Research on
The Practice of Counselling by Guidance Counsellors in Post Primary Schools

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The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) is an agency of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) which advises on policy and strategies for guidance in the context of lifelong learning. To achieve this aim, NCGE commissions and disseminates research on guidance practice. A key objective of NCGE is to promote the implementation of best practice in guidance counselling in schools in accordance with the Education Act 1998. The publication of Research on the Practice of Counselling by Guidance Counsellors in Post-Primary schools comes at a time of change in the provision of guidance at this level of education. However, the Education Act 1998 Section 9 clearly states that schools must use their available resources to –

(c) ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices

Counselling is recognised as one of the key elements of the guidance programme in post-primary schools. Following the recommendations of a Steering Group, NCGE commissioned the Research on the Practice of Counselling by Guidance Counsellors in Post-Primary schools to provide relevant stakeholders with information on the nature, scope and context of counselling practice by guidance counsellors in schools. This research was carried out in 2009-2010 with the final report submitted to NCGE in 2011.

For assisting in the completion of this work, several groups and individuals must be acknowledged. NCGE wishes to thank the researchers Dr Claire Hayes and Professor Mark Morgan for their dedication to this project. NCGE also wishes to acknowledge and thank those who participated in this research, through the completion of a questionnaire and participating in focus groups and collective interviews. We appreciate the openness and co-operation of all involved. Their commitment to the support of students in times of personal distress or crisis is evident throughout this report.

The members of the research Steering Group convened by NCGE to advise on this project brought their invaluable expertise from the fields of guidance, policy and research to this process. I wish to formally thank Dr Suzanne Guerin, UCD, Dr Ronnie Swain, UCC, Dr Tom Geary, UL, Colum Layton, DES, Breda Coyle, IGC and all previous members of the Steering Group. I wish to pay particular tribute to my colleague Linda Darbey, NCGE for her commitment to and professionalism in the development and support of this research since its inception in 2007.

The research findings and recommendations provide stakeholders with information on the nature of counselling within the guidance programme. These findings can contribute to and encourage further dialogue on policy, delivery, supports, training and continuing professional development in the area of counselling within guidance provision.

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Executive Summary

This research into the practice of counselling by guidance counsellors was commissioned by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) under the direction of an advisory Steering Group. Here we summarise the aims and background methodology, as well the main results of the research. The recommendations arising from the research are also set out.

Aims
The project explored the nature, scope and context of the practice of counselling by guidance counsellors in post-primary schools from September to December 2009. It identified:

1. The counselling models and practices employed by guidance counsellors;
2. The issues with which students present for counselling;
3. The proportion of time which guidance counsellors devote to counselling and to counselling individual students;
4. The challenges (e.g. context, management, training, support, resources etc.) that guidance counsellors face in carrying out their counselling role;
5. How guidance counsellors employ referral;
6. Where students are referred;
7. The policies on counselling that exist in schools;
8. The context within which guidance counsellors work, including management, training, support and resources;
9. The ways in which guidance counsellors gauge the effectiveness of their work.

Background
The design of the study was guided by policy statements and practice relating to guidance counselling in post-primary schools in Ireland, as well as earlier reviews of guidance services in second-level schools. Studies of school counselling in mainland UK and Northern Ireland and international research on school counselling were also examined. An important part of the context of the study was an examination of relevant studies of the challenges facing young people in Ireland, with particular attention to evidence on the mental health and risk behaviours of adolescents, as well as the importance of schools for students’ well-being, particularly groups who have suffered social exclusion. However, the limits of extant research as it impacts on guidelines for school counselling is acknowledged.

Methodology
An examination of the objectives and terms of reference of the present study indicates that while it is quite exploratory in nature, the aim is to establish as far as possible the main features of counselling by guidance counsellors. With these considerations in mind, we decided to use a mixed method approach. Here we define mixed methods as research that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques, approaches and concepts.
Within the mixed methods perspective, the research was carried out in the three phases:
1. A nationwide survey of guidance counsellors;
2. Focus groups of guidance counsellors;
3. Meetings with representatives of identified stakeholders.

The questionnaire for the survey of guidance counsellors obtained information on the qualifications of guidance counsellors, their approach to counselling, issues presented by students in counselling, challenges, rewards and supports of counselling and guidance counsellors’ recommendations for the future. The response rate was 36%; given the demands on guidance counsellors and the fact that the returned questionnaires were representative of post-primary schools, this rate was considered satisfactory.

Four focus groups were held with guidance counsellors who were currently practising in second-level schools. These were concerned especially with experiences of the counselling aspect of the guidance role and with presenting recommendations regarding the counselling aspect of this role.

Six stakeholders were identified by the Steering Group for the purpose of Phase Three of this research. These were: the Directors of Studies of Guidance Counselling, the Guidance Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the IGC, the NCGE, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD). Representatives of each group met with the researchers for collective interviews. The focus of these discussions was on their understanding of the counselling aspect of the role of the guidance counsellor and the recommendations they would like to make.

**Results of the Research**

The results of the research are set out in the main body of the report and here we highlight some particularly important findings based on the consensus of the different research methodologies. The study showed that guidance counsellors are recognised by themselves and by key stakeholders as being highly committed to carrying out the counselling aspect of their role. It is especially noteworthy that more than three-fifths of guidance counsellors had been involved in further training since their initial qualification and that much of this training was taken at their own expense, on their own time, with no formal recognition in terms of salary or time off in lieu by their school management.

One of the most consistent findings from this research is that there is not a shared understanding of what the counselling aspect of the role involves, either among guidance counsellors themselves or among the key stakeholders. There was variation between guidance counsellors with regard to the number of students they saw for counselling, the number of counselling sessions and the percentage of time that they spent on prevention, crisis or individual counselling. Schools differed in terms of the number of guidance counsellors they had, the hours they had available for counselling and the emphasis they placed on the counselling aspect of the role. It is evident from the information supplied in this research that a range of approaches are practised. These include person-centred counselling, reality therapy, cognitive behaviour therapy, solution-focused brief therapy, gestalt therapy as well as a variety of other approaches. There is no suggestion that only one approach should be taken by guidance counsellors. However, there would be merit in having evidence for the efficacy of these approaches for particular problems made available.

It also emerged that guidance counsellors do not perceive themselves to be sufficiently supported...
in the counselling aspect of their work. There was consensus that students come to them for counselling with a wide range of issues of varying severity. These include:

- Family concerns, such as marital break-up or parental pressure;
- Peer issues such as bullying and relationship problems;
- Academic areas such as concerns about exams, teachers and future career;
- Issues to do with the self, such as suicidal ideation, aggression, self-harm, pregnancy, concerns about sexuality, abuse, depression, anxiety and eating disorders.

While there was clear recognition of the benefits of supervision, there was a view among guidance counsellors that supervision was only for newly-qualified people in their first five years of the role. Only 35% of the respondents to the questionnaires described the DES as supportive in the counselling aspect of their work. Many of the guidance counsellors who participated in the focus groups also referred to this lack of support and were particularly aggrieved that the counselling aspect of their work was not formally recognised as part of the Whole School Evaluation process.

The views of students and their parents need to be taken into account when considering the practice of counselling by guidance counsellors. Concern was expressed by some stakeholders as well as guidance counsellors in the focus groups that the students and their parents were not included in this research. Earlier work has highlighted differences in the perception of counselling by guidance counsellors among principals, guidance counsellors, young people and their parents. A limitation of the current research is that it is not possible to compare the perceptions of the guidance counsellors and the stakeholders with those who choose to use, or not to use the service, namely the students and their parents.

It emerged that school policies with regard to counselling are not well developed. In many cases, policies in relation to critical issues like consent and confidentiality are decided by guidance counsellors rather than at school level. While consistency across all schools may not be desirable, this matter merits serious attention.

The issues which did not emerge in the data (including that from stakeholders) are as interesting as those that did. Two that are of particular interest are early school leaving and examination stress. Recent research on early school leaving has drawn attention to the fact that dropping out of post-primary school is still a major issue and makes special mention of the important role of guidance counsellors in prevention of early drop out. Issues of examination stress and the pressure of the ‘points system’ are also talked about frequently. What is not clear is whether these are not encountered by guidance counsellors or whether they are regarded as inevitable consequences of the system. These matters merit further investigation and it is important to consider the views of the students and their parents. In conclusion, the researchers were most struck by the deep interest and concern which research participants showed about the practice of counselling by guidance counsellors.
Recommendations

1. Role:
   • That the Department of Education and Skills clarifies what exactly the practice of counselling by guidance counsellors involves, its limits and how it can be supported, evaluated and developed.

2. Referral:
   • That representatives from the DES, the NCGE, the IGC, NEPS and the NAPD meet with representatives from the HSE and other key referral agencies to agree a policy on referral, communication and feedback.

3. Support:
   • That the DES maintains and strengthens the guidance counsellor’s practice of counselling through additional supports such as reducing the ratio of students to guidance counsellor, providing regular supervision and CPD and acknowledging and formally rewarding the additional training.

4. Training:
   • That guidance counsellors be given continuing professional development to ensure that they work with models of best practice in line with their code of professional ethics and that they refer to other agencies when appropriate.

   • That the issues which students present to guidance counsellors for counselling be monitored on an ongoing basis so as to inform the course content of initial and continuing development education courses.

   • That existing providers of programmes for the education of guidance counsellors should be encouraged to collaborate with a view to providing a post-graduate programme that is particularly geared to the needs of guidance counsellors with regard to counselling.

5. Policy:
   • That attention be given to co-ordinating the SPHE programme with guidance counsellors’ work in counselling.

   • That all guidance counsellors have a written policy on their counselling role.

6. Evaluation:
   • That Whole School Evaluations should include a focus on the practice of counselling by guidance counsellors.

   • That the views of students and their parents be considered in future in evaluation of and research on the counselling practice of guidance counsellors.
This chapter contains an overview of the terms of reference of the research and its aims and objectives. The important policy guidelines on counselling by guidance counsellors in schools are set out with a particular reference to the distinctive features of counselling in schools in Ireland. An overview of the report is also presented.

**Scope of Research**
The research explored the nature, scope and context of the practice of counselling by guidance counsellors in post-primary schools from September 2009 to December 2010. In carrying out the research, the authors had the assistance of an advisory Steering Group.

**The Role and Membership of the Steering Group**
The role of the Steering Group was to:
- Advise NCGE on the scope of the research;
- Examine and advise NCGE on the submissions received as part of the tendering process and to recommend candidates for interview, if appropriate;
- Advise and to make recommendations to NCGE on the draft and final reports submitted by the researchers.

The members of the Steering Group were representatives of the NCGE, the IGC, the DES, the Directors of Studies in Guidance Counselling and a research psychologist with particular expertise in research methodology, counselling and education.

**Aims**
The aims of the research were:
- To investigate the current nature (including demographics), scope (including counselling training) and context of counselling provided by guidance counsellors in post-primary schools.
- To inform and make recommendations to key guidance stakeholders about the practice of counselling in post-primary schools.

**Objectives**
The objectives of the research were:
- To explore the training in counselling offered as part of the initial education programmes in guidance;
- To explore guidance counsellors’ experiences of the counselling training they received as part of their initial education in guidance;
- To identify any additional training in counselling that guidance counsellors have undertaken since their initial education;
- To explore guidance counsellors’ awareness of existing supports;
- To explore the context in which guidance counsellors undertake counselling in the school, including: demographics (school type and...
size), number of qualified guidance counsellors allocated to schools by the Department of Education and Science, and the extent of involvement of the guidance counsellor in subject teaching or other school roles;

- To identify School Management and Student Support Structures for guidance counsellors;
- To identify the counselling models, methodologies and international best practice employed by guidance counsellors;
- To identify the challenges (e.g. context, management, training, support, resources, etc.) that guidance counsellors face in the school in terms of undertaking the counselling role in schools;
- To identify the proportion of time which guidance counsellors devote to counselling and to counselling individual students (i.e. the average number of sessions expressed as a range, if required) and to counselling in general;
- To identify the range of problems that are presented by students;
- To explore how guidance counsellors employ referral and where students are referred;
- To identify other staff in the school who employ counselling skills when assisting students;
- To ascertain if a policy on counselling exists in schools;
- To explore guidance counsellors’ expectations of their counselling role based on guidelines issued by the DES, NCGE and the IGC;
- To explore the views on the counselling role in schools held by the IGC, its members and the Directors of Studies in Guidance Counselling;
- To explore guidance counsellors’ perceptions of the challenges to the counselling role (e.g. context, managerial, training, support, resources etc) in schools;
- To explore guidance counsellors’ expectations of the counselling process.

