upset, which directly impacts their experiences of school and their desire to learn.

Guidance counsellors are acutely aware that *Snapchat* and *Instagram* occupy a huge part of students' free time. This means that many teenage girls are engaged with digital communication possibly more than human face to face communication. The three guidance counsellors referred to issues of cyberbullying amongst second year girls and the negative consequences of this for students' self-esteem and confidence during second year. Two of the guidance counsellors spoke about overuse and abuse of social media and the prevalence of online addiction, including gaming addiction. It is interesting to note that while discussing free-time activities, many students report '*going on my phone*' as an activity, much like hockey, football or tennis. This shows the big place mobile phones and online communication occupies in the lives of female teenage students. The findings highlight that guidance counsellors are very concerned about student emotional well-being due to the impact of social media and online socialising. The literature highlights that a quarter of all young people will experience a mental health problem during their lifetime (WHO 2014). The research findings provide an insight into the world that today's teenagers inhabit, and highlight the need for support with friendships in a digital world.

## **5.6 Student Engagement during Second Year**

*How can guidance counsellors and the whole-school guidance counselling service better support second year students during this mid-Junior Cycle year?*

The research findings identify that school policies and practices with regard to guidance counselling and the whole-school approach, differ from school to school. The findings also highlight that students' experiences of support vary from school to school, and are dependent on senior management, school ethos, individual personnel and a commitment to students' holistic development and overall well-being. Two of the guidance counsellors in this study only meet second year students through referrals by a year head, tutor, deputy principal or principal. The guidance counsellors want to be available to support students but there are restrictions and limitations on them within their schools. All three guidance counsellors are involved in several school initiatives aimed at second year students. These include school Mentoring Programmes, the 'Learning to

Learn' programme, the 'My Friends Youth' programme, Well-being Week, year-round programmes to promote student well-being, guest speakers, workshops and campaigns.

The three guidance counsellors reported a desire to have more time and resources to devote to second year students during the mid-Junior Cycle year. However, the findings show that the reality in schools is not as the three guidance counsellors would wish. The question of adequacy is discussed by the guidance counsellors who individually conclude that the service they provide to second year students is less than adequate. One of the guidance counsellors reported that each Junior cycle student should be given their own 40-minute interview with a guidance counsellor twice yearly. She thinks that this could be a preventative measure and an opportunity for students to talk freely about their worries and get help where needed. The literature also identifies prevention as an important element of good student well-being in school (DES 2017).

The research findings indicate that guidance counselling services in post-primary schools today are '*fairly stretched*'. Guidance counsellors believe that the reduction in allocation following Budget 2012 is to blame. One of the guidance counsellors reported being the only full-time guidance counsellor in a school of 1080 girls. She reported having to be 'very creative' with support teams and pastoral groups (volunteer teachers) in order to try to meet the demands in her school. The findings indicate strong agreement from students that the supports available in schools are inadequate. The findings identify problems with regard to access, availability and visibility of guidance counsellors and the guidance counselling service in schools. Many students reported that they would like a service that is accessible, open, friendly, effective and adequate. The students' desires appear to echo the proposals of the DES (2017) to promote student mental health and well-being. However, the research findings indicate that second year students currently, do not have this.

### **5.7 School Mentoring Programmes and 'One Good Adult'**

The findings show that students in the case study school have been part of a mentoring programme from first year. At the time of conducting the focus groups, all students had met their mentor three times. According to the students, the first meeting was to discuss how they were settling into school in first year and how they were doing with subjects,

homework and study. The second meeting had a greater academic focus, providing a space to reflect on Christmas exam results, the school report, study skills and target setting for Summer exams. The third meeting was an academic review of progress, encouraging students to reflect on Summer exam results and set targets for second year. The students report mixed experiences of mentoring. The research findings show students spoke positively about mentoring because they welcomed the opportunity to talk and be heard by a 'good' adult.

The literature shows that 'one good adult' can make a difference in the life of a young person (Dooley and Fitzgerald 2012). Schools are identified as playing a central role in promoting the health and well-being of students (NEPS 2013) The research findings provide insight into the need for guidance counsellors in schools, who are available and accessible to students during second year. The findings of this study concur with the finding from '*Pathways through the Junior Cycle*' (NCCA 2016), that second year can be a defining year in any student's academic journey. The findings strongly show that students are asking for more support during this time because they themselves recognise that they need it. The guidance counsellors in this study want to better support second year students as they navigate friendship issues, social media, cyberbullying, online addiction, hormonal changes, peer pressure, parental pressure, teacher expectations, societal demands, mental health issues, identity issues, self-esteem, anxiety and academic pressure. The findings indicate that guidance counsellors can be the 'one good adult' that students wish were available to them during second year. However, due to timetabling restraints, a lack of resources and the priority being at the top end of the school (GC 1), guidance counsellors are not accessible when second year students need them.

