

**DBS SCHOOL OF ARTS**

**NAME: MARION EGAN**

**A Qualitative Exploration of the Role of the Career  
Guidance Counsellor from a Psychotherapeutic Perspective.**

**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements of the BA  
Counselling and Psychotherapy**

**Supervisor: Mary Bartley**

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# Abstract

The provision of guidance counselling in post primary schools is an essential element of the school programme, which has faced increasing challenges in recent times in Ireland. The purpose of this research project was to gain a deeper understanding of the role of guidance counsellors in post primary schools in Dublin. It explored the dual aspect of their role within the school environment, providing an insight into the requirements to provide career/guidance counselling and personal/therapeutic counselling as part of the school guidance programme, in addition to the guidance counsellor's role in classroom teaching. It also explored the impact of cutbacks in Budget 2011 on the guidance counsellor's role, the additional stress this has placed on them and how students are referred to them for therapeutic counselling. It also explored how students are referred onwards for further therapeutic counselling. A sample group of five guidance counsellors were interviewed using semi-structured qualitative interviewing procedures and the data was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings of this research revealed that guidance counsellors have been impacted significantly by cutbacks in Budget 2011 with a reduced allocation of guidance hours and an increased demand from students requiring support and therapeutic counselling. This study also found that guidance counsellors are all working well in excess of their allocated hours to meet the demands on their time, which has impacted on the amount of stress they are under. The findings also revealed the challenges in providing therapeutic counselling to students in a school environment. The findings further revealed that while some guidance counsellors feel very supported in their roles, a number of guidance counsellors feel isolated in their jobs and that the amount of supervision being provided to guidance counsellors is less than that required by the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Rationale

Adolescence is a period of transition in a child's life where many changes occur in a relatively short number of years. These changes have always been a challenge to navigate but it has been never more difficult than in recent years. Ireland in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a difficult place to go through the difficulties of puberty and teen years with the relatively new phenomenon of social media, the boom of the Celtic Tiger and the bust of the banking crisis with. Smith & Cowie (1991) note that in addition to the biological changes and transition, one of the key transitions during adolescence is the change for the child from being parent oriented to peer oriented. Parents have a central role in helping their children through these years but as teens yearn to identify themselves independently from their parents, schools feature more prominently in guiding adolescents from childhood to adulthood. Elkind (1967) notes that adolescents become obsessed with their own feelings, their own self-consciousness and believe that their own actions are very important in the eyes of others. This research proposal will explore how post primary schools and in particular guidance counsellors provide support to students during these years of change and transition and what challenges they face in doing so.

In providing support to students, counselling is recognised as a key part of the school guidance programme to help students through the developmental learning process and in moments of personal crisis (Department of Education and Science, 2005) .The school guidance counsellor is tasked with delivering the school guidance programme within a whole school framework. This research will seek to understand the

challenges faced on a daily basis by guidance counsellors working within an education system subject to severe cutbacks in recent years. It will explore how the challenges of “providing meaningful support for students experiencing emotional difficulties or who are the victims of bullying” (Russell, 2014) can be met in reality.

The need for guidance counsellors is evident given the stress that students are under both at home and in school. Indeed the services of the guidance counsellor are “of critical importance for young people who are suffering increasing incidences of depression, self harm, neglect and anxiety regarding their families' economic circumstances” (Reilly, 2011). However they are facing challenges in allocated hours and this study will seek to explore how they meet that challenge.

While the number of studies on the role of the guidance counsellor continues to increase, there is limited research and literature available on the role of the guidance counsellor in Ireland. The majority of research has taken place in the United Kingdom, and of those studies very few examine the effects that the guidance counsellor has on the therapeutic relationship with the majority of studies focussing on the career guidance aspect of the role. Research on how guidance counsellors work as therapists and within a therapeutic relationship in Ireland has until now remained nonexistent. It was this lack of research, which prompted the following research which investigates how guidance.

## **1.2 Aim & Objectives**

The aim of this study is to explore the impact of the role of the guidance counsellors in post primary schools from a psychotherapeutic perspective. The results will be

analysed to determine what guidance will also be analysed to understand the support provided by guidance counsellors to students in post primary schools. The results and existing literature will also be used to acquire an insight into the challenges for the guidance counsellor in providing this support. It will analyse and explore the impact on the guidance counsellor in providing care and therapeutic support to students, along with an analysis of how the current economic climate and specifically the cutback in education grants has impacted on guidance counsellors. It will explore what guidance counsellors understand their role in schools to be.

The researcher will augment the limited existing body of research in this area. The research carried out may be used for further studies in this area, in order to identify gaps in training, gaps in understanding of the guidance counselling role, which may help provide the opportunity for future guidance counsellors to work in a different way. This research aims to provide a deeper insight into the experience of guidance counsellors working in post primary schools and the long-reaching effects that this can have on these individuals outside of the school gates. It highlights the need for a greater awareness of the challenges facing guidance counsellors working within the current education framework. It emphasises the benefits of psychotherapeutic interventions for students as they reach early adulthood and begin to navigate the challenge of romantic relationships, changing friendships, stress of study and planning for their long term futures. It further emphasises how the interventions of the guidance counsellors may help the students to develop an ability to cope with these challenges.

### **1.3 Focus of the Study**

The study focuses on the work environment and experiences of five individuals who work within the post primary school system. Through the use of semi-structured

qualitative interviews, it examines their experience within a number of themes which were guided by the existing literature on the subject. These themes included the challenges for the guidance counsellor working within the constraints of cutbacks in resources in the current economic environment, supports available to the guidance counsellors, how guidance counsellors use those supports and decide when students require specialised support gained by means of referral agencies, how these referral agencies are used and limitations of the role of the guidance counsellor within the psychotherapeutic perspective.

