

## Academic Paper

# Guidance/Counselling - Managing mental health at second level:

## An exploration of Second Level Guidance Counsellors' perceptions and lived experiences of seeking to meet student mental health needs

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*The Department of Education in Ireland states that counselling within schools includes personal, educational and career counselling (Hayes et al., 2011). The Guidance Counsellor has more than one role serving multiple needs. This research offers insight into the Guidance Counsellors' perception of their ability to meet these multiple needs.*

### Introduction

The role of the Second Level Guidance Counsellor is a broad one. Arguably, counselling for mental health is just a part of their role and we want to explore how Guidance Counsellors' assess their ability to perform this part

within a school setting. In terms of counselling for mental health within the role of a Guidance Counsellor, the Department of Education has defined this as part of the role as, being offered for development and personal crisis as well as to empower students to "make

decisions, solve problems, address behavioural issues, develop coping strategies and resolve difficulties they may be experiencing." (Hayes et al. 2011). What are the perceptions and lived experiences of the Guidance Counsellor in looking to meet these needs?

### Literature review

According to the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) the most suitable member of staff in Second Level schools, that can assist students with mental health difficulties, is the Guidance Counsellor. This is due to the distinctive role Guidance Counsellors have in terms of personal, educational, and vocational guidance, as well as professional supervision (Irish Examiner, 2018). This means that the role of the Guidance Counsellor has become multifaceted.

It is possible that this is due to many reasons including the 2011 Budget Cut which led to 91% of Guidance Counsellors admitting to spending less time with students on a one-to-one basis due to hours being decreased. These cutbacks caused students struggling with their mental health to have difficulty receiving help when needed (Irish Times, 2014). In turn, this caused students to

be at a disadvantage in terms of general support and mental health (Teachers Union Ireland, 2017). The cutbacks also caused Guidance Counsellors to spend more time teaching, leading to lack of time dealing with crisis situations as they are required to go and teach a class (*The Journal*, 2017).

The Department of Education states that Guidance Counsellors are fully equipped to offer counselling to students (National Centre Guidance Education (NCGE, 2018). Yet, according to the IGC, Guidance Counsellors know within one-to-ones with students that they should not attempt “well-meaning counselling - territory for which they have no training or professional supervision”. It seems for one that a clear definition of well-meaning counselling is needed. (*Irish Examiner*, 2018).

The findings of the research conducted by the NCGE show that Guidance Counsellors are under great deals of stress attempting to do both guidance and classroom teaching. Other alarming results from the survey conducted was the lack of understanding of what the job involves. There was no shared understanding of therapeutic counselling in terms of how many times they see a student or how much time is given to counselling sessions. Variations of how Guidance Counsellors try to meet demands for counselling in Second Level were seen (Egan, 2014). In 2004, the NCGE stated that counselling is only one of seven guidance activities completed in the role. These included giving information, advice, educational development, personal and social development and well as referrals (NCGE, 2014).

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(Egan, 2014)

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Although the students' need for counselling may vary from school to school, it is suggested that Guidance Counsellors make outside referrals for those students who need recurrent counselling. According to the IGC, Guidance Counsellors are frequently dealing with a range of issues such as anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidal ideations as well as sexual abuse, bullying, substance abuse etc. (NCGE, 2014). The research also showed Guidance Counsellors are unsure as to when to refer students (Egan, 2014). The current referral system is not effective enough for these changing times, says the IGC. Ms. Dooley expresses concern for Guidance Counsellors and their students: “Guidance Counsellors are left holding them, sometimes for months before they are successfully referred on to the appropriate mental health services” (*The Journal*, 2017).

A mixed method study of adolescents in Irish schools by Doyle et al. (2017) found that students feel the dual role of Guidance Counsellors and teacher should be separate. The “It Just Doesn't Feel Right” study surveyed students in Dublin schools and found 84% of students would not talk about mental health problems due to the Guidance Counsellor's dual role of teacher and worries around

limitations to confidentiality (Doyle et al., 2017).

Egan (2014) conducted a qualitative research project into the role of the Guidance Counsellor from a psychotherapeutic perspective. All Guidance Counsellors interviewed felt high levels of stress due to the increase in mental health counselling needs of students (Egan, 2014). The changing times and social media are possibly causing higher levels of anxiety in adolescents, according to *The Journal*. Issues that Guidance Counsellors are facing are becoming more severe and more frequent (*The Journal*, 2017).