## **5.8 The Relationship between Emotional Well-being and Academic Engagement**

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement. The research findings prove that there is a significant relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement, a relationship that can have a profound effect on students' lives. The literature shows that schools are not only places where students acquire academic skills, but places where social and

emotional competencies are cultivated so that young people can thrive and realise their potentials (OECD, 2017). Guidance is highlighted as supporting ‘learning about well-being and learning for well-being’ for students in Junior Cycle. (NCCA 2017). Students’ emotional well-being is understood to be crucial to students’ ability to engage with education. Problems with emotional well-being are strongly linked to problems with motivation, concentration and interest in learning (ESRI 2016). In Seligman’s PERMA model of flourishing (2011), *engagement* refers to psychological connection to activities or organizations (e.g. feeling absorbed, interested, and engaged in life). Academic engagement involves absorption, interest and motivation, qualities that may be lacking when student emotional well-being is not adequately supported. The findings of this study show that students want to be academically engaged and do well in school. However, it is evident that this is strongly dependent on their emotional well-being.

Some conceptualizations of well-being see it as a pre-requisite for learning, and therefore, something that must be in place in order for students to remain engaged in education. While others identify that well-being can be viewed as an outcome of learning, something that results from healthy engagement with learning (White 2011), Peterson (2006) argued that schools should expand their focus beyond academic learning because of the importance of emotional well-being. Kern *et. al* (2013) found that directly assessing subjective well-being across multiple domains offers the potential for schools to more systematically understand and promote well-being. The research findings emphasise that investigating student well-being is valuable and leads to a better understanding of students’ needs.

The Junior Cycle guidelines state that: ‘Wellbeing is present when students realise their abilities, take care of their physical wellbeing, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and have a sense of purpose and belonging to a wider community’ (NCCA 2017, p.17). Student well-being is the responsibility of everyone in the school community and to this end, student well-being is a whole school endeavour. Like learning itself, in Looking at our Schools, student well-being is viewed in holistic terms and central to all students’ development (DES 2016c). The emotional well-being of second year students deserves our attention because of its relationship with academic engagement. The research findings indicate that unhappy students find it very difficult to stay engaged with school and learning. Students suffering mental health issues find it difficult to concentrate in

classes because learning is no longer the priority. As highlighted by the literature review, the emotional well-being of the young person takes precedence over all other activities.

Mentoring was reportedly well-received by the majority of students in the case study school. Girls have their own ways of coping with the pressures, stresses and anxieties that they experience during second year. Many seek help directly whereas others are referred to the guidance counsellor. Frequently connected to the reported 'stress' is fear of failure, test anxiety, a tendency towards perfectionism and the constant comparing of oneself to others. Mentoring can be a highly effective way of engaging with students and safeguarding their well-being. The findings highlight the importance of 'one good adult' in the lives of young people. Students are very strong in their assertions that they would like greater access to guidance counsellors during their school day. They would like a service that is available not only during class time but before school and during break-times also. Some students still feel that there is a stigma attached to 'going to see the counsellor' and this would be lessened if they did not have to miss a lesson in order to attend an appointment in the school. The findings also provide insight into the reality of phenomenon of stress, worry and anxiety as reported by both students and guidance counsellors. Much of this is connected with social media, friends and the fact that much of teenage socialization occurs digitally and without face to face human connection.

Noddings asserts that 'the pursuit of happiness and the achievement of well-being is one of the chief aims of education' (Noddings 2003). Sometimes schools, and their students, can be so focused on the academic that they do not concentrate enough on student well-being (Noddings 2003). In light of the findings of this research, it is evident that favouring academic outcomes over the promotion of student well-being, is a mistake. Well-being and well-becoming (DCYA 2017) need to be at the centre of policy and practice in education and whole-school guidance counselling services so that the current needs of second year students are met.

## **5.9 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst second year students, through the lens of the research questions. Through a critical engagement with the literature and the primary findings, a number of important insights emerged including: school workload and stress, patterns of engagement and disengagement, the importance of friendship, the added value of mentoring programmes and the need for adequate support for second year students in schools. Chapter 6 will conclude the research study by discussing the implications of the case study findings and by proposing recommendations which have emerged from it.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a conclusion with regard to the aims and objectives of this study. This chapter presents the limitations and strengths of the study, and implications of the study at a practical and research level. In addition, recommendations at policy, practice and research levels will be addressed. Finally, a reflexive examination of the study from the researcher's perspective is presented, in light of personal learning during the research process.

### **6.1 Overview of the Findings**

The overall aim of this exploratory case study was to investigate the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement among a group of mid-Junior cycle students during second year in post-primary school. The secondary aim was to learn about students' subjective experiences of school during second year and to discover the 'factors' that impact their emotional well-being and academic engagement during this time. The objectives were to gain new insights and understandings of students' experiences through student and guidance counsellor narratives in order to better support female students during second year.

While there exists an extensive body of research literature in the area of adolescent mental well-being globally (Bor *et. al* 2014; Cosma *et. al* 2017; DES 2013; DES 2015; NCCA 2016; NCCA 2017; Wynn *et al.* 2000), there is little research in Ireland that focusses on student voice (Flynn 2017). Despite the work of the ESRI, the NCCA and the DES, relatively little is known about the links between emotional well-being and academic achievement during Junior Cycle from female students' perspectives.