# **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

## **2.1 Background**

The role of the guidance counsellor in post primary schools in Ireland has evolved in response to society's and student needs over the years, from 1960's where the role focussed purely on career guidance, to 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland where guidance counselling involves providing therapeutic counselling and pastoral care to students in addition to career guidance. This review builds on the findings of the reports by O'Leary (1990) and by Hayes & Morgan (2011) detailing how the role of guidance counsellor has evolved in the Ireland beyond career counselling only, to include emotional support, crisis management, academic support and issues relating to the student and the family. It examines what is meant by guidance counselling and how guidance counsellors view their role in post primary schools. Recent cutbacks in education allowances, as announced in Budget 2011, have reduced the allocation of resource hours in school for guidance counsellors and Reilly (2011) noted the impact this has had on both guidance counsellors and students.

## **2.2 Development of Guidance Counselling**

This literature review starts with the report from O'Leary (1990), which outlines the development of guidance counselling in Irish schools. The report was published at a time of cutbacks in education and high unemployment for school leavers, similar to the current climate in Ireland. The report outlines the ambiguity about the role of the guidance counsellor within the school system by guidance counsellors themselves and other stakeholders such school management and Department of Education and

Science. It also outlines hopes for the future development of the role within the constraints of the economic climate of the time.

At the time of publication of the National Development Plan 2000-2006, Ireland was starting to find its place as an emerging economy in the first world. The report stated “the provision of guidance and counselling in second level schools is vital to enable each pupil to gain the maximum benefit from the education system”. Guidance counsellors do see the need for providing therapeutic counselling in schools, but there is a lack of clarity in how this should be provided. A referral system is available for referring pupils in distress or in need of specialist emotional support. Details of how this referral system is used were not examined.

Similarly, the Department of Education and Science in its 2005 report notes that counselling is a key part of the school guidance programme to help the developmental process and may be provided at times of crisis, on an individual basis or in groups. It further noted that while guidance counsellors are in the opinion of the department qualified to provide counselling and support to students but in cases where longer term counselling or psychotherapy might be required that such students should be referred to outside relevant agencies. It is not altogether clear what is meant by an outside relevant agency, nor is there any clarity on what is meant by longer term counselling.

The Competency Framework for Guidance Practitioners (2007) which envisages guidance as a lifelong guidance service, notes competency in counselling in terms of person centred therapy where skills such as reflecting, paraphrasing, active listening,

clarifying. It notes the duties of guidance counsellors in terms of group counselling and guidance, an ability to be self reflective, an ability to engage with supervision. It notes that guidance counsellors have sufficient skills to provide both individual and group counselling. The report does not clarify how a guidance counsellor will gain and maintain these skills, nor does it differentiate between the different skills and training required in individual and group counselling settings.

On the other hand, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors in its 2008 report on Whole School Guidance and Counselling questioned whether counselling could be provided within the school curriculum in any meaningful way. It noted that an effective guidance service could be established if proper resources were provided to facilitate this. The subsequent re-allocation of hours as announced in the 2011 Budget, which reduced time for guidance counsellors has impacted on this vision, and this researcher will clarify how this has impacted.

### **2.3 Evolvement of the Role of the Guidance Counsellor**

The Department of Education and Science in its 2009 report looking at Guidance in Second Level Schools based its report on 55 school inspection reports and notes that the provision of guidance was well balanced between therapeutic, social, educational and career guidance in most schools. It noted most schools have team support structures in place which include the guidance counsellor, special education co-ordinator, school chaplain and other key staff., with collaboration in most schools between these individuals. The report focuses on the support for students as part of a whole school programme, but it is not clear how this is delivered in practical terms.

Hayes & Morgan (2011) note that the Irish guidance counselling system is based on a compromise between the American system which focuses on therapeutic counselling and the European system which focuses on the narrower career guidance system. They surveyed and had a number of focus groups with guidance counsellors in a number of schools, with the overall proportion of schools in the survey found to be representative of schools nationally, ie, a balance between fee paying and non fee paying schools, with 25% Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS schools, in disadvantaged areas).

This survey found that 62% of guidance counsellors had taken further training specifically in relation to counselling, and 75% of those guidance counsellors found the course to be of some use. The details, length and any qualifications gained from these courses was not available.

In terms of the type of counselling given to students, person centred counselling was the most popular type of counselling (32%) with reality therapy the next most popular (26%) and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy the third most popular (16%), making up overall 74% of counselling types. 75% of guidance counsellors rated their competence and comfort quite highly. Of the types of problems discussed with students, family problems were discussed most (64%) with bullying next (35%), mood disturbance (33%), bereavement (27%) with issues such as sexual abuse (2%) and pregnancy (1%) featuring less frequently.

In terms of support for guidance counsellors in dealing with these issues, most guidance counsellors felt support from the school principal was sufficient (57%), and

from parents (62%). Support from supervision was noted as sufficient or more than needed in 71% of respondents, with overall support for a counselling service in the school perceived by respondents to be quite strong overall.

The overall amount of supervision sessions for 76% of respondents was 2 or less in the school term immediately preceding the focus groups. It is not clear how much therapeutic counselling is provided and whether the amount of supervision provided for guidance counsellors is within recommended guidelines from associations such as Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy or the Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy. The report does go on to conclude that counselling in schools may include therapeutic/personal, education and career/guidance counselling. School policies also differ on the number of guidance counsellors they have, what percentage of time is allocated to counselling and the emphasis placed on counselling.

Some guidance counsellors also mentioned the challenges of providing counselling within the school timetable, with difficulties involved in students having to miss class to attend counselling, with students in senior years more likely to present for counselling. The question arises whether it is felt that students over a certain age are ready and benefit more from counselling. One of the most interesting findings of the report is that guidance counselors and key stakeholders do not have a shared understanding of what their role involves. This lack of shared understanding between stakeholders and guidance counsellors includes areas such as how many times they saw students for counselling and what percentage of time they spent on therapeutic counselling, and the number of students they saw for therapeutic counselling.