Guidance Counselling in Irish Schools

The Education Act (Ireland, 1998, section 9) sets out the context of the work of Guidance Counsellors.

“Guidance in schools refers to a range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence that assist students to develop self-management skills which will lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives. It encompasses the three separate, but interlinked, areas of personal and social development, educational, guidance and career guidance” (DES, 2005, p.4).

Counselling in this context:

‘...is a key part of the school guidance programme, offered on an individual or group basis as part of a developmental learning process and at moments of personal crisis. Counselling has as its objective the empowerment of students so that they can make decisions, solve problems, address behavioural issues, develop coping strategies and resolve difficulties they may be experiencing. Counselling in schools may include personal counselling, educational counselling, career counselling or combinations of these’ (DES, 2005, p.4).

The document ‘Planning the School Guidance Programme’ (NCGE, 2004) notes that counselling is one of seven guidance activities that assist students to make choices. The other six are as follows: Assessment, Information, Advice, Educational Development Programmes, Personal and Social Development Programmes and Referral. Counselling was defined as ‘helping students to explore their thoughts and feelings, and the choices open to them; giving care and support to students learning to cope with the many aspects of growing up’ (NCGE, 2004, p.12). It was described as being a ‘key part of the school guidance programme, offered on an individual or group basis as part of
a developmental learning process and at moments of personal crisis’ (NCGE, 2004, p.21). Counselling on an individual basis was seen to be part of the support structure that a school should provide to students and that within the overall time allocated for guidance, adequate time should be given for the counselling function in the guidance programme.

There are at least two important points on the policy matters that are considered in more detail in the next chapter. The first is that guidance counsellors have responsibilities other than counselling, including those listed above. The other point is that while the guidance counsellors have primary responsibility for the delivery of the school’s guidance and counselling programme, other appropriately-qualified members of staff have important and worthwhile contributions to make to the planning and delivery of many aspects of the programme, including counselling. These points are worth bearing in mind when comparing counselling services in Irish schools with those in other countries.

Overview of Report
Chapter Two of this report consists of two parts, as follows: (i) the policy context of guidance counselling in Irish schools is set out and considered in the light of policy statements, guidelines and directions, and (ii) relevant background research is examined, including an earlier review of guidance services in second-level schools, studies of school counselling in mainland UK and Northern Ireland, an examination of relevant studies of the challenges facing young people and some emerging issues in school counselling in contemporary literature. In Chapter Three, the salient features of the research methodology are described. The rationale for the mixed approach is set and the key feature of each aspect of the research is described, including the national survey of guidance counsellors, the focus groups of guidance counsellors and the interviews/focus groups with stakeholders.

The results of the survey are set out in Chapter Four. These include information on qualifications and professional development of guidance counsellors; approaches to counselling and number and type of sessions; the kind of issues that students bring to counselling; the procedures for referral to counsellors; information on the perceived stresses and supports of counselling in schools; school policies; how guidance counsellors gauge the impact of counselling and recommendations of the respondents in the survey. Chapter Five presents the results of the focus group research, with particular attention to the practices of counselling in second-level schools; the demanding nature of the counselling role; the supports received by guidance counsellors; the benefits to them and the recommendations from counsellors regarding the counselling aspect of their role. The results of discussions with consultative groups who were representative of stakeholders are set up in Chapter Six, with an emphasis on the themes that emerged in those discussions. Chapter Seven discusses the main findings from the research and the concluding chapter, Chapter Eight, puts forward the recommendations based on the research.
The most relevant research and policy statements relating to the practice of counselling by guidance counsellors working in second-level schools in Ireland are considered in this chapter. The chapter is divided into two parts: the first part is concerned with policy and research in Ireland related to counselling and the work of guidance counsellors, while the second part examines (i) research on relevant challenges facing young people, with a particular focus on school surveys of mental health issues, substance use, bullying, early school leaving and family issues and (ii) the emerging issues in school counselling in international literature, with particular reference to research carried out in Northern Ireland and the mainland UK. In considering this research, we draw particular attention to the differences in the provision for counselling in Irish schools and those in the UK. Finally, in this chapter, we draw attention to gaps in existing research and implications for this project.

1. Policy and Research Relating to the Practice of Counselling by Guidance Counsellors in Ireland

Ireland has long acknowledged the valuable contribution that education and guidance counsellors play in helping young people achieve their potential (e.g. National Guidance Forum, 2007a; 2007b; Ireland, 2005, Ryan, 1993). The Department of Education established the National Centre for Guidance in Education in 1995 to ‘support and develop guidance across the education spectrum and to inform the policy of the Department in the field of guidance’ (NGF, 2007b, p.18). The DES, in interpreting the Education Act (Ireland, 1998), sees guidance as a whole school responsibility, with guidance counsellors having a broad role which includes providing counselling support to students, promoting educational and social inclusion, addressing educational disadvantage and the prevention of early school leaving and poor educational attainment (Department of Education and Science, 2005).

Section 9c of the Education Act (Ireland, 1998) states that a school ‘shall use its available resources to ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices’.

For over fifty years, Irish educationalists have worked to develop guidance and counselling services in Ireland. The Scoping Paper of the National Guidance Forum (NGF, 2007b) provides a detailed description of the history and development of guidance counselling in Ireland. The Irish guidance counselling system is recognised as being a ‘compromise between the American model which emphasises personal counselling and the European model which almost exclusively focuses on the narrower concept of career guidance’ (Ryan, 1993, p.63). In 1972, the Department of Education granted ex-quota status to guidance teachers in schools with an excess of 250 pupils and released guidance counsellors with pay for training. Since 1973, a number of full-time and part-time training courses have been set up for guidance counsellors including University College Dublin, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin City University, National University of Ireland Cork, National University of Ireland Maynooth and University of Limerick.
Cutbacks in 1983 resulted in schools being required to have 500 students in order to receive full-time guidance provision. A series of subsequent initiatives led to amendments to this, culminating in the 2005 DES Circular, (PPT 12/05) which revised the allocation for guidance provision in schools. There have also been a series of policy statements and reports to enhance guidance services in Irish second-level schools. These are relevant in providing a context for this current report and are summarised below. Firstly, we consider policy statements followed by an overview of some empirical work that is pertinent to these policies.

**Planning the School Guidance Programme (NCGE, 2004)**

The document ‘Planning the School Guidance Programme’ (NCGE, 2004) noted that counselling is one of seven guidance activities that assist students to make choices. The other six are as follows: Assessment, Information, Advice, Educational Development Programmes, Personal and Social Development Programmes and Referral. Counselling was defined as ‘helping students to explore their thoughts and feelings, and the choices open to them; giving care and support to students learning to cope with the many aspects of growing up’ (NCGE, 2004, p.12). It was described as being a ‘key part of the school guidance programme, offered on an individual or group basis as part of a developmental learning process and at moments of personal crisis’ (NCGE, 2004, p.21). Counselling on an individual basis was seen to be part of the support structure that a school should provide to students and that within the overall time allocated for guidance, adequate time should be given for the counselling function in the guidance programme.

**DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools) - An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion (Ireland, 2005)**

Minister Mary Hanafin, then Minister for Education and Science wrote in the foreword to the 2005 report ‘DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools) - An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion’ that:

> We know that many of the barriers to educational access, progression and attainment lie outside the education system. While we cannot expect our education system to address all the causes of disadvantage, we can and should expect the system to make special efforts to help everyone reach their full educational potential (p.3).

Minister Hanafin emphasised that:

> We want all our young people to derive maximum personal benefit from the education system. We want the needs of the learner and a culture of high expectations to be at the centre of all our actions (p.3).

It may seem surprising, therefore, that the role of the guidance counsellor was only mentioned once in the report and then only with regard to their ‘particularly important role in advising second-level students on career options and on the related issue of appropriate subject choice’ which was seen to involve ‘the provision of advice on an individual or group basis, as appropriate’ (p.44). However, a number of other documents have been published by the Department of Education and Science, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, the National Guidance Forum and the National Centre for Guidance in Education which focus specifically on the role of the guidance counsellor, clarify the meaning of counselling and give guidelines for guidance counsellors on best practice in carrying out the counselling aspect of their roles. Central to these is the Education Act (Ireland, 1998).
Guidelines for Second-Level Schools on the Implications of Section 9(c) of the Education Act (DES, 2005)

In the same year that the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion was published, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science published detailed guidelines for second-level schools on the implications of Section 9(c) of the Education Act 1998, relating to students’ access to appropriate guidance (Ireland, 2005b). This section states that a school ‘shall use its available resources to...

\[(c)\text{ Ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices’ (Ireland, 1998, p.13).}\]

The Inspectorate noted that the provision of guidance was a statutory requirement for schools under the Education Act 1998 and encouraged schools to develop a comprehensive guidance plan as part of their overall school development plan, taking into account the needs of students, available resources and contextual factors. The Inspectors noted that the development of the guidance plan should, where possible, be led by the guidance counsellor/s. To fulfil its obligations to provide access to appropriate guidance, the Inspectorate noted that a school would need to consider two requirements - the need to provide access and the need to provide appropriate guidance.

This report acknowledged that

\[\text{While the guidance counsellor/s has/have primary responsibility for the delivery of the school’s guidance and counselling programme, other members of staff have important and worthwhile contributions to make to the planning and delivery of many aspects of the programme.} \ (DES, 2005, p.8).\]

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science stated that it was important that students and their parents be clear about the role and functions of the various members of staff concerned with aspects of student support, listing chaplain, class tutors/year heads, Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinators, as well as guidance counsellors. Of most relevance to this current research is the section in the Guidelines on Counselling: Individual and Group. This notes that:

\[\text{Counselling should be available when necessary, on an individual and/or group basis, to assist students in their personal and social, educational and career development. Guidance counsellors are qualified to provide counselling support to students. The demands for counselling will vary among schools and within any particular school from year to year, in response to student needs. Schools, therefore, require flexibility in determining the allocation of time for the guidance counsellor/s to engage in counselling. However, schools need to balance the time available to the guidance counsellor/s for individual counselling against their responsibilities to the full student body in the school. It is recommended, therefore, that in cases where students require personal counselling over a protracted period of time, guidance counsellors should refer such cases to relevant outside agencies.} \ (DES, 2005, p.10).\]

Counselling was described as being a key part of the school guidance programme, offered on an individual or group basis as part of a developmental learning process and at moments of personal crisis. Its objective was ‘the empowerment of students so that they can make decisions, solve problems, address behavioural issues, develop coping strategies and resolve difficulties they may be experiencing’ (p. 4). The Inspectorate noted that counselling in schools may include personal counselling, educational counselling, career counselling or combinations of these.
The Inspectorate was very clear that:

In cases where a student requires specialist support, the guidance counsellor should become involved in assessing his/her needs and where necessary, arrange a referral to an appropriate outside agency. Procedures for the referral of students to the guidance counsellor and for referral to outside agencies should be included in the School Plan. NEPS psychologists provide a source of advice to guidance counsellors on appropriate referral pathways. (DES, 2005, p.10).

It is clear from their report that the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science sees the guidance counsellors as having a wide and varied role, e.g. helping students transfer from primary school to secondary school, meeting with students who do not wish to progress to senior cycle or transition year programme and their parents to discuss possible progression routes and training options and providing individual career planning interviews to all students. Guidance counsellors were also described as having a role in promoting educational and social inclusion and in addressing educational disadvantage.

National Guidance Forum Report (NGF, 2007a)
The National Guidance Forum was established in 2004 as part of the programme of events of the Irish Presidency of the European Union. It was a joint initiative of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of Education and Science. The remit of the Forum was to:

1. Explore how individuals, at any point throughout their lives, can access quality guidance appropriate to their needs;
2. Identify collaborative action across the guidance continuum;
3. Agree recommendations for a lifelong guidance strategy in collaboration with other stakeholders.

The term of the Forum was from June 2004 to October 2006 and it had 34 members, including representatives of: guidance policy-makers, guidance practitioners from education and labour market sectors, trainers of guidance counsellors, employer representatives, trade unions, education managers, parents and consumers (www.nationalguidanceforum.ie).