The NCCA (2016) acknowledge that what happens during second year can have a long-term impact on student engagement with education, their motivation to learn, their self-concept and their overall mental health and well-being. It is estimated that one in four people will experience a mental health condition at some point in their lives (WHO, 2001). There have been large increases in reports of stress, anxiety and depression in recent years (OECD 2015). It is known that up to half of all mental health problems have their onset before the age of 14 and current literature indicates that mental health

problems are on the increase (Cosma *et al.* 2017). Stoep *et. al* (2003) believe that here is a link between mental health problems and an adolescent's ability to learn and to cope in school. The findings of this study strongly support the Stoep *et al.* findings in 2003. In the last two decades, teenage lives have been shaped by rapid technological changes that affect how they learn, how they interact and how they feel about themselves.

The data analysis from this research illuminates a number of key issues central to this topic. From the perspectives of the guidance counsellors, a link exists between students' emotional well-being and their level of focus, motivation and engagement in school and learning. From the students' perspectives, there are many factors that affect student well-being during second year. These include academic stress, test anxiety, fear of failure, friendship difficulties, online problems, difficulties negotiating social media, cyberbullying, high expectation from teachers and students themselves, peer pressure, self-esteem issues and feeling unsupported in school. The introduction of the Junior Cycle subject of 'Wellbeing' highlights the commitment of the DES to promote student well-being in school. Student well-being is understood to be intrinsic to learning, both as an enabler of learning and an outcome of learning in schools (DES 2016). Well-being, including physical, social and emotional well-being, are essential to the development of healthy future adults (DES 2016). The Junior Cycle indicators of 'Wellbeing' - being active, responsible, connected, resilient, respected and aware, are being absorbed by the students in this study. The fact that second year students are asking for more support from the school guidance counselling service is indicative of a greater sense of openness, self-awareness and need amongst this adolescent group.

A greater awareness and understanding of the factors that affect second year students would be highly beneficial to all school staff, including senior management, middle management and guidance counsellors. The fact that friendship issues, the online world and issues connected with social media, are so prominent in these students' lives highlights the need for more targeted continued professional development for guidance counsellors. Many students experience a broad range of problems during second year, including exam stress, fear of failure, cyberbullying, social media misuse, online addiction and disengagement from school and learning. It is apparent from this study that both students and their parents need extra support from school guidance counselling services. It is worrying that so many students have their mobile phones in

their bedrooms at night time, they find it difficult to disengage from social media and friends online, they often forego their sleep, they lack concentration and engagement in learning, they suffer stress and anxiety, their academic progress is diminished, and feelings of dissatisfaction grow.

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

### **6.2.1 Strengths**

A key strength of this research was the interpretivist paradigm which underpinned this study and enabled the collection of rich qualitative data through focus group and individual interviews (Thomas 2013). The depth of the qualitative data meant that descriptions were of lived experiences including feelings and opinions which were well explained (Bryman 2012).

Another strength of this study was that it gave second year students in the case study school a voice. It also investigates the female perspective and recognises that lived experiences, feelings, behaviours and coping strategies can vary with gender. It is important for students to be heard and this can positively impact their mental health and their engagement in school (Flynn 2014). Finally, this research provides a deeper insight and extends our understanding of some of the conclusions of the ESRI's 'Pathways through the Junior Cycle: The Experiences of Second Year Students' (ESRI 2006).

### **6.2.2 Limitations**

Due to the nature of the interpretivist paradigm which relies on qualitative data and individuals' personal narratives, it is difficult to generalise the findings outside the boundaries of the study (Thomas 2013). It is possible to conclude that the case study school could be considered typical of other public single-sex female post-primary schools with a similar ethos of holistic care of the student and high academic expectations.

This study focuses on the female perspective, the case study school is all-female, coincidentally the guidance counsellors are female and the researcher is female. One obvious limitation of this research is the absence of the male perspective as a point of

comparison. The researcher kept a research diary and a reflective journal throughout the research, and notes were made regarding gender and possible researcher bias (Appendix L). Rigorous data analysis procedures, including researcher reflexivity, aim to ensure that personal bias and misinterpretation of data does not occur (Thomas 2013).

Another limitation of this study is that all of the students in the case study school had experienced a school mentoring programme (Appendix O). A similar study to explore the experiences of second year students in a school where there is no mentoring programme could provide a deeper insight into the emotional and academic benefit of mentoring programmes for second year students.

### **6.2.3 Implications of the Findings**

There are several implications of the findings for guidance counselling policy and practice:

1. The DES restoration of the guidance allocation since 2012 may not be sufficient to meet the current needs of second year students, in light of their reported experiences and the current challenges they face.
2. It is important that guidance counsellors can get more contact time with second year students to support their emotional well-being during second year.
3. Students are requesting extra support during second year because they believe that they need it and that guidance counsellors can help them.
4. Students are encouraged to ask for help and when they do, it is essential that the response is swift and supportive (DES 2017).

### **6.3 Recommendations**

Arising from the overall findings of the study, the following recommendations with regard to policy, practice and research can be made:

1. Establish a School Mentoring programme for all students in order to actively promote student well-being, student voice and better engagement with school and education.
2. Recognise that the Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle cohorts of students are two very distinct groups within post-primary education, with different developmental needs.