Again, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (n.d.) in its report on The Role of the Guidance Counsellor notes that counselling is a central part of the role of the guidance counsellor. It emphasises the person centred requirements as espoused by Rogers (2004), of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard as being a requirement for guidance counsellors, along with the use of summarizing, paraphrasing, mirroring. The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (2012) report on the Future Role of the Guidance Counsellor in response to Budget 2011 notes that the removal of ex-quoted allocated hours in respect of guidance counsellors will have a significant negative impact on young people, given the stability that is provided within the school structure and the central role of the guidance counsellor in providing this stability.

#### **2.4 Support for Guidance Counsellors**

In its 2009 report, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors report on the code of ethics for supervisors notes that the culture and ethos in the school has a significant impact on the counselling relationship. It also notes difficulties in how the guidance counsellor manages to balance the confidentiality of the student while maintaining structures integral to the functioning of the school. It is noted that Department of Education and Science funds 4/5 supervision hours per school year, the training and support being given to supervisors is not clear.

The amount of support from professional bodies such as Department of Education and Science, National Centre for Guidance in Education and the National Educational Psychological Services was found to be less than sufficient however, according to

Hayes and Morgan (2011). The National Educational Psychological Services, the student's General Practitioner, or Social Services were the referral agencies most commonly used by guidance counsellors interviewed for the report. However, the study found there was no shared understanding between guidance counsellors of when a student might be referred on for specialised or long term counselling.

Their study also examined stress experienced by guidance counsellors, with the survey finding the single biggest source of stress to be the dual role of classroom teacher and guidance counsellor. While guidance counsellors in the Hayes and Morgan (2011) report found that support from school management was often perceived to be quite strong and that support from supervision was also seen as positive.

The main professional bodies for therapists, the Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy and the Irish Association of Guidance Counsellors have codes of ethics which give some guidance on supervision requirements. The Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy note that supervision for therapists should be in proportion to the volume of psychotherapy work undertaken. (Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy, n.d.). On the other hand the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy are more explicit in terms of their supervision requirements which stipulate that qualified counsellors should complete one supervision hour for each twenty hours of therapeutic therapy provided (Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, n.d)

In terms of support available to guidance counsellors, the Memorandum of Understanding 2012 from the Institute of Guidance Counsellors outlines the role of the supervisor and the fact that supervision takes place in groups and is available 4/5 times over the year with any additional supervision being provided at the expense of the guidance counsellor. Given the risk of vicarious trauma for the guidance counsellor, further research will be necessary to explore the adequacy of supervision and support currently provided for guidance counsellors.

## **2.5 Guidance Counselling in the United Kingdom**

Because of our proximity to Great Britain and in particular England, we have often in the past been able to use the experiences of the bigger country to our advantage in tailoring their systems to our needs. Because the English education system has a heavy emphasis on career guidance as opposed to counselling support, counselling support is more commonly available outside the education system.

A British based charity; Place2Be is now offering counselling support in some British schools, for children up to age fourteen. This is done in partnership with the schools and relies on donations from the public along with volunteer counsellors and trainee counsellors to provide counselling in schools, recognising the need for support for children in schools. The charity notes that on average there are three children in every classroom with a diagnosable mental health disorder. It sees a need for early intervention in children with behavioural and emotional to reduce the difficulties children will face later. The charity provides counselling services on an integrative basis, relying on a range of therapeutic perspectives. The school must apply to join the initiative.

Support is also provided to parents, grandparents and carers, recognising that children cannot live in isolation from either school or home and the need for an integrated approach in providing counselling and therapeutic support to children. It is noted in British Association Of Counselling and Psychotherapy report (2013) that second level schools in Northern Ireland and Wales do now need to provide access to counselling services, with the need for counselling for second level pupils being accessed by 70,000-90,000 students per year. The demand for counselling is not diminishing, in fact it is increasing, but the structures and how this might be delivered to students in Britain remains unclear.

## **2.6 Budgetary Changes and their Impact on Guidance Counsellors**

The Department of Education and Science in its 2012 circular issued in response to budgetary cutbacks in guidance hours in schools notes that schools have autonomy to allocate and manage staff for the provision of guidance to students. The National Centre for Guidance in Education report (2012) in response to the Department of Education and Science circular, notes that good guidance is holistic and should not be separated into its constituent parts such as therapeutic guidance, vocational and education guidance, while noting in larger schools where there is more than one guidance counsellor this may actually be the case. It notes that guidance should be part of whole school activity, involving many areas of teaching staff and that guidance can take place in the classroom setting. While schools need to ensure guidance counsellors allocate sufficient 1:1 time for students in difficulty or crisis, schools also need to ensure the needs of the overall student body are balanced against the needs of the individual student. The suggestion of guidance being taught as part of the Social,

Personal, Health Education (SPHE) programme in schools is also raised. The implications of this from a practical stance is not yet examined.

However, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors in its 2012 report stated that the changes made to the allocation of guidance hours in Budget 2011 is likely to have a major negative impact for students requiring this service and questioned whether the cut in resources would put the provision of counselling to students in jeopardy. The report notes that some schools will cease to have guidance counsellors and that the provision of guidance counsellors in schools may move to provision of a service on a fee or paid for basis making the provision of guidance counselling and all of its components only available to those who can afford it. How these changes to allocations are now impacting on schools is unclear and further research in this area will help to clarify the impact on guidance counsellors and students.