The Final Report from the National Guidance Forum Guidance for Life: An Integrated Framework for Lifelong Guidance in Ireland, submitted to the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Minister for Education and Science in January 2007, contains a national lifelong guidance framework and a proposal for national and local structures to support the implementation of the framework. It defined the counselling aspect of the guidance role as ‘working with people to help them to discover, clarify, assess and understand their needs’ and noted that ‘counselling may be vocational, educational and/or personal’ (NGF, 2007a, p.22).

The Competency Framework for Guidance Practitioners (NGF, 2007b)
The Competency Framework for Guidance Practitioners published by the National Guidance Forum (NGF, 2007b) described competency in counselling as the:

- capacity to use appropriate counselling skills, the heart of which are the core competencies of empathy, genuineness and unconditional positive regard, and to facilitate individuals in identifying options, making decisions and resolving difficulties. These skills include: active listening, clarifying, paraphrasing, setting boundaries, contracting, challenging, focusing, motivating, utilising non-verbal communications, probing, questioning, reflecting feelings, prioritising issues, structuring, summarising a session and reviewing progress. (NGF, 2007b, p.15).
The complex and varied nature of the guidance counsellors’ role is seen in the following five key areas in which they are expected to demonstrate knowledge and understanding:

1. Theory and practice of vocational educational and personal/social guidance across the lifespan;
2. Labour market education and training;
3. Counselling;
4. Information and resource management;
5. Professional practice.

Counselling was seen to include the following competencies:

- Engage in personal counselling, either individually or in groups;
- Clarify the professional and ethical issues in group counselling and group guidance;
- Help individuals to develop a personal life plan;
- Engage in appropriate supervision to develop counselling skills and to progress work with individuals;
- Recognise when it is necessary to seek the support of other professionals in the counselling role.

Guidance counsellors were described as engaging in personal counselling with individuals around issues such as stress, transitional difficulties, relationship issues, personal/sexual identity, group culture pressures, health issues and bereavement. The importance of referral to specialised professionals was highlighted ‘in cases where the degree of disturbance to the mental well-being of the individual is significant’ (NGF, 2007b, p.16). Examples of such cases were when individuals disclose issues such as suicide ideation, addiction, self-harm, sexual abuse and eating disorders.

The duties of guidance counsellors also included the following:

- Helping individuals to develop a personal life plan;
- Clarifying the professional and ethical issues in group counselling and group guidance;
- Initiating, leading and bringing closure to groups;
- Evaluating group outcomes and their own role as leaders in the group process;
- Demonstrating an ability and commitment to engage in appropriate supervision, proportionate to the counselling workload and to use it to further develop their counselling skills and to progress work with individuals;
- Demonstrating an ability and commitment to seek such other support as may be necessary, particularly when major unresolved/vulnerable/distressing issues manifest themselves in their own lives;
- Being open to ongoing reflection on their own life narrative and its impact on the counselling relationship.

The Background Scoping Paper of the NGF
The Background Scoping Paper (NGF, 2007c) provided an overview of guidance in Ireland in the education, labour and community sectors. It acknowledged that while guidance counsellors often need to refer clients on from their service, there are very few support and referral services available to them to access on behalf of clients and that there is no agreed protocol on referring clients. Of relevance to this current research is the information provided on supports to guidance counsellors including the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), the National Welfare Board (NWB), Education Centres and pastoral care teams. While a member of the National Parents’ Council Post-Primary (NCPpp) was a member of the National Guidance Forum, the NCPpp was not listed under the supports for
guidance counsellors. Instead, reference was made to guidance counsellors, as part of their role, providing supports to parents of students.

**The Consultative Process of the NGF**

One of the four tasks of the National Guidance Forum was to carry out a consultative process with members of the general public to determine their experiences, opinions and recommendations concerning guidance services in Ireland. A detailed Literature Review, Methodology, Results, Discussion and Recommendations are contained in a report by Hayes and Murray (2007). The consultative process was carried out in two phases. Phase One involved the support of the members of the National Guidance Forum in encouraging as many people as possible to complete an on-line or paper questionnaire. This resulted in 635 completed questionnaires being returned by the deadline of 31st December 2005. Phase Two involved focus groups with seven targeted groups, i.e. people who were not Irish nationals, early school leavers, people who were unemployed or who were receiving a low income, people with physical and/or learning disabilities, parents of pre-school and primary schoolchildren, adults with literacy difficulties and people who were aged 60 years and over. A total of 72 people participated in the focus groups.

The questionnaire designed in Phase One was intended to elicit respondents’ knowledge, experience and opinion of guidance services in Ireland, as well as recommendations on how guidance services might be improved. The National Guidance Forum’s agreed definition is as follows:

> **Guidance** facilitates people throughout their lives to manage their own educational, training, occupational, personal, social and life choices so that they reach their full potential and contribute to the development of a better society. (NGF, 2007, p.6).

Relevant to this current research was the findings in Phase One that information and counselling were the aspects of guidance which respondents rated most highly, while assessment was the aspect they rated lowest. Also relevant were the opinions expressed in Phase Two that guidance services in second-level schools need to be available and to be seen to be available for students in the Junior Cycle and for those who are less academic, as well as for those who intend to go to university. Guidance services were described as needing to be confidential and available for everyone who wants it, irrespective of age and financial situation. Counselling and personal development programmes were seen to be important aspects of guidance for adults, as well as for students. The results of the consultative process clearly showed that people valued and wanted guidance. Recommendations focused on how guidance services could be developed and strengthened so that everyone, irrespective of age, ability or financial circumstances, could be helped to be aware of them, helped to access them and helped to benefit from them.

The focus of the consultative process of the National Guidance Forum was much wider than the focus of the current research. Rather than focusing specifically on one aspect of guidance, i.e. counselling, and one particular group, i.e. guidance counsellors currently working in second-level schools, it looked at all aspects of guidance as experienced by people at all stages of life. However, the following comments in the Discussion can be seen as being applicable to this current research:

> Asking people’s opinions can be difficult. It leads to other questions: ‘How can we be sure that people will say what they mean and mean what they say?’ ‘How can we ask enough people to get a reasonable picture of what the general public thinks?’ ‘If people are asked for their opinion, might they expect that their opinion will then be acted on?’ ‘What is the next step once their opinion has been given?’ (Hayes & Murray, p.102).
The researchers who carried out the Consultative Process noted that:

Questionnaires can have many benefits, but their limitations are well recognised and often one of the key ones can be a poor response. Standardised questionnaires require evidence of two key research principles: validity and reliability. If a questionnaire is designed to measure an individual's level of a construct such as depression, a valid (accurate) measure will do exactly that, and a valid, reliable (consistent) measure will ensure that an accurate response is given over a period of time. The questionnaire that was designed for this consultative process is not a standardised one. It is not measuring any particular construct but instead is a way of accessing people's descriptions of their experiences of guidance as well as their opinions of guidance services in Ireland and their thoughts on what they would recommend regarding these services. Therefore, there is no guarantee that people's responses are accurate or consistent. They may be saying what they think is expected, or they might not be taking any question seriously. They might change their opinion if asked to complete the questionnaires again. (Hayes & Murray, 2007, p.104).

As was the case with the research on principals' perceptions carried out by McKenna et al. (1997), the focus of the consultative process was primarily on the experience and perception of the respondents as indicated in the responses to the questionnaire and recorded in interviews. The researchers quoted the view of McKenna et al (1997) that:

It must be emphasised that perceptions are just that – views, feelings and opinions - and the outcomes of this study should be seen in that context. (McKenna et al., 1997, p.4).

People who participated in the Consultative Process were described as having appreciated being asked for their opinions. While some of the comments were critical of the type of guidance received, nobody expressed the view that there was no need for guidance practitioners.


The NCCA Draft Curriculum Framework for Guidance in Post-Primary Education (2007) recognises counselling as being a key part of the school guidance programme. It suggests that it should be offered on an individual or group basis as part of a developmental process and at moments of personal crisis (p.3). The central idea is that ‘counselling has as its objective the empowerment of students so that they can make decisions, solve problems, address behavioural issues, develop coping strategies and resolve difficulties they may be experiencing’ (NCCA, 2007, p.4). It also reiterates the three components of counselling: personal, educational and career counselling or combinations of these.

In the framework, under the heading ‘Personal Guidance’, the focus includes the self-concept, influences on ‘me’, decision-making and personal responsibility, communication and co-operation and conflict. As well as indicating learning outcomes, the framework draws attention to subjects and programmes relevant to these topics, particularly SPHE, pastoral programmes, religious education and CSPE.

In response to the NCCA proposals, the IGC (2008) suggests that it is not entirely appropriate to see everything through a curricular lens, since doing so might turn all involvement with students into “curricular experiences”. The IGC suggests that there is a need to recognise the limitations of this model when applied to service interventions which are additional to and different from “curricular experiences”. The Institute of Guidance Counsellors
suggests instead that there is a need for service plus curriculum model to cater for the needs of students.

**Whole School Guidance and Counselling Service and Curriculum: Roles and Relationships (IGC, 2008)**

In the foreword to this document, Frank Mulvihill, President of the IGC in 2008, described how the IGC was an active participant in the consultative process which accompanied the work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in the area of Guidance in Post-Primary Education. He noted that:

> It was no surprise, therefore, that when the NCCA consultative process was complete, 62% of submissions in response to the Discussion Document had come from guidance counsellors. This was evidence of the interest in, commitment to, and concern of practitioners to preserving the highest of standards in the provision of guidance and counselling services in schools. (IGC, 2008, p.3).

Mulvihill referred to the training and expertise of the members of the IGC in describing it as being ‘in a strong position to make a meaningful contribution to discussions about guidance’. His foreword concluded as follows:

> The Institute places a strong emphasis on the distinction which exists between the curricular elements of second-level guidance and the professional guidance service which is provided by the guidance counsellor and argues that, with proper resources, a truly effective guidance service could be established in Ireland. The benefits of such a service are far-reaching and would have numerous positive effects on the country’s socio-economic development as well as addressing other matters such as the mental health of our young people. (IGC, 2008, p.3).

In the document ‘A Whole School Guidance and Counselling Service and Curriculum: Roles and Relationships’ (IGC, 2008), the IGC clarified its ‘position on the role of curriculum development as an essential complement to the service elements of the guidance and counselling service in second-level schools’ (p.4). Later in the document, reference was made to how ‘the provision of personal counselling is a guidance intervention that cannot fit into a curricular structure in any meaningful way’ (p.7). Emphasis was given to the ‘dynamic interaction between the service and the curriculum components in the whole school model of guidance and counselling delivery’ (p.7).

The IGC noted that the final document that emerges from the consultation process initiated by the NCCA required a change of title to read as follows: ‘A Framework for the Curricular Elements of the Whole School Guidance Programme in Post-Primary Schools’. It pointed to the Discussion Paper of the NCCA as suggesting confusion on the part of the NCCA on the nature of counselling and noted that ‘personal counselling is necessary for a significant number of students at some time during their school career’ (p.10).

**Code of Ethics (IGC)**

The Preamble to the Code of Ethics notes that:

1.1 Guidance Counsellors work with clients, individually and in groups, to whom they supply professional services concerning educational, vocational and personal/social development;

1.2 Guidance Counsellors respect the dignity, integrity and welfare of their clients. They work in ways which promote clients’ control over their own lives, and they respect clients’ ability to make decisions and engage in personal change in the light of their own beliefs and values;
1.3 The professional services offered by Guidance Counsellors involve a special relationship of trust and confidence. Guidance Counsellors are responsible for maintaining trust by setting and monitoring appropriate boundaries in the relationship, and making this explicit to the client and relevant others;

1.4 It is the duty of Guidance Counsellors:
(a) To comply with the provisions of the Code of Ethics.
(b) Not to engage in conduct (whether in pursuit of their profession or otherwise) which is dishonest, or which may otherwise bring to the profession of Guidance and Counselling into disrepute, or which is prejudicial to the administration of justice.
(c) To observe the ethics and etiquette of the profession.
(d) To be competent in all their professional activities.

1.5 The relationship with the client is the foremost concern of the Guidance Counsellor, but it does not exist in a social vacuum. For this reason, Guidance Counsellors have sensible regard for the social context of their work, which includes colleagues, the law and the wider community;

1.6 Guidance Counsellors are recommended to deal with ethical dilemmas by engaging in the formal decision-making process presented in Appendix A;

1.7 The Institute of Guidance Counsellors strongly recommends supervision as an integral part of the professional practice of members.