### **Research methodology**

As this research is based around lived experiences and perceptions, a qualitative approach was chosen. The research took a phenomenological stance to gain deep insight into participants' experiences. The phenomenon of interest here is Guidance Counsellors' lived experience of dealing with students with mental health difficulties. An unstructured interview technique has been chosen for this research as unstructured interviews do not disturb or regulate the research yet gain significant insight of participants' experience (Yan Zhang et al., 2019).

Thematic analysis (TA) was employed to identify, analyse, and report themes emergent from the data. This method, according to Rice and Ezzy (1999) allows for “emerging themes” to be categorised for analysis (Fereday et al., 2006). Potential ethical issues were carefully considered throughout this study including confidentiality and anonymity. Ethical issues are deemed vital when conducting any type of research (Roshaidain Arifin, 2018).

## Research findings

### Guidance Counsellors' experience with outside referrals

All participants discussed issues with outside services, including waiting lists, students' experiences with the service and examples of the reality of dealing with such services. There were questions as to whether this service that provides assessment and treatment for young people experiencing mental health difficulties was working as affectively as needed for school students. Long waiting lists can lead to students waiting months for appointments. Not only do students have to wait for an appointment, once they have received their initial assessment appointment, they are still left waiting months after that to see a specialist.

*A general kind of referral would take a long time and those kids would stay with us until they go in and that can be over a year.*

It is evident that students have also had negative experiences with outside organizations including students refusing to go back to these organizations after initial appointment. Participant 3 felt very strongly about discussing an example of a student who felt unheard and uncared for. This student decided then that "the system would not work for them".

*She had an awful experience and decided that it was the only experience they will have with them and will NEVER go back.*

Participant 1 discussed a student with additional needs in his school who was "turned away" from such organizations. He also stated a "big portion

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of autistic kids" would have been referred and turned away. Guidance Counsellors seemed negative in terms of the service being "not up to par at all". When students are turned away, the Guidance Counsellors are "left to pick up the pieces or trying to support them as much as you can".

### Continuous Professional Development and difference within initial training

Guidance Counsellors felt they needed to regularly upskill with their local branch. An example of appropriate training was the updating of counselling skills and knowledge to assist with the personal development side of counselling. Participants 3 and 4 discussed their value for CPD that is available, particularly with the Institute of Guidance Counselling (IGC). According to Participant 3, the IGC surveyed Guidance Counsellors to explore what CPD is needed. She stated there was "always something interesting and worthwhile" as well that, sometimes branches can fund half of the training which is a "really supportive professional system." Participant 4 spoke about a very useful behavioural therapy course she had done after feeling like she needed more skills and techniques for helping students with mental health difficulties.

*I'll have a student who has issues around eating disorders and I will have to pass them on...without the specialist training, it is very hard to know what to do in those situations .... you feel a bit helpless.*

This leads to questions as to whether Guidance Counsellors should upskill to Counselling and Psychotherapy. Participant 2 stated, "they should look into the model of having a psychotherapist to back up the Guidance Counsellors or to upskill the Guidance Counsellors a notch." It is suggested that Guidance Counsellors be supported to upskill into more and more psychotherapy or be supported more by a psychotherapist as it "would be far more beneficial to the kids than this like half mash, holding, then we are passing you on, falling through the cracks." This participant wishes for a postgraduate course for Guidance Counsellors in Counselling and Psychotherapy. Another participant commented on the complexities of dealing with students with mental health difficulties. This participant mentioned lack of knowledge and skill in terms of eating disorders, self-harm and suicidal ideation. Seen frequently within the role, this causes Guidance Counsellor to feel they "can't support them" as much as they would like to or as effectively as a Counsellor or Psychotherapist could.

*You can never know if you're saying or doing the right thing.*

Guidance Counsellors have done initial qualifications with different institutes, all at different times. Due to this, it is possible that there are a wide variety of qualifications, "although it is the same level, it is such a wide role



that you're covering the social and vocational and you know then the personal comes into it," states Participant 3. It is important to note that some Guidance Counsellors prefer careers and vocational type of work instead of one-to-ones, where others may not have much time due to teaching roles. Participant 1 discussed challenges with preparation for the role. This participant stated that on the job there is continuous learning and development however within initial training courses, there were strong feelings about being "thrown into scenarios". This includes the experience of practicing on your peers "that can be challenging enough" as you are restricted to "very low scale kind of stuff". Participant 1 later went on to state that he feels "lucky" to have three other Guidance Counsellors in his school to "bounce off".