## **2.7 Current Study**

The research to date indicates that guidance counsellors are not clear on what their role is in relation to therapeutic counselling, this research will seek to establish if this is this because it has not been defined enough, and if so, whose responsibility is it to define their role. In undertaking further research in this area, this researcher will seek to clarify if there is a frustration on the different understanding of the role of the guidance counsellor between stakeholders.

Research to date has not addressed the limitations of therapeutic work in a school environment. In addition, most recent reports have focussed on economic changes that have impacted on changes to allocations for guidance counsellors. Further research

should include how this has impacted on practical terms on the provision of guidance counselling in schools. In addition, it is clear that guidance counsellors are expected to provide counselling in both individual and group settings. It is not clear how practical this is and how often counselling is given in a group setting. Further research could help to clarify this.

In relation to the referral system, it is unclear to what extent this is used by individual guidance counsellors. There is a need for further study on the role of referral and how and when a referral service is used and how often, how available it is and how a guidance counsellor would access the most appropriate referral service. The use of supervision, it is suggested, is somewhat sporadic. Further research could seek to understand the use of supervision by guidance counsellors, including the frequency of attendance at supervision and how useful this is.

# Chapter 3: Research Methodology

## 3.1 Research Strategy

The objective of this study is to explore the experiences and views of guidance counsellors in the post primary school environment. This section details the research methodology applied to this project. Due to the lack of research into the psychotherapeutic role of the guidance counsellor in Ireland, this research sought to explore what guidance counsellors understood their role to be from a psychotherapeutic perspective and how they fulfilled this role within the constraints of cutbacks in education allowances in recent years. The aims of this research were best met by a research strategy within the qualitative paradigm, which focussed on the qualities and characteristics of the data (Howitt & Cramer, 2011).

Qualitative research seeks to build theory by using individual who have personal experience. Qualitative research requires a small sample group that is purposively selected because of the compatibility of their experiences to the research topic (McLeod, 2001). Qualitative research is appropriate for the research topic as it has an emphasis on individual meaning and experience with open-ended data, which can then be interpreted. The qualitative approach, can “produce unexpected insights about human nature through an open-ended approach” according to (Landridge 2004, p. 15). The form of research is flexible and aims to capture the essence of the experience of the participant through qualitative data collection methods.

McLeod (2008) also states that this form of qualitative research interview can be a positive experience for the researcher, which was the case for this researcher who gained a richer understanding of the day-to-day role of a guidance counsellor.

### **3.2 Research Sample**

The research took the form of semi-structured, informal interviews. Questions were open ended in order to encourage depth and quality of data. A set of guide interview questions were drawn up and given to participants. Five participants, who are currently working as guidance counsellors within the post primary school system were selected. Their relevant, compatible experience allowed them to talk in detail about the topic. Participants were contacted via a post primary school teacher known to the researcher personally with a request to participate in the study. Names and contact details of these individual were, with their consent, given to the researcher. The researcher was mindful of the pressure on teachers and guidance counsellors in the current economic climate, where allocation of guidance hours has been curtailed in recent budgets and of the time constraints involved in the participant's daily schedules. The researcher was also aware that participants might have felt an implicit criticism where questions may highlight gaps in their ability to met requirements to fulfil their role and the researcher was mindful of not adding to this pressure on participants in conducting these interviews.

### **3.3 Research Design**

This study is based on qualitative in-depth interviews with guidance counsellors in a number of schools in Dublin, in different socio-economic areas with the aim of getting as broad an understanding as possible of how guidance counsellors work within the school system and whether there are differences between schools in terms of policy in the provision of guidance counselling and whether any differences are due

to socio-economic factors only in catering to the different requirements of students in different socio-economic areas.

### **3.4 Data Collection – Semi Structured Interviewing**

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used in this research as it was felt to be the best way to gain detailed descriptions of participants' experiences. The research questions were designed to allow consistent information across participants to be collected, providing a framework to gather a depth of detail required for thematic analysis. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and covered amongst other information the following topics:

- Background information
- The nature of the participants' job and role as they understand it
- The participants understanding of their role in providing psychotherapeutic support to students
- Support and training provided to participants in order to fulfil their role, including the use of supervision support
- How participants decide on the priority given to students at any given time in the academic year
- The impact, if any, on the participant in providing support to students
- The impact of recent budget cutbacks on the participants' ability to fulfil the requirements of their role
- What qualifications and further training, if any, are required to do the job better

A full list of questions is contained in Appendix A.

### **3.5 Data Analysis – Thematic Analysis**

The data was analysed under thematic headings to identify, analyse and report themes within the data, e.g. policies within schools, training and support provided to guidance counsellors, the impact of the role on the guidance counsellor, economic cutbacks and their impact. Because qualitative data can be diverse, thematic analysis can be viewed as the foundation method for review of the information and data contained therein (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each data item was given equal attention. Themes or patterns were identified in a theoretical or top down way. The data was then coded in a meaningful and systematic way, which helped to identify features within the data that are of most significance and interest. Coding also helped to identify themes and patterns within the data of most relevance to the research topic. Once themes were identified, they were then reviewed, refined and defined.

### **3.6 Data Recording and Transcription**

The interviews were recorded using a hand-held digital voice records. The recordings were then transcribed by the researcher. Any identifying information was obscured in the transcription to protect the confidentiality of the individuals. The transcripts were read several times in their entirety following the transcription process before data analysis commenced.

### **3.7 Confidentiality**

Utmost due diligence with regards to anonymity of all participants was guaranteed prior to commencement of the interviews. Interviews were conducted in a variety of locations where privacy could be ensured. During the transcription process, interviews were coded by number and all names or otherwise identifying data was obscured.

Pseudonyms were used in the presentation of the results in this study. Confidentiality for participants is ensured by protecting their identities, with pseudonyms being used on all documents. This was done in a manner that will not influence the meanings within the data content in any way. The researcher will prevent data from being released or published which would permit identification of participants. All data will be held on the researcher's password protected personal computer with a password known only to the researcher.