The Code of Ethics then gives details on best practice with regard to competence, conduct, confidentiality, consent, testing and evaluation and research.

Code of Ethics and Practice for Supervisors of Guidance Counsellors (IGC, 2009)

This Code of Ethics and Practice for Supervisors of Guidance Counsellors was drafted by the IGC Supervision Sub-Committee. In its preamble, it defines supervision as:

an effective means of assisting guidance counsellors to maintain and enhance their competence by providing continuing clinical skill development, ongoing consultation regarding legal and ethical issues and a professional support system that can mitigate stress and burnout. (IGC, 2009, p.1).

It distinguishes between clinical and administrative supervision and between the supervision needs of guidance counsellors engaged in guidance counselling with adults in Further Education, Higher Education or Adult Education, and those who work in second-level schools where the majority of the students are under eighteen and thus minors. The authors of the document note that the scope and complexities of the work of guidance counsellors who work with minors in second-level schools is ‘unique in the world of counselling and counselling supervision’ (p.1).

Guidance counsellors are described as participating in three main areas of activity:
- Personal/Social Guidance and Counselling
- Educational Guidance and Counselling
- Vocational Guidance and Counselling

The word ‘huge’ was used to describe their workloads, which included:

Having a duty of care for hundreds of students, providing counselling, taking classes (sometimes even subject teaching), administering aptitude and interests tests to assist in subject and career choice and having the responsibility of guiding all school leavers into a suitable career. (IGC, 2009, p.1).
The document detailed the complicated situations in which students have acute counselling needs that guidance counsellors routinely deal with, including:

- depression, anxiety, stress, suicidal tendencies,
- pregnancy, gender issues, substance abuse,
- physical/psychological bullying, violence, physical or sexual abuse etc.

(IGC, 2009, p.2).

The Organisational Context section of the Code gives a very clear description of how guidance counsellors work as part of a team and advises supervisors that:

When working with guidance counsellor supervisees it is essential to be conscious of her/his many and intricate work relationships with the above personnel, her/his roles and functions within the school and how her/his working days can be unpredictable, no matter how carefully pre-planned. The guidance counsellor is constantly challenged to prioritise and make decisions about multiple demands on her/his time.

(IGC, 2009, p.2).

Differences between counselling adults and school-based counselling are pointed out and the guidance counsellor working in schools is described as:

Having responsibility for students who are generally minors, who are referred or who self-refer, and who occasionally might even be seeing the guidance counsellor under duress as part of the disciplinary process.

The culture and ethos of the school is described in the documents as having ‘a huge impact on the counselling relationship’ and the challenges on the guidance counsellor to ‘walk a tightrope between maintaining confidentiality and imparting sufficient information to protect the student within the disciplinary structures essential to the satisfactory running of a school’ (p.3).

The Code of Ethics and Practice for Supervisors addresses the issue of confidentiality in detail and provides a comprehensive description of the Code of Ethics and Practice. The appendix contains a problem-solving protocol for supervisors and supervisees.

Looking at Guidance in Second-Level Schools (DES, 2009)

This report is based on 55 inspection reports carried out in the academic year 2006-7 (DES, 2009) and is based on observations of practice and discussions with management, staff members and students, as well as examination of documents. A number of the Inspectors’ main conclusions are especially relevant in the present context:

1. The provision of personal and social, educational and career guidance was well balanced in the majority of schools;
2. Most schools had support structures in place in the form of a team which included the guidance counsellor, special education co-ordinator and chaplain and other key staff;
3. In the majority of schools, there was collaboration between the guidance counsellor and special-educational needs co-ordinators, and with chaplains and with Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinators;
4. Some interaction between guidance personnel and parents was found in all schools.

As part of the inspection programme focusing on guidance, a questionnaire was given to 1,129 senior cycle students from 55 post-primary schools in 2006–2007. The results showed that almost six in ten students (59%) said that they have had an interview with their guidance counsellor since beginning to study for the Leaving Certificate. Relatively more female students reported having had such an interview than males, and the proportion of students
who had such interviews increased with the size of the school.

Students were asked to whom they would go for advice and help with a personal problem. As is frequently found with this kind of question, the majority of students indicated they would turn to friends (75%) and family (67%). With regard to school personnel, 18% said that they would go to a guidance counsellor, 16% said that they would go to a year head/class tutor or chaplain and 15% said they would go to a class teacher.

Also of interest is a question to students on what had been the most helpful part of the guidance service that they received. While information on courses/colleges was identified by 36% of the students, one-to-one meetings with guidance counsellors was identified by 12%.

**Issues Emerging**

The review of these policy documents warrants a number of conclusions. Firstly, counselling by guidance counsellors is one of seven guidance activities that have been prescribed. Thus, counselling is embedded in a range of related activities in which guidance counsellors are involved. Secondly, the policies in relation to counselling by guidance counsellors have evolved over the years and have been influenced by the practice of both the American and UK systems, as well as by the requirements of the Education Act. Thirdly, the provision for counselling is an indication of the need for student support – a need that is accepted as being relatively greater in recent years. In this regard, there is an acceptance that a comprehensive student care system requires more than any one staff member within a school. The next section examines the evidence regarding the challenges experienced by young people as well as international evidence regarding school counselling.

**Empirical Studies Relevant to Counselling by Guidance Counsellors in Ireland**

Ryan (1993) circulated a questionnaire to the 565 members of the IGC and received a response rate of 61%. He presented the problems of adolescents under seven sections, i.e. problems which were home-related, sexually-related, emotionally-related, school-related, crime-related, health-related and religion-related. He referred to school as having ‘taken on the character of being an oasis of stability between an increasingly insecure and unstable family life and an equally uncertain and uninviting marketplace’ (p.79). Guidance counsellors reported that they spent 21% of their time on personal counselling as compared with 40% on career guidance, 28% on classroom teaching and 8% on other official activities. Ryan’s report painted a stark picture of guidance counsellors who described themselves as having ‘just too many people to deal with, too many problems banging on the door, too much unfinished business everywhere’ (Ryan 1993, p. 66). Ryan noted that there were mixed opinions as to what the counselling dimension in schools should entail, with most seeing that the role of career guidance and personal counselling cannot be separated, as a student might go to a guidance counsellor to discuss subject-choice or career-choice, but move quickly to discussing a serious personal issue. This led to Ryan concluding that ‘the real issue appears to be not so much should the school confront these problems, but that no time is allocated to counselling in the school programme’ (Ryan, 1993, p.70).

Ryan’s research also looked at guidance counsellors’ perceptions of support from their Principals, colleagues and from the Department of Education and found that 63% of respondents reported that their Principals were supportive of their work. It was clear that school Principals vary, with some seeing the need for both careers information and a pastoral
care counselling presence in the school, while the majority were reported as seeing the need only for career information and not understanding the latter. There was also a lack of understanding about the nature of the guidance counsellor’s role from other members of the school staff. In general, the Department of Education’s level of understanding, recognition and support of the guidance counsellors was viewed as low, with specific criticisms focusing on the lack of resources, the poor back-up service available to counsellors, the paucity of in-service training on all aspects of the work, especially that of career guidance, and no updating or research on aptitude testing. Ryan cautioned that if guidance counsellors ‘go greatly beyond their resources, then nothing is done well and even priorities get lost’ (Ryan, 1993, p.80).

The study by McKenna et al., (1997) was concerned with Principals’ perceptions of guidance services in post-primary schools.

These researchers noted that:

In the Irish context, it might be argued that existing research gives us a good deal of information regarding the historical development of the guidance service, the role of the guidance counsellor in schools in terms of the types of work undertaken, the division of time, and to an extent, the type of student problems encountered. What is, by and large, missing from the research to date is rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of the guidance service, in terms of achievement of goals; the nature and extent of training of counsellors; and adequacy of support services. (McKenna et al., 1997, p.12).

McKenna and his colleagues worked to rectify a gap in research into students’ perceptions of the guidance counselling service and reported that from their sample of 274 post-primary students and 25 adult education providers, 58% of students said that the only significant guidance they had received was information, while many students said they had received no guidance at all. This contrasted with the reports of the guidance providers which were more positive. McKenna et al. described the finding that 66% of students reported getting no help in making decisions on the key questions of course and institution choice as ‘staggering’, and noted that only 13% had said they had got a lot of help. However, it is encouraging that the overwhelming majority of students and providers when asked to rate the desirability of having a guidance service, saw it as very desirable or desirable.

In their introduction section, McKenna et al. noted that:

The focus of the research was primarily on the experience and perception of the Principals as indicated in the responses to the questionnaire and recorded in interviews. It must be emphasised that perceptions are just that – views, feelings and opinions and the outcomes of this study should be seen in that context. (McKenna et al., 1997, p.4).

The study by the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) on the Professional Profile of Guidance Counsellors was carried out in 2003/4 and is included as an Appendix in the DES review (2006). The study was undertaken to ‘facilitate the Minister …in her review of the guidance and counselling system in Ireland’. The response rate for the study was extremely high (93%) and 76% of the schools in the Irish Republic are represented. For present purposes, the most relevant data came from 715 respondents who are employed as guidance counsellors in 568 second-level schools, particularly as the information relates to time spent on personal counselling.

Of the 715 respondents in the study, 248 returned information on time spent on ‘one- to-one
counselling’ and the average was 5 hours per week. Among this group, the reported time spent with year groups ranged from 10% with First Years to 24% with Sixth Years. It is interesting to compare these figures with the time spent on one-to-one career guidance; slightly more guidance counsellors (274) returned information on this point and the average time per week was 6 hours. However, an important difference compared to the counselling time data was that 58% of time on one-to-one guidance was spent with Sixth Years.

The lack of information on personal counselling time from over 60% of the sample should not be taken as indicating that no service was available. When guidance counsellors were asked to indicate the areas in which they provide a service (class contact, careers guidance, academic guidance, personal counselling), 66% indicated that they were providing a service of ‘personal counselling’.

Some guidance counsellors reported participation in various school programmes. Just under a third of the sample said they had an involvement in the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and almost the same number in the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme. Rather fewer of the respondents indicated that they were involved in a pastoral programme, work experience or Social Personal and Health Education. For those involved in these programmes, the time involved ranged from 1 hour 36 minutes for pastoral care to 2 hours for the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme.

The Review of Guidance in Second-Level Schools (DES, 2006) is based on the following four strands of inquiry: (i) a quantitative and qualitative study of the use of resources provided for guidance counsellors, carried out by the NCGE, (ii) a survey of 260 second-levels schools (carried out by the ESRI), (iii) in-depth case studies of Principals, Deputy Principals, guidance counsellors and students in fifteen schools drawn from those involved in strand two, and (iv) focus group interviews with stakeholders, including parents and students. A number of findings are of major interest in relation to this current research:

1. Some schools reported an under-utilisation of hours available to them by indicating that the ex-quota allocation for their schools was lower than it actually was.

2. Counselling, and in particular individual one-to-one counselling, ‘was seen by Principals as one of the major strengths of the guidance programme’ (p.14) and two-thirds of Principals expressed satisfaction with personal guidance/counselling.

3. Principals were generally satisfied with the support structures (like pastoral care) available to students in their schools and nearly two-thirds of guidance counsellors took the same view.

4. Principals, students and parents all referred to the issue of the multiple roles of guidance counsellors. These seemed to involve conflicting demands in terms of time and the nature of the different roles of subject teacher and guidance counsellor, e.g. some students indicated difficulties in consulting a subject teacher in a counselling role. While they were certain of the need for a service involving individual counselling, there was less agreement on how this should be structured.
Overview of Relevant Research on Challenges Facing Young People

Challenges Facing Young People

This section looks at evidence on the challenges that young people face in the course of their adolescent years. In particular, it focuses on research studies that examined well-being, substance use and consequences, self-harm, fears/anxiety and diet/health.

Issues around Well-being

O’Brien (2008) reviews the literature on well-being and post-primary schooling, and sets studies carried out in Ireland in the context of international findings. A number of conclusions from this review are especially pertinent to the present study:

1. With respect to mental health, ‘there is a widespread malaise in society that is expressed in the mental health and risk behaviour of adolescents, particularly groups who have suffered social exclusion and forms of ethnic and cultural discrimination’ (p. 88);

2. Given the link between material wealth and well-being, some young people are significantly at risk of multiple exclusions, affecting their well-being, as a result of relative poverty;

3. Schools have an important impact on well-being. In particular, school is a significant place for social development.

Substance Use

With regard to substance use, the recently completed ESPAD study (Morgan & Brand, 2009) shows that the vast majority (86%) of Irish students have experimented with alcohol by the age of 16. Almost one-quarter of adolescents have drunk alcohol 40 times or more in their lifetime. Furthermore, over half of them (54%) have been drunk at least once. More than one in five have tried cannabis, and 15% of respondents have tried inhalants or solvents, at some time in their lives. It is of particular interest in the present context that the respondents express satisfaction with the way in which schools prepare them to resist pressure to experiment with substances and to make them aware of issues surrounding use.