3. Exploit the opportunity afforded by Junior Cycle 'Wellbeing' to work creatively with second year students, directly engaging with them and giving them a voice to positively impact their own emotional well-being and academic engagement.
4. Design a targeted and dedicated second year programme to address: stress, anxiety, study skills, friendship and social skills, online safety, coping skills and resilience. This programme should aim to scaffold student learning and development, and make the transition into second year less difficult.

## **6.4 Reflexivity and Personal Learning**

Throughout the research study, a reflexive approach was applied in order to gain an understanding the phenomenon under investigation while keeping in mind my own personal, social, professional and cultural context. My personal and professional reflexivity were a key aspect of this study which involved an increase in my awareness of my assumptions, preconceptions biases and dispositions prior to starting the research study and throughout.

My personal journaling during the research process made sure I continued to look at issues through different lenses and perspectives. The regular note-taking, self-questioning, recording of observations and reflections on the data collection helped me to maintain reflexivity as a research (Progoff 1997). It also moved my own learning on and encouraged me to revisit literature and re-question other research processes, procedures and findings.

This research study has highlighted many personal qualities to me including my own resilience and my desire, as a teacher with almost 20 years' experience, to make school a better and happier place for young people. This study has made me look deeply at our education system, question gender segregation, high stakes exams and educational reforms. I have become more both more curious for answers, more reflective and more critical of policy and practices in other countries. As a guidance counsellor, my attentive listening skills and meta-communication micro skills have been honed during the research process. During the research process, I have become increasingly aware of the importance of self-care for guidance counsellors (IGC 2017) and the need to accept that guidance counsellors can only work within the resources available to them. The DES must support the well-being of school guidance counsellors so that they can

continue to effectively support students' personal, social, emotional well-being (IGC 2017).

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This chapter concludes the research study by presenting a summary of the findings in the context of the primary research question and the aims and objectives of the study. In addition, this chapter describes the strengths and limitations of the study and provides recommendations for policy, practice and future research. Finally, a description of the reflexivity and personal learning of the researcher is provided.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Approval from EHS Ethics Review Committee



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK  
O L L S C O I L L U I M N I G H

#### Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee Research Ethics Committee Feedback

<b>Title of Research Project</b>	<b>An investigation into the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst Second Year students in a single sex post-primary school - implications for Guidance Counsellors</b>
<b>Ethics Number</b>	<b>2018_02_20_EHS</b>
<b>Principal Investigator</b>	<b>Lucy Hearne</b>
<b>Date of EHSREC Meeting</b>	<b>21/2/2018</b>
<b>Section 1: Eligibility for Chair's Action</b>	
<b>Section 2: Ethical Issues</b>	
<b>Section 3: Approved Procedures</b>	
<b>Section 4: Study Design and conduct of the study</b>	
a. What are the aims of this research?	
b. Include a short justification for choosing this study	
c. Provide a description of the study	

<b>Section 5: Recruitment of research participants</b>	
a. Describe the population you will recruit from	
b. How will you source or identify your participants?	
c. How many participants	
d. Provide details of financial remuneration or any other form of reward which the participants will receive	
e. Where will the research work be done?	
<b>Section 6: Consent</b>	
Details of how you will obtain consent (where relevant)	
<b>Section 7: Care and protection of research participants</b>	
a. Participation time for each participant	
b. If there are multiple testing sessions for each participant, please provide breakdown	
c. Provide detailed information on potential risks to participant or researcher from procedures or techniques to be employed in this research.	
d. Provide justification of the predictable risks and inconvenience to participants	
<b>Section 8: Protection of participant confidentiality</b>	
a. Who will have access to data collected from participants?	
b. How will confidentiality be ensured	
c. How long will the data be kept? Destruction Method?	

<b>Section 9: Feedback to Participants and Relevant Communities</b>	
Describe how the results of the research will be made available to the participants and to the concerned communities	
<b>Section 10: Indemnity</b>	
Is research covered by UL insurance Y/N	

<b>Section 11: Document Checklist:</b>	<b>Which documents are attached</b>		<b>Comments EHSREC</b>
	Y	N/A	
<b>Volunteer information sheet</b>	y		
<b>Parent/carer information sheet</b>	Y		
<b>Volunteer informed consent form</b>	Y		
<b>Parent/Carer Informed Consent Form</b>	Y		
<b>Letter to school principal</b>	Y		
<b>Questionnaire</b>			
<b>Interview/survey questions/focus group script</b>	Y		
<b>Recruitment letter/email/poster</b>			
<b>Acceptance of UL child protection form</b>	Y		
<b>EHSREC or PESSREC Procedures</b>	Y		

<b>Section 12: Declaration</b>	
<b>Section 13: Appendices</b>	
<b>EHSREC Recommendations</b>	
<b>Approved</b>	

<b>Re-submit</b>	
<b>Minor changes – amend as necessary and resend to EHSREC</b>	<b>Y</b>
<b>Refused</b>	

<b>Notes</b>

## **Appendix B: Subject Information Letter for Gatekeeper**



**University of Limerick**  
**OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH**

### **School Principal Subject Information Letter**

Date:9/3/2018

**EHS Rec No : 2018\_02\_20\_EHS**

**Research Title:** An investigation into the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst second year students in a single sex post-primary school - implications for Guidance Counsellors

Dear Principal,

I am a student on the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr. Sancha Power. I am undertaking a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling as part of my studies.