### **Dual role of Guidance Counsellor and teacher**

Participants described the dual role as feeling like "two different people because you have to be quite strict with some of the classes." As a Guidance Counsellor, this can be a difficult transition as it causes complexities in terms of building relationship with students as a Guidance Counsellor. In turn, professional ability to teach and be a Guidance Counsellor is questioned. This participant states she has allowed her maths teaching to "slide" to be an effective Guidance Counsellor.

*Ideally you are just a Guidance Counsellor but I didn't have that luxury. The Guidance Counsellor is better placed with their full head in the guidance game. You can't be both and be excellent. You can only be both and mediocre.*

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Participant 5 mentioned issues around dealing with students on personal matters and then later having to teach them a subject. The participant mentioned having to go to a class after a one-to-one goes over the allocated time. This can cause the Guidance Counsellor to have to leave subject classes to deal with students' personal matters such as anxiety attacks. Although it is necessary for Guidance Counsellors to be available to such students, the class is then falling behind. Guidance Counsellors would also have difficulty dealing with students with behaviour problems. There are times when Guidance Counsellors may need to do a report for a student misbehaving in class. This can be difficult when you are the only Guidance Counsellor within the school. Participant 2 discussed her consistent debate of trying to figure out who she is professionally. She states it is "not ideal" and it is not where she wants to be with her role in the school.

### **The "holding space"**

All participants discussed the "holding space" that Guidance Counsellors see daily. This might be a physical environment such as a private office, where students are supported as best as possible by the Guidance Counsellor. Generally, this happens when the student is also on a waiting list for outside services. Students are

then left being supported by the Guidance Counsellor within the school. Participant 1 describes this as "challenging".

Aware of her limitations, that she is not a Counsellor or Psychotherapist, Participant 3 describes her role as Guidance Counsellor as the "first point of call" for students with mental health difficulties within schools. Also stated by Participant 1, the guidance sessions are not counselling. "It's more, 'So how are you doing? How's the week going?' and things like that." Participant 1 also acknowledged that Guidance Counsellors "can only do things to a certain level." Yet, the "holding space" has its benefits as it becomes a familiar space for students. It gains some ease around it compared to travelling outside of school for the service.

On the other hand, there is evidence that the holding space can be problematic. Guidance Counsellors have described issues such as feeling like they are "picking up the pieces" when outside services are telling the students that "there is nothing we can do." This can lead to the over-reliance on schools due to long waiting lists with outside referrals. Participant 4 takes the researcher through her reality of the holding space. She states, the first few sessions are looking at the spectrum of risk, informing the student that their issue will not be sorted right away, which can bring about its own difficulties. It also allows the student to feel safe within the guidance environment while they are waiting for outside help. This can become difficult if a student has already had experience, perhaps counselling outside "hasn't gone well for them." Participant 2 states that the holding space, along with limitation

in skills can be a problem. At this point, “We are aware that we can only hold them for so long and then they need to be referred out and we don’t have an internal referral. So we are very aware that there are limits to our skills.”

*We aren’t skilled enough to hold them.*

### **Challenges faced in relation to cuts**

Within this theme, the number of Guidance Counsellors’ positions and hours cut in 2011 within Second Level by the Minsters for Education discussed. Participant 4 experiences feelings of “working on the front line”. This caused the workload of Guidance Counsellors to be “back tracked” as they were still expected to carry out personal, social, and educational supports, while the majority were also teaching a core subject. She later went on to explain that the “environment isn’t set up for major in-depth mental health work with kids.”

Participants state that some means of using Guidance Counsellors more effectively within a school setting to better help students should be put in place. In turn, more hours and positions would need to become available which would allow for a more supportive and engaged “whole school community.” Participant 5 states that there is limited time for counselling within the guidance profession. Yet “so many kids who need so much help” and there just are not enough hours in the day. In relation to this, Participant 4 discusses the feeling of “holding back a flood ever since the 2011 cuts.” Since then, she went on to mention how “difficult and stressful” working as a Guidance Counsellor has become due to the cuts. Guidance hours

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have not returned to time allocations prior to 2011. Within this research it was evident that Participant 4 felt it was extremely critical to manage her own professional and personal boundaries within her work, for the sake of her own mental wellness.