The recent report published by the National Advisory Committee on Drugs (Haase & Pratschke, 2010) presents the results of a study of substance use among young people in Ireland, based on information collected in face-to-face interviews with 991 people, aged between 15 and 18. The target population comprised school-attending students and young people who, having left school, were attending either a Youthreach Centre for Education or FÁS Community Training Centre. Several risk and protective factors were identified at the personal, family and community levels. From the present perspective, those pertaining to the school/centre are especially relevant. Some of the most significant protective factors found in this study relate to the young person’s overall school experience. If a school student feels that he or she has a positive relationship with supportive teachers or has a positive school experience, this has a huge effect in terms of reducing the risk of drinking alcohol and using cannabis or other drugs. The authors conclude that this outcome is likely to involve reciprocal effects. Students who have a satisfying and enjoyable school experience are less likely to use/abuse substances, and those who do not use substances are more likely to have a good relationship with teachers and school. It also emerged that unmet counselling needs experienced by those attending centres for education or training are associated with higher alcohol consumption.
Furthermore, significant effects were detected with regard to school policies and it was quite striking to find that the number of substance-use classes or information sessions for parents is associated with a lower risk of cigarette smoking.

Relationships and Sexuality

Studies have revealed a high level of sexual risk-taking among teenagers in Ireland. Mayock and Byrne (2004) found great diversity in the range and quality of young people's sexual knowledge and in the perceived value of the knowledge sources available to them (school, home, peers, media). There is also evidence from international studies that embarrassment, fear of negative reactions and lack of communication skills militate against discussion between boys and girls with regard to sexual matters.

A national study of the implementation of the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme indicated that in only two-thirds of schools had the implementation of the programme actually improved since the mid-Nineties (Mayock, Kitching, & Morgan, 2007). It was of particular interest that while no major difference emerged within the schools surveyed in terms of school type, size or location, there was a widespread consensus that boys' schools were lower implementers of RSE – a finding that corresponds broadly with previous research on SPHE (Geary & Mannix-MacNamara, 2003). The tendency for boys' schools to give less attention to RSE might be attributed to ‘…prevailing discourse about males’ developmental levels, maturity ….and reactions to RSE’ (Mayock et al., p. 229).

Bullying

Virtually every study that has examined the prevalence of bullying in schools has found that a substantial number of children report being bullied. The recently-completed PISA study (Eivers et al., 2008) showed that 43% of Irish children reported at least one form of bullying and that 14% said that they experienced three or more forms. It is a particular concern that the more forms of bullying experienced, the poorer the academic performance. It is also a concern that experiencing bullying in school predicts subsequent early school leaving.

A study by Mayock et al. (2009) is of particular interest since it focuses on the mental health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) young people. The study showed that LGBT youth become aware of their identity at age 12-14 years on average. Their reports of their experiences in school, particularly evidence of homophobic bullying, are concerning. Just half of the participants in the study said that they were called by abusive names relating to their sexual orientation, while a substantial number (25-40%) were threatened either physically or verbally by other students. The consequences of such experiences should be understood in the context of the high level of self-harm and suicidal ideation among LGBT students; one-third had seriously thought about ending their lives.

Transitions

The study by Smyth et al., (2004) in the study of transition from primary to post-primary showed that difficulties in this process can contribute to subsequent educational failure. The estimate in that study was that about one in ten students experienced such transition difficulties and among the factors involved were the move to a larger school, adjusting to a new peer group, the number of teachers, being of lower ability and personality factors. It was striking that transition difficulties were relatively more common among students with low self-confidence. There was also evidence that realistic expectations play an important role in adjustment following transition. Where there was ample contact between the primary and post-primary school, students and parents got a better
idea of what to expect. In line with this, induction and integration programmes could play a useful part, particularly when these were underpinned by a positive, informal school climate.

It was of particular interest that in the Smyth et al. (2004) study, teachers did not place great emphasis on the number of subjects being taught or on family support. Furthermore, while bullying emerged as an important issue in all of the schools, Principals did not see this as the case. This raises important questions which will be taken up below.

Self-harm and Suicide

Some recent studies in Ireland have examined the issue of prevalence of self-harm and associated factors. Sullivan et al. (2004) reported on the results of a representative sample of 3,800 15-17 year olds in Ireland. Serious personal, emotional, behavioural or mental health problems were reported by 27%. Of these only 18% had received professional help. Girls were more likely to display signs of both depression (8.4%) and anxiety (12.7%) than boys (5.1% and 5.8% respectively). The study also showed that about 9% of teenagers had engaged in self-harm, with girls three times more likely to do so than boys. A study by Lynch et al. (2006) involved 720 12-15 year olds in eight schools. The rate of suicidal ideation (2%) was similar to that in other Western countries.

While there are numerous risk factors for suicide, it is particularly interesting that some factors are particularly relevant to educational influences and to counselling in particular. These include deficits in interpersonal problem-solving, which result in an inability to think flexibly about available options in response to a problem (Sullivan et al., 2004). Thus, when young people are required to generate solutions to social dilemmas, those who generate fewer or inappropriate solutions are found to be more at risk of suicidal ideation, which in turn is a major risk factor for suicide.

A psycho-educational programme aiming to help adolescents cope, and which was delivered to over 70 young adolescents by Irish guidance counsellors, was found to be effective in reducing depression and in increasing the ability to cope (Hayes & Morgan, 2005; Hayes, 2004; Hayes, 2001). Examples of the diversity of psycho-educational programmes have included: helping young people at risk of dropping out of school prematurely (Hayes & Morgan, 2005); changing young people's explanatory style from pessimism to optimism (Hayes, 2001); coping with sexual transitions (Morgan, 2000); treating conduct disorders (Hayes & Morgan, 2005); preventing teenage pregnancy (Mayock & Byrne, 2004); and treating anxiety (Hayes, 2001).

While psycho-educational programmes have proved to be of value, they may also have drawbacks (Hayes, 2006). For example, Diekstra et al. (1995) question the ethics of providing suicide prevention programmes as they are concerned that 'in their attempts to ‘de-stigmatise’ suicide, some school-based suicide prevention programmes may be normalising the behaviour and reducing potentially protective taboos' (p. 735).

Diet and Health

There is concern about weight and obesity among all age groups in Ireland but particularly in young people. While this is a common concern in all Western countries, a major issue is the concern with body image and the subsequent impact on self-esteem. The increase in eating disorders among young people, particularly girls, is indicative of a discrepancy between reality and an unreal ideal of body image. Recent research has indicated that social rejection of overweight young people has increased dramatically in recent decades and that
this is particularly the case among young people who are overweight themselves (O’Brien, 2008).

There are indications that adolescents are becoming increasingly concerned about the rapid increase in obesity, anorexia and bulimia (Santrock, 2009).

**Early School Leaving**

Despite several policy initiatives, the number of young people who quit school before completing the Leaving Certificate has remained stubbornly high (around 17% Joint Oireachtas Committee, 2010, Byrne & Smyth, 2010). Of the demographic factors that are associated with early school leaving, gender, geographical location and social background are the most significant. Twice as many boys as girls finish early, and there are major differences between rural and urban areas: the completion rate for Leitrim is 91% while that for Dublin is only 72%. Young people whose parents are in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations (or unemployed) are less likely to complete the senior cycle than those whose parents are professionals, but the gap has narrowed substantially over the last two decades. Young people with a farming background are as likely as children of professionals to complete the Leaving Certificate.

From the perspective of the present study, it is noteworthy that experiences during post-primary school are a major factor in the decision not to complete. Relevant experiences include being bullied, being ‘in trouble’ in school and a disengagement from learning. What is of particular interest is that the decision to quit is part of a process that may involve months or even years. These findings have important implications for guidance counselling in schools.

**Family Issues**

There is substantial evidence that parental influences and specifically marital transitions have a major influence on children’s adjustment. Hetherington & Elmore (2003) summarised the findings on the effects of parental divorce/conflict on children and found that such experiences often resulted in externalising behaviours as well as less social responsibility and lower academic attainment. However, they also identified factors promoting resilience in these circumstances including the absence of overt conflict, as well as good relationships outside the family. A similar study in Ireland by the Children’s Research Centre in Trinity College (2002) showed that the direct impact on the child was a major factor in the outcome. Specifically, if a divorce results in the departure of one parent and if other experiences of the child remained as they had been (schools, friends, grandparents) then the impact was quite limited in contrast to situations where a child had to move house, school and away from their friends.
Emerging Issues in School Counselling in the International Literature

Overview
Here evaluations of counselling in the international literature are considered with particular focus on mainland UK as well as Northern Ireland. It is important to understand that the provisions for counselling described in these studies are quite different from those in Ireland. What is particular noteworthy is that the structures for counselling vary from one country to another and even, in the case of the USA, from one state to another. In the UK, counselling services are frequently provided by agencies that work independently of the school. In the USA, there are professional school counsellors who implement a school counselling programme that promotes and enhances student achievement. Some states have set out frameworks for appropriate and inappropriate school counsellor responsibilities and, in most USA states, practitioners usually have a Master’s degree in school counselling from a Counsellor Education graduate programme. In Canada, counselling can only be carried out by licensed teachers with additional school counselling training and the focus is on academic, career, and personal/social issues.

As noted above, the specific focus of our research is on counselling by guidance counsellors while the reports that we consider below are concerned with counselling that may or may not involve schools’ staff. However, these studies are valuable in that they describe the models of counselling and some involve pre- and post-assessments, thus allowing some indication of the effectiveness of the process. This section considers some recent issues in the international literature with regard to the following topics:

(i) The distinctive role of school counsellors;
(ii) The effectiveness of school counselling based on emerging evidence from evaluations;
(iii) Factors contributing to the well-being/stress of school counsellors.

Mainland UK
At least six evaluations of counselling in post-primary schools have been carried out in mainland UK (Cooper, 2006; Jenkins & Polat, 2004, Lines, 2001). As noted above, the counselling service to students is not provided by guidance counsellors as in Ireland but counsellors who provide a service to the schools in particular areas. In the studies reviewed, the model of counselling in each one is described as person-centred or ‘humanistic’ and the forms of referral fall into two broad categories; self-referral and teacher/pastoral-care referral. All of these studies reported that students in the age-groups 12 to 14 years were most likely to attend counselling with a substantial drop among older students. There was a tendency for girls to be more likely to attend counselling sessions but this difference was not a major one.

An important question concerns the major issues that the young people brought to counselling. Across these studies, family matters was the most common and relationships, anxiety/stress and behaviour were also quite common. There was also evidence in some studies of gender differences with regard to issues, with girls more likely to present with family and relationship issues while boys more often were concerned with anger and behaviour matters.

In three of the studies reviewed here, pre- and post-counselling measures of mental health and well-being were administered using a variety of instruments that have been shown to have strong reliability. The data indicated that clients of counselling were significantly less distressed on completion of the...
counselling sessions, compared with the beginning, and where follow-up assessments were made, the improvements were maintained. There were some other indications of satisfaction in addition to test measures. The clients' ratings in each study were generally positive, with about two-thirds to three-quarters of the students indicating that the experience of counselling was helpful. In addition, in those studies in which the question was asked, the majority of the students who had been involved in counselling expressed a readiness to see the counsellor again. While the views of teachers were sought in a form that is somewhat more general ('Counselling can make a difference to the lives of students'), there was a generally positive response.

A particularly interesting feature is the aspect of counselling which was found to be most helpful by the students. Fairly consistently, the most helpful aspects of counselling included 'having an opportunity to talk and be listened to'. Confidentiality was regarded as extremely important in seeking out the help of the counsellor.

It is instructive to see what areas and suggestions for improvement emerged in the UK studies. One was a need to have greater communication between counsellors and pastoral care staff. It was especially the case that teachers wanted information on the progress that students were making in counselling and on anything they could do to facilitate their pupils’ development. However, it is important to note that the most common response to the question about the problems with counselling was 'none'.