In my research, I aim to investigate the topic of well-being and academic engagement. In order to gather this information, I would appreciate if you would give me consent to carry out the research study in your school.

This would involve me recruiting 36 student volunteers and conducting 3 focus groups involving 30-36 second year students in total. The volunteers will not be students that I

teach or assess in second year. The focus groups will be held in school. Student confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained throughout.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Focus group interviews will be audio tape recorded and the data will be destroyed after analysis according to UL guidelines. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to data analysis phase. 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. It is important to note that the school's name and the name of the individual participants will not be used in the research and the school will not be identifiable to anyone other than those directly involved.

If you have any queries or require any further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Valerie O’Gorman  
Power

Supervisor: Dr. Sancha

234297

Telephone number: 061-

UL Email address: [16063333@ul.ie](mailto:16063333@ul.ie)  
sancha.power@ul.ie

Email address:

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (**EHS Rec No : 2018\_02\_20\_EHS**).

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

**Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee**

**EHS Faculty Office**

**University of Limerick**

**Tel: (061) 234101**

**ehsresearchethics@ul.ie**

## Appendix C: Consent Form for Gatekeeper



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK  
**OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH**

### School Principal Consent Form

EHS Rec No : 2018\_02\_20\_EHS

**Research Title:** An investigation into the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst second year students in a single sex post-primary school - implications for Guidance Counsellors

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

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

I hereby give my consent for *Valerie O’Gorman* to carry out this research in St. Mary’s College Naas:

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

Printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

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

## **Appendix D: Letter of Information for Parent/Guardian**



**University of Limerick**  
**OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH**

***Parent or Carer or Guardian Subject Information Letter***

Date: 9/3/2018

**EHS Rec No : 2018\_02\_20\_EHS**

**Research Title:** An investigation into the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst second year students in a single sex post-primary school - implications for Guidance Counsellors

Dear Parent (*or Carer or Guardian*),

I am a student on the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr. Sancha Power. I am undertaking a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling as part of my guidance studies.

In my research, I aim to explore the topic of well-being and academic engagement. I am writing to you to enquire whether you would be willing to consent to your daughter taking part in a research study in St. Mary's College Naas through a student focus group with me. The focus group will take approximately 40 minutes and be audio-tape recorded. It should be noted that as focus groups are conducted within a group setting, each participant's contributions will be heard by the other participants within the group. However, each student will be asked to sign an agreement to keep all opinions expressed during the focus group interview private. The recordings will have

any names or identifiers removed, will be stored in a secure location or on a password protected computer in UL, and the information will be stored for seven years. It will then be safely destroyed.

Participation in this study is voluntary and students can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis phase. Should a student withdraw after a focus group has begun, their contribution will be removed.

If you have any queries or require any further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Valerie O’Gorman  
Power

Supervisor: Dr. Sancha

234297

Telephone number: 061-

UL Email address: [16063333@ul.ie](mailto:16063333@ul.ie)  
sancha.power@ul.ie

Email address:

If you are agreeable to your daughter participating in this research study please confirm your consent by completing the attached **Consent Form** and returning it by Monday, 26<sup>th</sup> February to me at St. Mary’s College Naas. A signed copy of this form must be received in advance of the day of the focus group in order for your daughter to participate.

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

**Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee**

**EHS Faculty Office**

**University of Limerick**

**Tel: (061) 234101**

**ehsresearchethics@ul.ie**

**Appendix E: Consent Form for Parent/ Guardian**



**University of Limerick**  
**OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH**

**Parent or Carer or Guardian Consent Form**

Date: 9/3/2018

**EHS Rec No : 2018\_02\_20\_EHS**

**Research Title:** An investigation into the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst second year students in a single sex post-primary school - implications for Guidance Counsellors

I have read the Subject Information Letter and understand in detail the particulars of the research study. I understand that the following conditions are designed to protect the privacy of all participants and to respect their contributions.

- (i) Participation is entirely voluntary. Even if I consent to my child taking part, she still has the right to refuse to take part.
- (ii) All participants are free to withdraw at any time in the process prior to data analysis of the focus group.
- (iii) The focus group data will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the research team. Contributions during the focus group, however, will be heard by all other participants in that focus group.
- (iv) While excerpts from the focus group data may be made part of the final research report, under no circumstances will any names of students or the school, nor any identifying characteristics be included in this report.

I hereby consent to my daughter taking part in this research study in the form of a focus group.

Parent/Guardian Name: .....

Students Name and Class:.....

Parent/Guardian

Signature:.....

Researcher's Signature.....Date:.....

## Appendix F: Student Subject Information Letter



University of Limerick  
**OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH**  
*Student Subject Information Letter*

Date: 9/3/2018

**EHS Rec No : 2018\_02\_20\_EHS**

**Research Title:** An investigation into the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst second year students in a single sex post-primary school - implications for Guidance Counsellors

Dear Student,

I am a student on the Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in the School of Education, University of Limerick. I am doing a study on a topic related to guidance counselling.

In my study, I hope to learn more about student well-being and learning. In order to gather information, I would like to ask you to volunteer to be in a student focus group. This is a small group made up of second year students only. In this group, you will discuss how happy you are in school and how well you think you are doing with classes and learning. These focus groups will be held in school and will be take about 40 minutes. They will be recorded for sound only (no video cameras), you will be able to hear what your fellow students say but I will not share what you say with anyone outside the focus group.