### **3.8 Ethical Issues**

Participants were provided with information regarding the topic of the research, the features of its design, the possible risks and benefits from participation in the research and their rights as research participants. These rights included the voluntary nature of the study, their right to choose what to disclose during the interview as well as the right to withdraw from the study. These points were outlined in a written document which was emailed to participants prior to the interviews along with an invitation for them to raise any queries regarding the research itself or the document. The document that was emailed to participants is contained in Appendix B. The accompanying email is contained in Appendix C.

The role of the researcher in this qualitative study needed to be considered and reflected on. According to Banister et al. (1994) it is important to consider the potential impact of the interviewer throughout the research process particularly on the interviews themselves. Participants were then briefed in greater detail about the nature of the research, as well as the purpose and procedure of the interview, prior to the interview. The participants were advised in the introduction email that they could

contact the researcher on the number and email address provided if they felt they had any concerns or questions relating to the survey. All responses were used and reflected equally in the study.

# CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline the results of interviews that were conducted with five guidance counsellors in Dublin schools in relation to their experience of dealing with students, allocating their time between their various functions, their own coping strategies and their perception of support services available. The findings are explored through a range of themes, each with sub themes and substantiated by quotations from the participants. The interviewees are referred to as G1 – guidance counsellor 1, G2 – guidance counsellor 2, and so on.

## 4.2 Impact of Budgetary Changes

All of the guidance counsellors interviewed talked of the allocated hours within the school system for the provision of therapeutic support and how the actual amount of therapeutic hours given to students was far in excess of this on a weekly basis. G2 said “last week I spent 10.5 hours on therapeutic counselling. I’ve got 4 hours allocated on my timetable”. G1 told of how he works full time while being allocated to work 22 hours. G3 mentioned that she worked far in excess of her allocated hours on a weekly basis.

All guidance counsellors interviewed are required to combine their role as a guidance counsellor with other roles within the school. The allocation to guidance counselling (or career counselling) hours in four cases where counsellors combine guidance counselling with therapeutic (or personal) counselling was far greater than the allocation to therapeutic counselling hours, while one guidance counsellor had a ratio

of half guidance counselling hours and half therapeutic counselling hours. All guidance counsellors noted the reduced provision of hours and a definite increase in the need for more support for students.

#### **4.2.1 Increased Pressure on Guidance Counsellors**

All of the guidance counsellors mentioned the pressure they are now working under which they perceive to be greater than recent times. G1 told of how he has noticed “there are far less resources and there is increased pressure”. G2 stated that “we are simply not meeting the counselling needs of our students”. All mentioned the fear of missing a vulnerable student, as G5 noted “with potentially catastrophic results”. G3 mentioned the fact that quieter students tend not to be active in seeking support and being mindful of keeping a watchful eye where a student might be reluctant to seek support. G4 stated “one of the real stressors for me is an acute event with a student and I then have to leave and take another class”.

#### **4.2.2 School holidays**

A number of guidance counsellors mentioned the long school holidays, with schools closed for a number of weeks at Christmas, Easter, midterm breaks and for three months during the summer holidays. G1 mentioned always being aware of the school holidays and being mindful of working with vulnerable students coming up to a long break. G3 and G5 both mentioned being mindful to refer students in need of support coming up to holiday time. There was a sense of working to timelines and within the constraints of the school calendar. G4 noted “the need for support during the school holidays is an important element of our duty of care”.

### **4.3 Supervision**

The guidance counsellors all mentioned that they are scheduled to attend 5-6 supervision sessions over course of the school year, this equates to a session approximately every 6 weeks. Some mentioned that scheduled sessions were missed due to parent teacher meetings now taking place within school hours due to Budgetary changes in relation to teaching requirements. There was a sense of good support from supervisors, this was a theme common to all. G5 mentioned “my supervisor is the only person who really understands what I am listening to each day”

#### **4.3.1 Support for Guidance Counsellors**

The key support that guidance counsellors feel is available to them is in relation to supervision and meeting with their supervisor on a regular basis. This is facilitated by each school within school hours. In addition, some feel that they can refer to colleagues within the school system for support outside of supervision, however a number commented on needing further support. G1 mentioned “You always feel you could do with further support”. Two guidance counsellors felt that they have good peer support from colleagues. Another guidance counsellor noted that they would prefer to be able to check in more regularly with their supervisor in relation to their work and in particular their problem cases, but that there is no agreed mechanism for doing so.

#### **4.3.2 Isolation**

A common theme was the feeling of isolation felt by guidance counsellors, especially in dealing with high stake situations. G2 mentioned “I often feel isolated, I deal with high stake situations (such as self harm or suicidal thoughts) in a rushed, cramped and pressurised situation”. Another guidance counsellor mentioned that they believed their

supervisor was the only person who understood what they were dealing with on a daily basis. A common theme amongst all guidance counsellors was the fact that due to the confidential nature of their job they are required to make decisions quickly and often on their own without support from colleagues or their supervisor and this added to the pressure guidance counsellors feel on a daily basis.

#### **4.4 Provision of Counselling**

The amount of therapeutic counselling sessions provided to students varied amongst the guidance counsellors interviewed. Some guidance counsellors provided both short term counselling to deal with issues such as stress, but would also provide longer term therapeutic counselling that would carry on from year to year and deal with issues such as self esteem, family issues. Other guidance counsellors would routinely refer on to an outside agency after seeing a student for six sessions and do not provide longer term counselling at all.