The research on counselling in schools in Wales (BACP, 2007) is broader in scope than in some other UK schools since it focuses on the broader questions of the services available to young people. The research which aimed to evaluate counselling services in operation in Wales and other parts of the UK was sufficiently robust and flexible enough to apply more widely. In particular, it explored whether counselling services were adaptable enough to fit in with the new planning and joint working arrangements that would be put in place as part of developments under the Children Act 2004. The research objectives of this qualitative and quantitative study included finding out how counselling services currently operating in Wales were planned, managed and evaluated, reviewing the different models that were in existence, considering their advantages and disadvantages and putting forward proposals for a range of suitable counselling models that could operate across Wales. The study found a great variety of counselling models were carried out by teaching staff or by a multi-agency team, but based in the school. In contrast, other models involved external agencies which operated either in the school or in an out-of-school environment. Overall, there was an increase in the number of schools providing a service over the last number of years, with about three-quarters of secondary schools providing a counselling service.

The study made several recommendations, including one to employ professionally-qualified counsellors who have experience of working with young people, who access appropriate clinical supervision with experienced supervisors, and who take part in regular, relevant continuing professional development. They pointed to the need to deliver accessible counselling in an appropriately private but safe setting within the school vicinity. The report emphasised the need for a non-stigmatising service that should be a normal part of school provision and integrated into the school community. They also suggested that the service be monitored and evaluated by individuals or an agency (in or out of the school) with experience in this specialised area of work. They
recommended employing counsellors who were members of a professional body with established ethical framework and complaints procedure and employing counsellors whose personal qualities would mean that they were approachable, had good listening skills and a manner that encouraged a climate for safe and trusting relationships.

School Counselling in Northern Ireland
The service to students in Northern Ireland is broadly similar to that in mainland UK. A study of the counselling service (Baginsky, 2003) has produced a number of interesting outcomes. The vast majority (87%) of students who were asked knew of the existence of the service. They also thought that having such a service was at least ‘useful’ although there seemed to be uncertainty about the boundaries of confidentiality. In response to the question about why it might be valuable to avail of counselling, a common response was ‘having someone to talk to’ or ‘to help solve a problem’. In some way, the reasons given for not seeing a counsellor were a mirror of these, including ‘prefer to talk to someone else’ or ‘prefer to keep the problem to myself’. That study also gives an indication of the kind of topics that students think might be appropriate for discussion with counsellors. They included bullying, family matters, relationships and various issues that could be categorised as ‘emotional health and well-being’.

In the Baginsky study, a questionnaire was also given to a sample of 248 teachers and classroom assistants. All were aware of the existence of the service and all agreed that this service was either ‘essential’ or ‘important’. In the views of the teachers, the existing service was ‘fitting in’ very well with the needs of the schools. A number of major benefits were identified in the service. These included having someone to whom students could talk to confidentially, having a person who was independent and had the appropriate training and had the time to listen. A number of suggestions were made as to how the service might be improved. These included the need for feedback by counsellors to teachers, the employment of more counsellors, the need to raise awareness about the service amongst pupils and the establishment of a system of self-referral.

Role of School Counsellors
There is a consensus in the international literature (e.g. Baginsky, 2003) that many aspects of counselling in school are not well established, including the training and supports available to counsellors. There is, however, agreement on the major issues that need to be investigated in relation to school counselling. These include the need for clarification of what school counselling is, the particular aims of school counselling, the models of school counselling that are most appropriate and the importance of the social and educational context.

With regard to what school counselling is, attention has been drawn to the many levels at which such counselling can operate. Chesterman et al. (1999) distinguished between ad hoc ‘emotional support’ that school staff provide to students, ‘informal counselling/mentoring’ that occurs alongside other roles and relationships and ‘formal counselling’ involving a young person seeing a school counsellor by appointment. The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) similarly distinguishes between counselling skills that may be used by school staff and the work of professional counsellors (BACP, 2001), emphasising the contractual nature of the counselling relationship, particularly the ‘planned setting aside of time for the process’ and, in its definition of counselling, emphasises ‘…exploring specific problems, making choices, coping with crises, working through
feelings of inner conflict and improving relationships with others’ (p.2).

Other work has emphasised different aspects of counselling. In a detailed treatment of this issue, McGuinness (1998) mentioned two features that were especially significant in the context of school counselling. The first was that it should be the client who is in charge of the process (rather than the counsellor) and, secondly, that counselling is about the concerns of people who are not mentally ill (in a psychiatric sense). The latter point is especially important since it forges a link between counselling and the social-emotional development of young people. Some research has drawn attention to the specific assets of a school as a site for counselling, particularly the absence of stigma that may be associated with a specialist service located in a non-school context (Bor, 2002).

There is a considerable body of research on different models of counselling in schools. Traditionally, a strongly-held view was that the person-centred approach of Carl Rogers was particularly suited to young people because of the positive experiences of clients and was especially popular in the Sixties and Seventies (Lines, 2002). In more recent times, cognitive behavioural approaches have become well-regarded. Besides its success in other domains, part of the reason for the popularity of CBT in schools is that its underpinnings are consistent with what students are already familiar with, especially in relation to study (Platts & Williamson, 2000). Other research has drawn attention to the possibilities of solution-focused brief therapy. For example, King & Kellock (2002) suggest that its focus on achievable goals helps the client to accept this approach and renders its use in school settings as very appropriate.

The view has sometimes been expressed that psycho-dynamic therapy is not practical in a school setting, regardless of the skills of the counsellor, partly because of the time required for exploration of issues and the requirement of the capacity for analysis and articulation (Lines, 2002). This reflects a consensus in the literature that the actual approach taken is less important than aligning the approach with what is possible in a school context, taking into account the circumstances and constraints.

Impact of Counselling Programmes on Student Development

A major body of research (largely from the US) has examined the impact of school counselling and counsellors on student development. It is worth noting that school counselling in the US is not unlike the service in Ireland in the sense that counsellors are normally staff members in the school and have other duties, especially in relation to career guidance and preparing students for college entrance tests.

A US study by Lapan, Gysbers & Sun (1997) showed that High School students who attended schools where there were comprehensive guidance programmes reported positive school experiences (including higher grades) and students felt that they were better prepared for the future. In addition, there were positive associations between implementation of such programmes and students’ feelings of safety and belonging in school, and their perception of more appropriate behaviour on the part of their peers.

Similarly, Nelson and Gardner (1998) found that students in High Schools with fully-implemented counselling programmes rated their overall education as better and had better scores on college entrance tests than students in other schools in the same state (Utah). Schneider and Stevenson (1999), also in the US, were concerned more with the combination of guidance and counselling. They examined ‘misaligned ambitions’ i.e., the mismatch
between what a students understand about the requirements of a particular occupation and what is actually required. In their study, students in schools with comprehensive counselling programmes (including guidance) were less likely to have misaligned ambitions.

Lapan et al. (2001) carried out a state-wide study. They were interested in the impact of five important indices of safety and the success of well-implemented counselling and guidance programmes. The indices included, as well as grades, students’ satisfaction with their education, and perception of safety in school and their relationships with teachers. The results showed that well-implemented programmes were indeed associated with each of these favourable outcomes. The authors of the study conclude that when comprehensive guidance and counselling programmes are implemented, that ‘counsellors move out of marginalised positions and into essential roles that promote essential……. objectives for students’ (p.327).

Counsellors’ Well-being
A number of recently published studies have been concerned about issues of counsellor self-care and, particularly, compassion, fatigue and burn-out. Lambie et al., (2010) showed that many professional school counsellors in the USA can perform their counselling work with empathy and flexibility while at the same time giving attention to boundary-setting and self-care. Rye & Spark (1999) noted that school counsellors are in the front line for dealing with youth suicide. Their study identified three factors as being crucial for continuing effective professional functioning, viz., training and practice standards, support resources and self-care.

Newsome et al., (2006) reported on a course entitled Mind/Body Medicine and the Art of Self-Care, which addressed personal and professional growth through self-care and mindfulness practices. Three methods were used to gauge the effectiveness of the course; the results showed positive changes for students in learning how to manage stress and improve counselling practice. The study reported positive physical, emotional, spiritual and interpersonal changes and most students indicated their intention of integrating mindfulness practices into their future professional work.
4. Summary of Issues Arising, Gaps in Research and Implications

In this chapter, we have examined policies and practices on counselling (guidance counsellors) in Irish schools, the evidence regarding the major challenges/problems faced by young people in Ireland and some of the issues on counselling in schools emerging in international literature. Here, we examine some of the gaps in the literature, particularly as these relate to implications for counselling in post-primary schools in Ireland. These include the methodological limitations of the studies, the way which the challenges faced by young people can be alleviated by other experiences (protective factors and resilience) and the uncertain nature of the relationship between the problems young people experience and the manifestations in school. Finally, we consider the implications for the design of the present research.

Methodological Questions

Virtually all of the information on the challenges facing young people considered in Part 2 above comes from self-report questionnaires. In some cases (e.g. substance use), a number of studies have been carried out so that the resultant picture is more convincing than the results of a single survey. In other cases (e.g. self-harm), the emerging indications are reliant on very few studies. Even with regard to issues on which objective information is available (e.g. early school leaving), the importance of school factors is frequently reliant on self-reports.

Another methodological and conceptual question concerns the baseline above which we should consider that a certain result indicates a serious problem. An example in this regard is the prevalence of bullying; any study in this area shows a certain prevalence of the experience of being a victim (and always a much lower level of being the bully), even in studies in Scandinavian countries with the most progressive anti-bullying policies. The same point can be made in relation to substance misuse, where judgements may be even more problematic.

Interactions of Events

An important question centres on the relative importance of the affective intensity of an event as opposed to the frequency with which that event occurs. For example, traumatic experiences have a powerful impact but occur infrequently, while low-level stressors have a less powerful emotional impact but occur more often (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). There is little information on how the factors interact and what the net effect is on well-being. A recent study on the everyday stresses in teachers’ lives showed that the frequency of negative events was a more powerful predictor of life satisfaction than was the intensity of these same events (Morgan et al., 2010).

Another unanswered question is how positive experience in a young person’s life interacts with negative events. One of the most interesting developments in recent years is the finding that, despite very negative experiences in early childhood (and in the years beyond), children can go on to have lives that are not much different from those who did have such experiences (Goldstein & Brooks, 2006). It is particularly interesting to identify the factors that have been shown to confer such resilience. The consensus of the evidence summarised in Luthar (2003) has set out some of the factors that may contribute to preventing problems in a high-risk environment and it is especially interesting that school can play an important role in this regard. She notes the consistent evidence that children who have higher intelligence or better problem-solving skills are more likely than their peers to ‘bounce back’ following adversity. For example,
children whose parents have divorced and who subsequently do well in school are less likely to experience problems than those whose school performance is mediocre or poor (Luthar, 2003). The case for the contribution of social support to resilience has been argued by Gilligan (2008) in the context of children in care or leaving care; he has argued for the importance of building social support through recreational activities and work.

**Issues for Schools**

One of the most difficult matters for schools concerns which of the various problems experienced by young people are likely to emerge in school and the related question of which issues a school is obliged to get involved in. One way of describing the problems encountered by young people is in terms of the proximity to school influences. For some experiences, school plays very little part in the problem (family conflict) while in others (bullying in school), it could be argued that the school has an immediate influence on the occurrence of the behaviour. However, to say that schools should only be concerned with problems that have their origin in school suggests a limited role for school (and by implication for guidance counsellors) that would hardly find favour with most professionals working in this area.

A related issue concerns the likelihood that a young person will want to divulge a particular problem in school. It is evident that a variety of influences operate to preclude such divulgence, even when a problem is extremely serious. As well as the publicised Tribunal findings, it is interesting that the SAVI study (McGee et al., 2004) showed that only half of people who have experienced abuse told anyone until the telephone interview that led to the disclosure. There are additional difficulties and pressures when a counsellor may also be identified as a teacher in the student’s school. As a result, schools frequently may not have an accurate or complete picture of the lives of their students either at the individual or collective level. One of the studies on bullying, noted above, showed a remarkable discrepancy between the perception of the Principal and those of the students.

**Implications for Study Design**

We conclude that the available research on the challenges faced by young people and on the nature of counselling in schools (in the national and international literature) does not provide a basis for expectations regarding the issues that young people are likely to bring to counselling by guidance counsellors. The range of possible issues and the factors that might prevent these emerging are too complex to advance any hypotheses as to what is likely to emerge.