All information gathered will be private and confidential. Your name will not be used. You will be asked to sign an agreement to keep all opinions expressed during the focus group private. Participation in the study is voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any time before the recorded information is analysed. The results from this study will be reported in my university and may be shared with other professional groups but you will not be identifiable.

The information I collect will be stored in a safe location chosen by the University of Limerick.

If you have any questions or if you would like more information on the study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Valerie O’Gorman  
Power

Supervisor: Dr. Sancha

234297

Telephone number: 061-

UL Email address: [16063333@ul.ie](mailto:16063333@ul.ie)  
sancha.power@ul.ie

Email address:

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (**EHS Rec No : 2018\_02\_20\_EHS**). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

**Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee**

**EHS Faculty Office**

**University of Limerick**

**Tel: (061) 234101**

**[ehsresearchethics@ul.ie](mailto:ehsresearchethics@ul.ie)**

## Appendix G: Student Consent Form



University of Limerick  
**OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH**

*Student Consent Form*

**EHS Rec No : 2018\_02\_20\_EHS**

**Research Title:** An investigation into the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst second year students in a single sex post-primary school - implications for Guidance Counsellors

- I understand what this study is about and what the information will be used for.
- I am fully aware of what will happen, and the risks and the benefits of the study.
- I am fully aware that the recording of the focus group will be kept private and confidential.
- I am aware that my real name will not be used.
- I know that I am a volunteer and I can leave at any time before the information is analysed.

I agree to take part in this study:

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

Printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

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

## Appendix H: Student Focus Group Interview Questions



University of Limerick  
**OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH**

### Student Focus Group Script

Date:

**EHS Rec No : 2018\_02\_20\_EHS**

**Research Title: Well-being and Academic Engagement in a Post-Primary School**

Length of Focus Group- 40 minutes x 3 groups

#### **Opening:**

1. Tell me your name, your class and one thing you like doing when you're not in school.

#### **Introductory:**

2. Describe your experience of being a student in Second Year.

#### **Transition:**

3. Is Second Year different from First Year in school? If so, in what ways?
4. Are you as happy, confident and connected in Second Year as you were in First Year?
5. (may be answered above)
6. Are you **more engaged** or **less engaged** with learning in Second Year, do you think?

#### **Key Questions:**

7. What do you think influences your being either 'more engaged' or 'less engaged'?
8. What helps and what doesn't help?

#### **Ending Question:**

9. Do you think there is a strong link between your well-being and your engagement in learning in school?
10. Is there anything that the school guidance service could do to support you better in second year?

Thank you for your participation today.

## Appendix I: Guidance Counsellor Information Letter



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK  
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

### Guidance Counsellor Subject Information Letter

Date: 9/3/2018

**EHS Rec No : 2018\_02\_20\_EHS**

**Research Title:** An investigation into the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst second year students in a single sex post-primary school - implications for Guidance Counsellors

Dear Guidance Counsellor,

I am a student on the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr. Sancha Power. I am undertaking a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling as part of my guidance studies.

In my research, I aim to explore the topic of well-being and academic engagement. As a trainee-practitioner, I am interested in the links between student well-being and academic engagement amongst second year students. I am particularly interested in the mid-Junior Cycle year in school and how this is experienced by female students. Consequently, this research aims to gather the perspectives of both students and guidance counsellors with more than 5 years' experience of working in all-girls schools. It is hoped that this research may benefit schools, parents and the whole-school guidance service.

In order to gather the information on this topic, I am contacting Guidance Counsellors in the greater Dublin area (including Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow) to ask if you would agree to participate in a face to face audio-taped interview which will take approximately 1 hour and will be held in a neutral location agreeable to you. Alternatively, the interview can take place over skype or telephone if this is more convenient.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Focus group interviews will be audio tape recorded and the data will be destroyed after the analysis process. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to data analysis phase. 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. It is important to note that your name will not be used in the reporting of this research.

If you have any queries or require any further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Valerie O’Gorman

Supervisor: Dr. Sancha Power

Telephone number: 061-234297

UL Email address: [16063333@ul.ie](mailto:16063333@ul.ie)

Email address: [sancha.power@ul.ie](mailto:sancha.power@ul.ie)

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (**EHS Rec No : 2018\_02\_20\_EHS**). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

**Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee**

**EHS Faculty Office**

**University of Limerick**

**Tel: (061) 234101**

**[ehsresearchethics@ul.ie](mailto:ehsresearchethics@ul.ie)**

## Appendix J: Guidance Counsellor Consent



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK  
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

### Guidance Counsellor Consent Form

**EHS Rec No : 2018\_02\_20\_EHS**

**Research Title:** An investigation into the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst second year students in a single sex post-primary school - implications for Guidance Counsellors

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

I hereby agree to take part in this study:

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

Printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

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

## Appendix K: Guidance Counsellor Interview Questions



University of Limerick  
**OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH**

### Guidance Counsellors Interview Questions

Date: 9/3/2018

**EHS Rec No : 2018\_02\_20\_EHS**

**Research Title:** An investigation into the relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement amongst second year students in a single sex post-primary school - implications for Guidance Counsellors

**Length of Interview- 60 minutes**

Opening:

Experiences of working with second years

1. Tell me about your experiences of working with second year students?

Introductory:

2. How is second year different from other year groups that you work with?

Transition:

Service offered to second years

3. Could you give me a brief description of the second year students' experience of the guidance counselling service in this school?
4. How does the school's guidance counselling service currently support second year students with their:
  5. well-being
  6. academic engagement
  7. (specific factors identified from the focus groups, eg. exam stress, peer relationships, problems with social media, anxiety, etc)?