A number of guidance counsellors do facilitate group counselling while others noted they never use this method of counselling. One guidance counsellor noted they use it in relation to specific issues only, such as bullying where it might be appropriate to facilitate it in a group or even in a classroom. Another guidance counsellor noted they are using it more frequently now, not out of choice but out of necessity in trying to work within current constraints. G2 noted he uses use it from time to time while noting it is “difficult and not hugely suitable”. One guidance counsellor noted that he sometimes sees students in pairs if he feels that they are friends dealing with similar difficulties which he has found to work effectively but this can only be used where he feels that the combination of students will work well together. Another guidance

counsellor noted that he only ever conducts group counselling in a psycho-educational way to cover topics such as stress management, bereavement, and substance misuse.

#### **4.4.1 Facilities for Counselling**

All of the guidance counsellors noted that the school environment had to be an appropriate setting for provision of therapeutic counselling, whilst noting that the office used must be laid out correctly and that students would not be collected, it would be up to the student to attend the guidance counsellors office so that other students are unaware that the student is attending for counselling. G4 commented that “the ethos of the school is crucial in providing an appropriate therapeutic setting”. Guidance counsellors noted that therapeutic counselling sessions are typically forty minutes or the length of a class and containment of issues where a student has then to return to their own class after a forty minute therapeutic session is finished, is a challenge. Some of the participants mentioned the importance of maintaining boundaries with students and the difficulty of providing therapeutic counselling to a student that they might also be teaching within the classroom setting as part of their dual role as guidance counsellor and teacher.

It was noted by all guidance counsellors who took part in the research that facilities for conducting group counselling were limited and were often confined to a classroom out of necessity, even though this was felt not to be the most appropriate setting for conducting group counselling. Guidance counsellors however feel that they have no choice but to use the facilities provided because they are limited to the school setting for the provision of therapeutic counselling and group counselling services.

## **4.5 Referral**

Where required guidance counsellors can refer students on for further specialised or long term counselling, depending on the presenting issue. In some cases referrals are made by guidance counsellors where there is a perceived need for family support as well as support for the student. Referral is used on a routine basis by all guidance counsellors interviewed in the study. One mentioned referring students on in approximately one out of every four students seen, while others noted they referred students on after meeting with them for six sessions, another guidance counsellor noted they would refer onwards almost on a daily basis, whilst another guidance counsellor mentioned that they would refer approximately 50% of their students onwards. There are no guidelines as to when students are referred on and it appears to be totally within the guidance counsellor's discretion as to when a referral might take place.

### **4.5.1 Referral Agencies**

It was noted by a number of guidance counsellors that agency waiting lists have increased significantly in the last number of years and that guidelines for operation within agencies change quite frequently, whether it be restrictions in dealing with students or waiting list times. All guidance counsellors felt that they needed to get students requiring referral into the referral system as soon as possible, while being mindful of approaching holidays and as G3 noted the “we have to be mindful of the welfare and well being of the most vulnerable children over the break”. One guidance counsellor noted that changes were frequently made to referral agency details such as addresses, phone numbers, waiting list times and restrictions such as no students over age 16. This guidance counsellor noted the need for guidance counsellors to keep up

to date with all of these changes to liaise with the referral agencies and that this is another task to be completed in the process of referring students onwards for specialised counselling.

A number of guidance counsellors stated that sometimes referrals might be made on a pre-emptive basis, where waiting lists were known to be long, often in excess of six months, as guidance counsellors are mindful to have students' names on waiting lists at the earliest possible opportunity. Guidance counsellors are also mindful of getting students onto waiting lists where holidays are approaching and there is a possibility of a student requiring ongoing support over the holiday period.

Another guidance counsellor noted her concern that some referral agencies were keen to discharge students to keep waiting lists down. To counteract this, the guidance counsellor followed up with parents to ensure that the student concerned attended for appointments with the relevant agencies so that early discharge is not achieved. Also, if parents do not accompany a child to the appointment, or the appointment is missed, the child can be discharged by the agency.

A number of the guidance counsellors noted that there is a significant amount of paperwork required to refer a student on for specialised support or counselling and that this paperwork, liaising with the referral agencies, "keeping an eye on how things are going" requires a significant amount of time which has to be done outside of their allocated hours on a weekly basis and thereby adding to their workload. One guidance counsellor noted the need for schools to link in with the wider community in

terms of ensuring that good relationships are maintained with referral agencies so that schools and agencies are familiar with how each other operate.

#### **4.5.2 Referrals to Guidance Counsellor**

All guidance counsellors noted that referrals for therapeutic counselling come from multiple sources. Parents can refer children for counselling, but the bulk of referrals are made by colleagues within the school system, from the principal, deputy principal, year-heads, tutors and teachers. Students can also self refer for counselling. G4 noted that “we are sometimes the first port of call for students where home mightn’t be very supportive”. It was noted as a concern by a number of guidance counsellors however that quieter children who may be in need of counselling can be reluctant to self refer and therefore these guidance counsellors, along with their colleagues, would keep a watchful eye for students that may be in need of therapeutic counselling but who would be reluctant to self refer.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

## **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter will review the findings of this research into guidance counsellors experience of the provision of personal or therapeutic support to students in post primary schools, the coping strategies employed by them and also explore their attitudes to support provided to them in carrying out their roles. It will review findings in relation to how the recent changes in Budget 2011 has impacted on guidance counsellors, their use of referral agencies for ongoing therapeutic support for students, and how guidance counsellors provide therapeutic counselling and group counselling. The findings will be discussed and compared with the available literature.