On this basis, we have formed the view that a mixed methods design (involving a quantitative and qualitative approach) is most likely to provide answers to the questions set out. As will be apparent in the next chapter, this approach has gained favour (especially in educational research) and avoids some of the objections that have been made to quantitative and qualitative approaches, respectively.
Chapter 3: 
Research Methodology

This chapter sets out the rationale of various kinds of research methodology in current research in education and the specific reasons for opting for a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2009). The methodology for the three phases of the study (the survey, the focus groups and the interviews with identified stakeholders) is explained.

1. Competing Research Paradigms and the Mixed Methods Approach

For most of the last 20 years, the advocates of quantitative and qualitative research have been involved in enthusiastic and sometimes acrimonious debate. Purists in the quantitative tradition argue that social science inquiry should be objective and that context-free generalisations can be determined reliably and validly, through the testing of hypotheses based on the theoretical assumptions. In contrast, qualitative researchers reject what they call this positivist approach and argue that a superior approach should involve interpretative, constructionist, humanistic or (sometimes) post-modern approach (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). They argue that context-free generalisations are not possible or even desirable and that the knower and the known cannot be separated because the subjective knower is the only source of reality. Several other features distinguish qualitative and quantitative theorists including writing style but one feature is particularly striking, viz. the tendency in qualitative research to prefer inductive methods. The classic approach of quantitative research is the hypothesis from which an outcome is predicted (deductive approach) while qualitative researchers prefer the inductive approach, going from the specific to the general.

Some proponents of each paradigm have argued that the approaches are mutually exclusive and cannot be mixed under any circumstance. An early statement by Guba (1990) claimed that ‘accommodation between the paradigms is impossible… and leads to diverse, disparate and totally antithetical ends’ (p.81). Indeed, it is fair to say that within education, the contrasting approaches have led to two differing research cultures, one emphasising rich, insightful data in contrast to the hard generalisable data of quantitative research.

More recently, mixed methods have been proposed as offering a third research paradigm that can bridge the schism between quantitative and qualitative research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2005). The new epistemological and methodological pluralism reflects changes that have seen research become more inter-disciplinary and the use of methods that are complementary to each other (Creswell, 2009). Here we define mixed methods as ‘Research that… combines quantitative and qualitative techniques, approaches, concept or language into a single study’ (Johnston et al., 2005). Philosophically, mixed methods tend to make use of the classic pragmatic system of philosophy (CS Pierce, William James) and the logic of inquiry includes both induction (discovery of patterns) as well as deduction (testing of hypotheses).

There is no suggestion that mixed methods preclude the use of exclusively quantitative or qualitative approaches in certain circumstances. Rather, the approach acknowledges that the research question determines the strategy (rather than vice-versa). There is a consensus that the mixed methods
are particularly appropriate when the focus of the research is one or several of the following:
  • If the purpose is triangulation, that is, seeking convergence and corroboration from different methods studying the same question;
  • If the aim is expansion, that is, seeking to extend the range of research through use of different methods;
  • If the aims centre on complementarity, that is, illustrating the results of one method through the results of another.

Mixed Methods in the Present Study
An examination of the objectives and terms of reference of the present study indicates that, while it is quite exploratory in nature, the aim is to establish as far as possible the main features of counselling by guidance counsellors. A sample of the objectives includes:
  • Exploring guidance counsellors’ experiences of their counselling training;
  • Identifying areas where guidance counsellors require further support and training;
  • Exploring the context in which guidance counsellors carry out their work.
  • Identifying the counselling models and methodologies employed by guidance counsellors;
  • Identifying the range of problems that students present with;
  • Exploring how guidance counsellors employ referral and where students are referred.

This sample of the objectives of the research suggests on the one hand that the study is exploratory in nature, i.e. there is no specific idea or hypothesis that is to be tested and thus it suggests that an inductive strategy is appropriate. However, the frequency with which the words ‘identify’ and ‘ascertain’ are used, and indeed the stress on making recommendations, suggests that the work should go beyond an initial exploration and should yield answers that inform policy and practice. We take this emphasis in the terms of reference of the study together with the merits of the mixed method approach to indicate that this approach (mixed methods) is most suitable for the work in hand.

In particular the decision to use mixed methods was guided by the need for triangulation, expansion and complementarities; we wanted to establish that one approach was supported by the results of another; and also, we wanted to find out in what way one approach (involving interviews) allowed for an enrichment and expansion of another approach (survey).

The decision to base our methodology on the mixed methods approach also guided a number of other decisions:
  (i) There were a number of informal interviews with guidance counsellors (or their representatives) to enable the researcher to map the focus of the questionnaire;
  (ii) It was thought appropriate at an early planning stage that the questionnaire to guidance counsellors should consist of open-ended as well as multiple choice questions;
  (iii) It seemed best for the interviews/focus groups to have open-ended questions;
  (iv) A major focus of the analysis would be the triangulation of the outcomes of the questionnaire and the interviews/focus groups.

In the remainder of this chapter we present the rationale and details of the survey and interviews/focus groups that were central to the study.

Ethical Standards
The research was carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines of St. Patrick’s College, Dublin and these in turn are based on the guidelines of Dublin City University. Particular attention was given to informed consent in the focus group interviews and in consultations with stakeholders. In this regard, it is important to note that all of the people involved in the study (in all three phases) are adult professionals.
Criteria Guiding Questionnaire Content
In devising the questionnaire we were guided by the following:

(i) Terms of reference of the study;
(ii) The review of literature relating to school counselling and research on the challenges experienced by young people;
(iii) Conversations with guidance counsellors, meetings with NCGE and representatives of guidance counsellors;
(iv) Methodological factors described in the section above.

Questionnaire Content and Format
Based on the considerations above, the draft questionnaire contained nine main sections (see appendix A) and was specifically designed for this study. The advantage of this was that it was possible to devise items that were specifically focused on the terms of reference. The disadvantage is that information on reliability and validity was not available. However, an effort was made to address the issue of internal reliability (see below).

There were three types of items in the questionnaire and these derive from the methodology guiding the work:

(i) Structured item, e.g. ‘to what extent has your initial training prepared you for the counselling aspect of your role?’ (five-point scale from ‘not at all’ to ‘a great deal’);
(ii) Open-ended questions but with some constraints e.g. ‘What is the issue you consider to be the most challenging in the counselling aspect of your role as guidance counsellor? Please give details to explain your answer’;
(iii) Combination of open-ended with structured items, e.g. ‘Please list the counselling model/approaches you use and indicate how helpful they are in the counselling aspect of your work’ (five-point scale from ‘not a lot’ to ‘a great deal’).

The nine sections in the questionnaire were as follows:

- Section A of the questionnaire was concerned with information on respondents’ schools including type of school, size, community served and whether the school was fee-paying or in the programme (Delivering Equality of Educational Opportunity in Schools);
- The next section focused on information on the guidance counsellors’ qualifications, including where these qualifications were obtained (Ireland or abroad), the year in which they were awarded and whether their initial education/training in guidance counselling prepared them for the counselling aspect of their role (five-point scale from ‘not at all’ to ‘a great deal’). This section also sought information on other courses taken since their initial qualifications and when and where these were obtained. Respondents were also asked to say what counselling approaches/models of counselling they use and how helpful they find these approaches (up to four approaches/models could be mentioned);
- Section C of the questionnaire focused on details of the counselling role. The respondents were asked the number of students presenting for counselling in each year in school (First Year to Sixth Year). Related questions were concerned with the nature of that counselling (preventative or crisis etc.) as well as the typical number of sessions and duration of sessions for students who present for counselling. In this section, there were questions on how students were referred for counselling and how frequently each method...
of referral occurred. Finally in this section, the
guidance counsellors were asked to rate their
‘confidence’, ‘competence’ and ‘comfort’ with
the counselling aspect of their role;

- In Section D, the nature of the issues presented
by students was explored. Respondents were
asked to identify up to three issues, state the
number of students involved and indicate how
comfortable/confident/competent they felt in
dealing with the issue in question. They were
also asked which issue they considered to be the
most challenging in their counselling role;

- Section E of the questionnaire was concerned
with school policy, referral agencies and the
evaluation of guidance counselling procedures.
There were additional specific questions on
whether guidelines were followed on issues like
confidentiality, consent and providing feedback.
Respondents were also asked about agencies
(up to three) to which they referred presenting
students. The final question in this section was
concerned with how respondents gauged the
impact of their counselling;

- Section F focused on supports. The guidance
counsellors were asked whether or not they
availed of supervision, the number of sessions
involved and the reasons for availing (or not
availing) of supervision. Respondents were
also asked about the extent of support from
school management and their colleagues with
respect to: (i) making counselling available to all
students who want to avail of it, (ii) supporting
their counselling role, (iii) ensuring that they
have professional supervision, as well as (iv)
ensuring they have adequate opportunities for
professional development. This section also
included questions on support from various
individuals, groups and organisations ranging
from the Principal, class teachers and students
to NEPS and the National Centre for Guidance
in Education. There were also questions about
various sources of stress, including expectations
of teacher colleagues, the severity of presenting
issues and the dual role of being a teacher and a
guidance counsellor;

- Section G of the questionnaire asked for any
recommendations that respondents wished to
make to individuals or groups, including school
 Principals and the DES;

- The next part of the questionnaire, Section H,
elicited personal information on demographic
factors including gender, age, years of experience
as a guidance counsellor and percentage of time
spent in the counselling role;

- The final section of the questionnaire, Section
I, invited respondents to make any additional
comments considered to be relevant.

**Piloting of Questionnaire**

An initial draft of the questionnaire was piloted
and completed by 12 guidance counsellors (half
selected randomly and half targeted on the basis
of their expertise and interest) and their comments
and suggestions, as well as those of the members
of the Steering Group, were taken into account in
the final version of the questionnaire. One of the
concerns of the authors was that the questionnaire
was too long to complete and that a shorter version
might have elicited a higher percentage of returns.
Based on conversations with the Steering Group
and taking into account the importance of all of the
areas targeted in the questionnaire, it was decided
not to shorten the instrument.

**Sample and Response Rate**

A sample of 300 schools was drawn randomly from
the official DES list of post-primary schools for the
year 2009-10. While a simple random sampling
process was used, a check was made on the
drawn sample to establish that it was representative
in terms of school types (voluntary secondary,
community schools, etc.) and with regard to school
size. It was suggested that respondents who
were guidance counsellors working in the targeted schools, return questionnaires as early as possible, but not later than three weeks. A further week was allowed and a reminder was sent to all respondents. Returns consisted of 108 questionnaires, giving a response rate of 36%. The question arises as to whether this response rate is satisfactory for a postal questionnaire. There is a difficulty in setting benchmarks for a response rate for this kind of questionnaire, especially in Ireland. In judging the adequacy of this response rate, we are guided by the guidelines suggested in a number of textbooks on methodology including Creswell (2009), which suggests that the extent to which the respondents are representative of the population is more important than the absolute level of response. As will be seen below, by this criterion the return is quite satisfactory.

**Issues of Reliability and Validity**

While some forms of reliability are difficult to establish in a questionnaire of this kind (test-retest), it is possible to examine other forms. Specifically, the internal consistency of responses can be examined through the use of the Cronbach alpha statistic. This measures the extent to which items are internally consistent with each other and, in the context of mixed methods, a high level of reliability might be expected for some groups of items but not for others. For example, it is reasonable to expect high consistency in relation to guidance counsellors’ perception of the extent that they are comfortable, confident and competent in their role as a counsellor and also in their dealing with a specific issue that students bring to counselling. However, in relation to other groups of items, this might not be the case. In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about sources of support (ranging from principal, colleagues to national organisations) and internal consistency should not be found to any great extent as in the case of stressors (ranging from ‘expectation of students’ to ‘legal complications arising from disclosures’).

As can be seen from Table 3.1, the results of an internal reliability check on this scale supports the contention that the coefficient (Cronbach alpha) reflects the extent to which it is reasonable to expect consistency. Thus the three items relating to self-perceived efficacy as a guidance counsellor have very high reliability (.89) as is also the case with items relating to efficacy in relation to a specific issue in counselling (.93). On the other hand, the reliability in relation to sources of support and aspects of stress show a low level of reliability which might be expected given that the sources of both support and stress are quite different from each other.