Well-being and academic engagement

8. How do you see well-being impacting second year students?

9. Do you think that many students level of academic engagement changes significantly in second year?
10. Why do you believe this is so?
11. Is there a link between a student's well-being and engagement in learning, in your opinion?
12. Are there other factors that need consideration?
13. What do you think a second year student would say about the link between well-being and academic engagement?
14. Do you think that current educational reforms (ie. Junior Cycle, increase in student responsibility and participation, CBAs, project work etc) are addressing the link between well-being, motivation, academic engagement and achievement?

#### Support for second year students

15. Does the school's guidance counselling service adequately support second year students?
16. How could the school's guidance counselling service better support these students?
17. Are there any changes to policy or current practices that could help second year students?

Thank you for your time and your participation.

## **Appendix L: Research Diary excerpt**

March 18<sup>th</sup>2018

The 3 guidance counsellors that have been selected are female. I did not anticipate a completely female set of participants. I'm now wondering about the possible impact of this on the study- gender bias as researcher is also female and interpreting through a female lens. Could some important aspects be missed? How do I make sure this does not happen?

March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2018

The three focus groups have now being conducted. I noted that girls in groups can tend to say things that are similar to their peers and then others are confident to give completely different responses. I could clearly see, from the focus groups, that each individual does 'speak for himself', as Kreuger points out.

I wonder what the focus groups would have been like if the participants were both male and female. There would perhaps have been a broader range of experiences and therefore, a broader range of insights to be gained.

I also think that girls in a mixed gender focus group could find it hard to discuss their real experiences in front of the boys.

I felt that the girls in the Focus Groups at the case study school were real and honest in their responses. Second year in that school is so big and the selection process was random sampling following consent forms and information letters, so much of the time, the students did not really know one another very well. There are almost 180 in second year so the 25 students came from all the different classes. There was no bunching of friends in groups and no one person dominated so I feel I got genuine heart-felt feedback from the students.

## Appendix M: Thematic Map

Focus Groups	Guidance Counsellors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress</li> <li>• Anxiety</li> <li>• <b>Junior Cycle workload</b>- CBAs, projects, continuous assessment</li> <li>• Lack of study skills</li> <li>• Friendship issues</li> <li>• Online world &amp; social media</li> <li>• Huge amounts of time spent online</li> <li>• Online dangers- overuse &amp; misuse</li> <li>• Cyberbullying</li> <li>• Online addiction</li> <li>• Impact on emotional well-being</li> <li>• Disturbed sleep patterns</li> <li>• Lack of concentration</li> <li>• Difficulty focusing in class</li> <li>• Poor performance</li> <li>• Study/ homework not being done</li> <li>• Combination of factors leading to gradual process of disengagement</li> <li>• Disinterest, lack of focus</li> <li>• Feeling overwhelmed by problems-workload, online issue, friendship problems, exam stress, worry about not doing well, comparing themselves with others</li> <li>• Impact on self-esteem, confidence</li> <li>• Consequences for face to face communication</li> <li>• Poor social skills</li> <li>• Poor <b> coping skills</b>, ‘can’t cope’, resilience?</li> <li>• Giving up because I can’t keep up</li> <li>• Feeling lost in second year</li> <li>• Feeling under-supported in comparison with first year</li> <li>• Feeling <b>scared</b>, alone</li> <li>• GC service unavailable, unknown, hidden, lack of access and awareness</li> <li>• Crying out for more support</li> <li>• Desire for targeted support for second year students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant increase in students reporting <b>stress, anxiety</b> in second year</li> <li>• More referrals from Yr Heads etc re: exam stress, fear of school, worry about <b>homework and study</b></li> <li>• Low self-efficacy/self-confidence</li> <li>• <b>Friendship issues</b> very common during second year</li> <li>• Importance of identifying with a group and belonging</li> <li>• Problems with socialising online so much, <b>poor social skills</b> when communicating face to face</li> <li>• Need for affirmation from social media, impact on <b>self-esteem</b></li> <li>• <b>Constant comparison</b> with others, body issues</li> <li>• Feeling one has to always be available to friends online, even at night</li> <li>• Unhealthy communications online</li> <li>• Challenges of the digital age</li> <li>• Lack of time for second years</li> <li>• Senior cycle students take up most of GC time</li> <li>• Noticeable changes in students in second year: interest in school, motivation, overall happiness.</li> <li>• Behaviour issues in second year often stem from being unhappy in school, friendship issues and <b>inability to cope with academic demands</b></li> <li>• <b>Mentoring &amp; Student Support Teams</b> seen as very beneficial to second year students</li> <li>• Need for more time to devote to this year group, critical stage of development and difficulty repairing damage caused work ethic if thrown off course during second year.</li> <li>• Practices differ hugely amongst the 3 GC’s schools</li> <li>• Too early to tell if Jr Cycle and ongoing assessment is good for girls</li> <li>• Importance of Wellbeing as a school subject and the opportunities it affords to schools.</li> </ul>