## **5.2 Impact of Budgetary Changes on Guidance Counsellors and Students**

As noted in the Department of Education and Science circular of 2012, schools have autonomy to allocate guidance and therapeutic counsellors hours and all guidance counsellors interviewed had a different allocation of guidance and therapeutic counselling hours. It is evident that all the guidance counsellors who participated in this research are working beyond their allocated hours to try to deal with the challenges of what is presented to them. In some cases they are working three times longer than their allocated hours on a weekly basis. This is in accordance with the 2012 report of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors which noted that the changes to allocation of guidance hours was likely to have a major negative impact for students. Guidance counsellors are trying to meet the increased demand for therapeutic counselling out of a reduced allocation of hours in order to ensure that students do not

bear the brunt of the cutback. The question is then raised whether it is in fact guidance counsellors rather than students who are instead bearing the brunt of the cutbacks in trying to ensure they maintain a service for students who are in crisis.

Guidance counsellors noted that recent budgets have had a dual impact as an increase in financial pressures at home has resulted in an increase in the number of students requiring support in school, as also noted by Reilly (2011), where guidance counsellors are struggling to deal with increased demand and lower hours allocation.

Another area which has been impacted by the budgetary changes which is having a knock on effect is the provision of specialised counselling provided by a number of the referral agencies where it was noted by guidance counsellors that waiting lists have increased and anecdotally that referral agencies are trying to reduce waiting lists by discharging children early.

### **5.3 Supervision and Support**

All guidance counsellors availed of supervision and this is consistent with Hayes and Morgan (2011) report and the findings of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (2009, 2012). However while the Department of Education and Science funds 4/5 supervision sessions over the school year, guidance counsellors commented that these sessions can clash with school meetings or parent/teacher meetings now taking place within school hours as a result of budgetary cutbacks. While the Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy do not specify a ratio of therapy hours to supervision hours, the largest body of psychotherapists and counsellors in Ireland, the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy does have a requirement of one

hour supervision for every twenty hours of therapeutic counselling provided. The amount of supervision hours being completed by four of the five participants in this study is significantly less than the requirements of the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.

Some guidance counsellors in this study noted that they felt isolated and that they could benefit from more support with some feeling more isolated than others. Other guidance counsellors noted that they feel they have good support from colleagues. Department of Education and Science in its 2009 report however stated that most schools have team support structures in place with collaboration in most schools between these staff. This report was based on 55 schools however. Hayes and Morgan's (2011) report noted that support from management is perceived to be strong.

Whilst the Hayes and Morgan (2011) report noted that the single biggest source of stress to be the dual role of classroom teacher and guidance counsellor, a significant source of stress from the participants in this study was the increase in demand for therapeutic counselling and support for students, but a reduction in their allocated hours for therapeutic counselling.

#### **5.4 Provision of Therapeutic and Group Counselling**

Hayes and Morgan (2011) noted that school policies differ on the number of guidance counsellors, percentage of time allocated to therapeutic counselling and emphasis on therapeutic counselling. Department of Education and Science (2012) emphasised the autonomy within schools to allocate and manage staff for the provision of guidance

and therapeutic counselling. This is consistent with the findings of this study, where all participants in the study had a different allocation of hours for therapeutic and guidance/career counselling and other teaching requirements in the school. Whilst the 2008 report of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors questioned whether counselling could be provided in school in a meaningful way, all participants noted that the provision of personal or therapeutic counselling was appropriate in a school environment. In its 2009 report, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors noted the culture and ethos in a school has a significant impact on the counselling relationship, as noted by one participant in the study.

One of the key findings of Hayes and Morgan (2011)'s report was the lack of a shared understanding between key stakeholders and guidance counsellors on what the role of the guidance counsellor involves, specifically in relation to how many times a guidance counsellor would see a student for therapeutic counselling, what percentage of time was spent on counselling and the number of students seen. There was no common standard amongst the participants in this study as to how many times a guidance counsellor might see a student for therapeutic counselling, or in relation to the percentage of time they spent on therapeutic counselling which varied amongst all participants on a weekly basis. The amount of students seen for therapeutic counselling by guidance counsellors also varied on a weekly basis, as guidance counsellors try to meet the demands for therapeutic counselling within the school timetable.

## **5.5 Referral Onwards**

All participants in the survey do refer onwards to referral agencies, but there were no commonalities in terms of how and when guidance counsellors decided to refer onwards. Some guidance counsellors refer on after six sessions, yet two guidance counsellors noted that they had been seeing some students over a much longer time period. This is consistent with the Department of Education and Science Report (2005), which noted that in cases where longer term counselling is required, such students should be referred to outside agencies. Hayes and Morgan's (2011) report noted that there was no shared understanding of how and when students should be referred onwards for counselling to the referral agencies and the findings of this study are consistent with this.

## **5.6 Strengths and Limitations**

For the purposes of this study qualitative methods were used to explore the main research questions. The five participants is a relatively small sample and may not accurately reflect the viewpoint of the majority of guidance counsellors. Additional use of focus groups may have yielded a more thorough understanding of their experience. A mixed method approach of qualitative and quantitative using self report questionnaires might provide a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

As documented there is limited research material on the experience of guidance counsellors and this study benefited from the range of experience, knowledge and openness of the participants. This provided for this researcher an insightful and deeper appreciation of the experience of the guidance counsellors working in post primary schools. They also provided extensive information that both supported and conflicted with the available literature.

## **5.7 Recommendations for further research**

The study illustrates that all guidance counsellors are working in a pressurised environment and working in excess of their allotted hours in all cases. Some guidance counsellors felt there was a lack of support and most mentioned a feeling of working in isolation. The effect of this pressure on guidance counsellors on an ongoing basis is not well researched and further study should focus on this. The challenges of working with referral agencies may also be an area for future research.

## **5.8 Conclusions**

In conclusion, this study has given a deeper understanding and insight into the challenges of guidance counsellors working in post primary schools in Dublin and how they juggle the different aspects of their jobs with most guidance counsellors being required to split their time on guidance counselling, therapeutic counselling and classroom teaching and administrative duties. The study has also reflected their perceptions of support available to guidance counsellors from colleagues, management and supervisors.