*I really felt it around the time of the guidance cuts. I felt this massive responsibility that I still have to be able to be there for the students despite the fact the government didn’t think it was important to be there.*

### **Study limitations**

The participants in this study all taught extra subjects along with their Guidance Counsellor position in Second Level. The study did not include Guidance Counsellors who had no extra teaching subjects. Further research into this area could give a wider variety of perceptions Guidance Counsellors may have in relation to their ability to help students in terms of mental health difficulties. Although the majority of Guidance Counsellors completed CPD and initial training qualifications, none of the participants came from a counselling or psychotherapy background. They did not have any formal counselling or psychotherapy qualifications

which may also be taken into consideration for future research.

### **Conclusion**

From the research, we now know Guidance Counsellors feel the “holding space” can be of use to the students. It can benefit students by being a familiar space where outside travel is not required and that it is an effective way to help students when they are on long waiting lists. However, most participants discussed the negatives associated with this. Guidance Counsellors have described issues such as feeling like they are picking up the pieces when outside services are telling the students, “There is nothing we can do to help.”

The skills and knowledge of the Guidance Counsellors comes up here, and while there is no literature to back it up, participants felt strongly about only having the ability to help students to a certain level. Often, students who are in this holding space, require more professional skills. Clinical supervision may be of benefit here.

The role of Guidance Counsellors is hindered by the long waiting lists for outside referrals. This leads to frequently using an already-busy schedule to ‘hold’ students when they have already been referred on due to complex issues. In particular, the evidence from literature supports findings that outside referrals may need to operate more effectively to help Guidance Counsellors, but more importantly, to help the students. Another point within this theme that was highlighted within the literature is students experience with outside referrals. Guidance Counsellors who participated in this study also expressed concerns for students’ experiences with the service

and examples of the reality of dealing with such services. There were questions as to whether this service that provides assessment and treatment for young people experiencing mental health difficulties was working as effectively as needed for school students. This is a significant finding as it was discussed by participants the most.

The literature and findings also bring the question as to whether Guidance Counsellors should be teaching. Despite the fact Guidance Counsellors are required to have teaching qualifications in Second Level, the dual role of Guidance Counsellor and teacher is evident to be disliked by Guidance Counsellors and students. As we know from this study, all Guidance Counsellors interviewed are also qualified in another subject. Four out of five participants mentioned how being in the dual role caused a loss of love for their original subject. They also discussed how teaching affects their ability to be a Guidance Counsellor and the difficulty in the classroom being the teacher and Guidance Counsellor.

## *Despite the fact Guidance Counsellors are required to have teaching qualifications in Second Level, the dual role of Guidance Counsellor and teacher is evident to be disliked by Guidance Counsellors and students*

The research acknowledges a more effective working system is needed within the Irish Health Care system for those at school in Second Level. The researcher agrees with Lisa Molloy from the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP), that the Government needs to start prioritizing mental health in schools. The IACP suggest launching school based therapeutic counselling to prioritize mental health in schools. Senator Colette Kelleher recently presented this idea along with IACP in Leinster House and propositioned a new project called Pathfinder. This proposal of Pathfinder asks the government for funding to enable school-based counselling

interventions (IACP, 2019). Due to findings of this research, it seems that Guidance Counsellors and most of all, students, would benefit from a prioritisation of mental health within Second Level schooling. The researcher would like to recommend such initiatives in mental health and counselling services. ☺

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Róisín Traynor holds a BSc in Education and Training, a Postgraduate in Career Guidance and a Master's in Counselling and Psychotherapy. She has always had a keen interest in mental health and education. Róisín has worked as a Guidance Counsellor in a variety of different schools in Ireland and abroad. Currently, she works as a Mental Health Officer at Meath Partnership and is passionate about evoking change within education, for example making the role of Counsellor prominent in a school setting and separate from the role of Guidance Counsellor. You can contact Róisín at Róisínnealatraylor@gmail.com

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