## **Appendix N: Initial Themes from Thematic Map**

Main themes that emerged from both the Focus Group and Semi-structured Interviews:

### **Student stress & distress (well-being of second years)**

Stress, anxiety, worry, fear.... related to workload in second year, CBAs, on-going assessment, change in difficulty level from first year, more challenging, teachers have higher expectations in second year. Jr Cycle is so very new, teachers are also stressed about it, perhaps transference to students?

### **Friendship issues & bullying**

Friendship issues and social media are huge in second year. Huge impact of emotional wellbeing and academic engagement. Bullying is prevalent in second year, Long-term negative impact.

### **Early adolescent female coping strategies**

Internalising. Girls' coping strategies personally, socially, emotionally and academically are uniquely female. They can be very hard on themselves, they ruminate a lot, they want to connect to others socially even if this means being awake all night so as not to break a streak.

### **Motivation & enthusiasm (academic engagement of second years)**

Motivation amongst second year students- Interest, enthusiasm and diligence can wane in second year. Impact of educational reforms such as Junior cycle, key skills, principles, importance of 'wellbeing' (as important as core subjects on school curriculum).

### **Other key points:**

- The relationship between emotional well-being and academic engagement
- Guidance Counsellor workload, under-resourcing, not enough to go around for 2<sup>nd</sup> yr students can
- 'more can be done for second year students'

- Some support is there. In some cases, it is good, in others it is inadequate. It is context dependent and depends on staff buy-in with regard to junior cycle and wellbeing. It is the remit of all not just a few.

Much of GCs time is taken up with 6<sup>th</sup> years re CAO, UCAS, career decision-making, 3<sup>rd</sup> years re study skills, goal setting, subject choice, decision-making, 1<sup>st</sup> years re transition to secondary school, TYs have the challenges of TY and 5<sup>th</sup> years have first year of senior cycle, adjusting, target setting, subjects/levels, career choice.

2<sup>nd</sup> years are often not a priority, the intermediary years, the forgotten year. It can be wrongly assumed that they know the ropes and can just get on with it.

They have a huge amount going on: puberty, hormonal changes, development of identity, sense of self, friendship, peer relations, teachers, social media, parents, pressure to do well in school, fear of not doing well, extra-curricular, Netflix, sports, mobile phones, appearance, self- confidence, self-esteem, school exams, stress, pressure, worry.

**Mentoring is seen as a good solution by students in second year and GCs.**

**Peer mentoring between 5<sup>th</sup> yr/ TY student and 2<sup>nd</sup> yr student with regard to social, personal, academic.** Low key and informal. Referral made for a one to one appointment with a GC if an issue arises that needs further support.

NB. Context, school ethos and personnel certainly matter. Some schools are doing amazing things for Wellbeing and extremely efficiently!

## **Appendix O: Mentoring Programme**

### **School Policy on Mentoring**

The school's mentoring programme is designed to support all students in the school.

Teacher mentors are assigned 10-20 students each academic year. At the start of each academic year, Teacher-mentors receive a pack with the list of the assigned students and instructions on how to undertake a mentoring meeting. Sample questions and probes are available in the Teacher mentor pack. All mentoring documentation must be returned to the school office after mentoring meetings have taken place.

Teacher-mentors meet the assigned students a minimum of twice per school year. The mentoring meetings are positive, polite and pastoral; supporting the individual social, personal and academic needs of the students. Each mentoring meeting will last no more than 10 minutes.

During the meetings, it is important to aim to build a rapport with the student. Mentors may provide some basic support or guidance to the student if requested by the student. If any issues arise, Teacher-mentors will pass these on to Tutor, Year Head, or Guidance Counsellor as appropriate. The mentoring meetings should be friendly and supportive for students.

It has been in place for over 3 years and to date, it has proven to be both a beneficial experience for students and a rewarding one for teachers.

We would like to thank all teachers who volunteer to participate in School Mentoring.

## **Appendix P: The Cairdeas programme**

The Cairdeas programme is a peer mentoring programme involving 5<sup>th</sup> year students mentoring 2<sup>nd</sup> year students. This mentoring programme is well-designed and has been in existence for over 10 years in the case study school. Each base class group in second year is assigned 2 fifth year students who are their mentors for the year. The Cairdeas students attend a 3-day training session in August prior to the start of the academic school year. They are trained to deal with all social, personal and school issue that arise for second year students.

The Cairdeas team and the Cairdeas co-ordinator design a calendar of social events for second year students, to include a cinema trip, a table quiz and a disco.

The Cairdeas leaders have lunch with their base class group once a week (on Thursdays) and this is a time where second year students can get to know their Cairdeas leaders, build a rapport with them, and avail of peer advice and support if needed.

Any specific issues which may arise are brought firstly to the Cairdeas Co-ordinator and if deemed serious, to the Year Head or Guidance Counsellor.