By and large the findings of this study are generally reflective of the available literature and research in this area; although there were a number of key findings that this study highlighted. What was of particular significance was the finding that for this group of guidance counsellors, there is a significant level of stress being experienced by all participants in relation to the increased demand for support for students, and the decrease in hours available to meet this demand. This is exacerbated by an increase in waiting lists to outside agencies where students in need of specialised counselling might have significant waiting times. There was a real fear among a number of participants of missing a vulnerable student.

The impact of school holidays was a common theme amongst the participants in the study, with the potential of a student having to take a break in therapeutic counselling at a critical time, if school holidays are approaching. All participants were mindful of upcoming breaks and the possible need to refer students to outside agencies due to school holidays. The possibility of not being able to avail of support from outside agencies due to significant waiting lists was also a key source of stress for guidance counsellors in this study.

Whilst all participants in this study have dual roles in their schools, there is no commonality on the split of guidance hours, therapeutic counselling hours and teaching hours amongst the participants. All complete therapeutic counselling hours in excess of those allocated to them. All participants were aware of the need to meet with students who may be encountering personal difficulties and any shortfall in hours available to meet with such students was met by guidance counsellors in their own time. Participants noted the challenges in dealing with students in the school and the challenge of themselves having to start teaching a class immediately after dealing with a student in particular difficulty.

The amount of support participants in the study felt they had from colleagues and school management varied. Some participants felt they had very good support available to them, whilst other participants mentioned their feelings of isolation within the job and the fact that they could only look to their supervisor for support. Some participants felt that the confidential nature of their job meant they could not discuss difficult student issues with their colleagues.

Another key finding of this study is in relation to the level of supervision available to guidance counsellors which is less than that recommended by the largest representative body of psychotherapists and counsellors, the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. As supervision currently funded by the Department of Education and Science is once every six weeks at best, this is less than the required by the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy which requires one supervision hour for every twenty hours of therapeutic therapy provided. Any additional supervision hours must be funded by the guidance counsellor themselves. Based on hours of therapeutic counselling provided, which averaged ten to twelve hours per week across the participants, the amount of supervision provided for guidance counsellors is far less than ideal. All participants in the study mentioned the good level of support they had from their supervisor.

Another finding of this study is in relation to the school setting as an appropriate environment for the provision of therapeutic counselling. All participants in the study noted that the school setting was adequate for providing therapeutic counselling to students, whilst noting a number of challenges in doing so. Students had to leave class to attend personal counselling and then return to class after attending personal counselling. This provides challenges to both guidance counsellor in containing any issues that might arise in the session and for the student having to return to classmates and a learning environment immediately afterwards.

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# Appendix A :Interview Questions

1. Please advise what your role as guidance counsellor in the school involves.
2. How many hours per week are you allocated to work, and how many hours per week do you actually work on average?
3. In terms of career counselling, personal counselling and vocational counselling, how do you decide the proportion of time spent on each aspect?
4. How do you feel the changes in recent budgets, in particular Budget 2011, has impacted on your role?
5. How do you feel these changes have impacted on the provision of counselling within the whole school system?
6. In relation to personal counselling, how many hours do you spend on average per week counselling students?
7. On average, how many personal counselling sessions do you provide per student?
8. Do you feel the school setting is an appropriate environment for providing personal counselling?
9. How often is group counselling given, or how often has it been provided within the current school year?
10. How often has it been necessary for you to refer a student for further or specialist counselling within the current school year?
11. Do you believe you have sufficient information on referral agencies in terms of availability of counsellors, waiting times, any fee scales?
12. Do you feel you have sufficient clarity on when it may be necessary to refer a student on for further personal counselling?

13. How often do you meet with your supervisor?

14. Do you believe you have sufficient support from your supervisor and colleagues in dealing with the challenges of your job?

# **Appendix B :Interview Consent Form**

## **INFORMATION FORM**

My name Marion Egan and I am currently undertaking a BA in Counselling and Psychotherapy at Dublin Business School. I am inviting you to take part in my research project which is concerned with '*The Role of the Guidance Counsellor from a Psychotherapeutic Perspective*'. I will be exploring the views of people like yourself who are currently working as guidance counsellors.

### **What is Involved?**

You are invited to participate in this research along with a number of other people because you have been identified as being suitable, being a guidance counsellor. If you agree to participate in this research, you will be invited to attend an interview with myself in a setting of your convenience, which should take no longer than 50-60 minutes to complete. During this I will ask you a series of questions relating to the research question and your own work. After completion of the interview, I may request to contact you by telephone or email if I have any follow-up questions.

### **Confidentiality**

All information obtained from you during the research will be kept confidential. You will not be identified in the results or in any part of the finished project. All identifying data will be obscured and all answers given will be treated in the strictest confidence. In the event it is used for future research it will be handled in the same way.

Audio recordings made during the interview will be obscured in the same way. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any point of the study without any disadvantage.

If you would like to take part in this study or require further information about any aspect of it, please contact me by telephone at (086) 8278886 or by email at marion\_egan@hotmail.com

Thank you for your consideration

Marion Egan

**The purpose and process of this study has been explained to me, and I agree to participate. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can stop the interview or withdraw my participation at any time.**

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

# Appendix C :Email to Participants

Dear.....

Thank you for agreeing to forward this email request your colleague(s) in the guidance department.

My name is Marion Egan and I am currently undertaking a BA in Counselling and Psychotherapy in DBS. I am looking for participants who are currently working as guidance counsellors for my research thesis, on the role of a guidance counsellor from a psychotherapeutic perspective.

I am aware of the demands on your time and would be very grateful if you can spare an hour for an interview. I attach an information sheet, with my contact details, for anyone interested in taking part.

Kind regards,

Marion Egan