**Table 3.1: Reliability (Internal Consistency) of Items (N = 108)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-perception as a counsellor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort, confidence and competence (specific issues)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of support</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspects of stress</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Analysis: Quantitative and Open-Ended**

Following data entry, the results were analysed by means of various procedures in the SPSS statistical package including FREQUENCIES and CROSSTABS. For open-ended items, a record was made of the precise response and these were analysed as follows: Firstly, the entries under the various headings were coded and a list made for each question. Following this, responses were clustered and formed into categories. Because most of the questions yielded relatively short responses in the open-ended format (What kind of problems did the young person present with?), it was possible in most cases to quantify the response in terms of broad themes. The approach taken for this analysis is sometimes referred to as a quasi-statistical approach and a more refined version is found in various statistical packages. However, given the nature of the data, this was not deemed
to be necessary for the analysis of the open-ended questions in the survey.

Profile of Schools and Respondents in Survey
Here we set out the main characteristics of the schools of respondents as well as demographic characteristics, particularly gender and age-group. With regard to schools, Table 3.2 shows that voluntary secondary schools account for the over 63% of the respondents’ schools and that other schools are also represented in the sample. With regard to gender of students, 24% of the schools were single-sex boys’ schools, 28% single-sex girls’ schools and the remaining (48%) contained both boys and girls. The mean (average) number of students in the schools in the study was 543 (s.d. = 40) and the mean weekly allocation of guidance counselling hours was 20.5. With regard to the community served by the school, 43% were urban, 46% were medium-size town/rural, and 11% of the schools served students with mainly a rural background. Just 7% of the schools in the survey were fee-paying and 25% were in DEIS, while the remaining schools were non-paying and not in DEIS. Overall, the profile of schools in the study is similar to what is known regarding the national picture, thus indicating that the respondents are quite representative of the population of guidance counsellors in Irish schools.

Table 3.2 School Type of Respondents  (N = 108)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Valid Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary Secondary</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community/Comprehensive</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational School</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Individual Guidance Counsellors
Table 3.3 shows the profile of the 108 respondents by age and gender and shows that 74% of these were female. Male guidance counsellors in the study were slightly more likely to be in the younger age groups. While the option of ‘<26 years’ was available, no respondent indicated that they were in this age category. As with several tables, there is some missing data and the percentages shown are for valid percentages.

Table 3.3: Profile of Respondents by Age and Gender  (N = 98)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26-35 yrs</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-45 yrs</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-55 yrs</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 55 yrs</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Table entries are valid column percentages

In response to the question of the number of years practising as a guidance counsellor, the mean emerged as 11.0 with a standard deviation of 8.9, indicating that some guidance counsellors were relatively new to the role and others had spent a long number of years as guidance counsellors. When asked what proportion of their time as a guidance counsellor was spent on counselling, the figure emerging was one-third (33%) and again with a large standard deviation (21%).

The further substantial results of the study will be presented in Chapter 4. In line with the mixed methods approach of the research, the results of the survey are best considered in the context of the focus groups with guidance counsellors, as well as the consultative groups of stakeholders.
3. Phase 2: Focus Groups with Guidance Counsellors

Four focus groups were held with guidance counsellors who were currently practising in second-level schools as Phase Two of the research. Three groups were held in May 2010 and the fourth in September 2010. A total of 25 guidance counsellors participated. Three of the focus groups took place immediately following professional guidance meetings. The fourth was held with guidance counsellors who attended specifically for the purpose of participating in the research. While the researchers had hoped to have between six and eight participants in each group, everyone who expressed an interest in attending and who met the criteria of working as a guidance counsellor in a secondary school was welcomed. A fifth group was planned but as only three people were able to participate, it was decided, in consultation with members of the Steering Group, not to include it.

In line with the mixed methods methodology, the four groups were chosen in different ways:

- Group A: A guidance counsellor who was involved in organising a branch meeting of the IGC in a city in Leinster was approached by one of the researchers (who did not know her personally) to ask if she would be interested in helping to organise a focus group. She was immediately supportive and contacted by email guidance counsellors in her branch of the IGC to invite anyone who was working as a guidance counsellor in a second-level school to participate in a focus group immediately following their May 2010 branch meeting.

- Group B: A guidance counsellor who was involved in organising a supervision group for guidance counsellors in a large town in Leinster was contacted by one of the researchers (who did not know her personally) to ask if she would be interested in helping to organise a focus group. She immediately agreed and contacted the members of her supervision group to invite them to participate in a focus group immediately following their May 2010 supervision meeting.

- Group C: The NCGE invited guidance counsellors who were doing training in a city in Munster to participate in a focus group immediately following their final training session in May 2010.

- Group D: One guidance counsellor had made contact by phone (following receipt of the questionnaire) and in person (at the IGC Conference in March 2010) to express his support for the research and to offer his assistance, if required. He was previously unknown to both researchers. In May 2010, he was contacted by the researchers and asked if he would like to arrange a focus group in September 2010 in a small town in Munster. He immediately agreed and contacted by email all the guidance counsellors he knew through his supervision group and personal contacts to invite them to participate in a focus group.

The following school types were all represented by guidance counsellors who participated in the focus groups: single-sex fee-paying, single-sex non-fee paying, DEIS, voluntary secondary, VEC community and community college. Details of the guidance counsellors (who participated in the four focus groups) regarding gender, the number of years’ experience they had, and whether they had completed the survey in Phase One, are contained in Chapter 4.

The duration of the focus groups was between 60 to 90 minutes. At the start of each group, participants were thanked for their interest in attending, the
The purpose of the research was explained, consent was obtained to audio-tape the interview and the following three questions were asked:

1. What is your experience of the counselling aspect of the role of the guidance counsellor working in second-level schools in Ireland?
2. What recommendations would you make with regard to the counselling aspect of this role?
3. Is there anything else you would like to say?

**Analysis**

The strategy used in the analysis of the interviews was the constant comparison/grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This involved looking for themes in the transcripts of the sessions and comparing them to find consistencies and differences. On the basis of these comparisons, themes were isolated and this procedure was repeated until no further themes emerged. It was possible to break down the content of the interviews into a relatively small number of broad themes which are identified in the Results Section (Chapter 4). An effort is made to give some weight to the frequency with which issues/matters of concern were raised. Thus, the order of presentation within these sections gives an indication of how frequently the matter in question was mentioned. As is traditional in qualitative research, direct quotations have been used to represent the views of participants.

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### Phase 3: Consultative Groups with Identified Stakeholders

Six stakeholders were identified by the Steering Group for the purpose of Phase Three. These were: the Directors of Studies in Guidance Counselling, the Guidance Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, the National Centre for Guidance in Education, the National Educational Psychological Service and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals. While students and their parents are also stakeholders, the decision of the Steering Group was that consultation with parents and students was outside the scope of this research. Table 3.4 contains details of how the six consultative groups were formed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder Group</th>
<th>How Group was Formed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IGC</td>
<td>The researchers made contact with the President of the IGC by phone. She was very supportive of being involved in a group, suggested a date and venue and undertook to invite interested guidance counsellors to participate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCGE</td>
<td>Two senior members arranged a date and venue with the researchers in person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>The Guidance Inspectorate of the DES was contacted by phone by the researchers to arrange a date and venue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directors of Studies</td>
<td>Each Director of Studies was contacted by email and invited to participate in the consultative process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEPS</td>
<td>The researchers made contact by email with a Regional Director of NEPS who suggested a date and venue and invited interested educational psychologists to participate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAPD</td>
<td>A member of the Executive was contacted by phone by the researchers. She suggested a date and a venue and invited interested Principals and Vice-Principals to participate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Details of the six stakeholder groups in terms of numbers, venues and context of meetings are contained in Chapter 6.

Each group met with the researchers for collective interviews which were held in June and September 2010. These interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and twenty-five people participated in total.

At the start of each collective interview, participants were thanked for their interest in attending, the purpose of the research was explained, consent was obtained to audio-tape the interview and the following three questions were asked:

1. What is your understanding of the counselling aspect of the role of the guidance counsellor working in second-level schools in Ireland?
2. What recommendations would you make with regard to the counselling aspect of this role?
3. Is there anything else you would like to say?

Analysis
The approach used in the analysis of these interviews was similar to that for the focus groups described above, that is, the constant comparison/grounded theory approach. The themes found are described in Chapter 6.

© Chapter Summary

Above, we have described the rationale for the mixed methods approach taken in this research. We have emphasised the exploratory nature of the study as well as the need to give some precise indications of the nature of counselling by guidance counsellors. In particular, the need for triangulation has been a guiding principle. The main features of the survey as well as the focus groups of guidance counsellors and stakeholders were described. The next chapter sets out the results of the survey. These are presented in nine sections, and are organised around the main topics and issues examined in the study, rather than strictly in accordance with the order in which they appeared in the questionnaire. About half of the results are based on structured questions and these are presented in tables. The other results are based on a qualitative thematic analysis of open-ended questions.
Chapter 4: Survey Results

The results of the survey are presented broadly in accordance with the various sections of the questionnaire, rather than themes that emerged through a coding frame. Section 1 is concerned with the qualification and professional development of guidance counsellors. Section 2 sets out the results on approaches to counselling including the number of sessions. In Section 3, we consider the students’ issues emerging in counselling and Section 4 is concerned with issues of referral. The supports and stresses in counselling are considered in Section 5 while Section 6 is concerned with school policies in relation to counselling by guidance counsellors. Section 7 focuses on the ways in which guidance counsellors gauge the effectiveness of their work, and Section 8 examines the recommendations of the respondents. The profiles of the schools and respondents have been presented in Chapter 2.

For the structured questions, we present the valid percentages (percentages of those who responded to that question), while in the case of open-ended questions, the responses have been coded and the results are presented in percentages where that is possible and with quotations to illustrate the dominant outcomes. One important matter concerns the extent to which the information gives a ‘true picture’ of social and mental health questions, e.g. information on what students bring to counselling. We draw attention again to the filtering that takes place between the experience of a problem by an adolescent and what they are prepared to divulge to a guidance counsellor in school. Therefore, while parental conflict emerges as a major issue (in terms of the percentage reporting), and sexual abuse as a minor one, these statistics should not be regarded as a reflection of the gravity of the issue in question.

1. Qualifications and Professional Development

Qualifications
It emerged that 93% of the respondents to the questionnaire had acquired their guidance qualification in Ireland (N=103). Half had obtained their initial qualification before 1999 and the remainder since then. When asked about the extent to which their initial education/training prepared them for the counselling aspect of their role, 59% said that they were prepared ‘a lot’ or a ‘great deal’, 33% said a ‘little’ and only 8% said ‘not at all’ or ‘not a lot’ (N =101).

Additional Professional Development
When asked if they had done any training in counselling in addition to their initial education/training in guidance counselling, 62% of respondents said that they had. Table 4.1 presents a breakdown of the courses taken. In total, 97 different courses were mentioned by 64 respondents who said that they had taken a course since their initial training in guidance counselling. As will be seen, (see Table 4.2, below) the counselling courses taken by the guidance counsellors are broadly in line with the models of counselling that were reported by
guidance counsellors. It can be seen from the table that ‘other courses’ make up a significant number of professional development courses taken; in some cases, a very small number mentioned a particular course (psychological) while in other cases there was not enough information to indicate the nature of the course (e.g. course run by the HSE).

Table 4.1: Professional Development Courses Taken by Guidance Counsellors (N = 103)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Valid Percentage*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counselling/Guidance Counselling</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality therapy</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychotherapy (and specific forms)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other courses</td>
<td>21**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Valid percentages are based on actual number responding and are used throughout the report
** This included specific courses that might fall under the umbrella of those listed but could not be subsumed under other headings.

When asked to rate the professional development courses that they had taken (N= 101), 75% of respondents said that these courses had helped them to meet the challenges of their work ‘a lot’ or ‘a great deal’, 20% said that the courses helped them ‘a little’ and only 5% said ‘not a lot’ or ‘not at all’. One interpretation of this outcome is that the respondents deliberately selected those courses that were of interest and value to them.

② Approaches to Counselling, Number and Type of Counselling Sessions

The respondents were asked to list the counselling models/approaches that they use, also to indicate how helpful they find them in the counselling aspect of their work. This item was open-ended and the respondents could name up to three models/approaches. The coding of the 173 entries (see Table 4.2) under this heading, indicated that four categories virtually exhausted all the responses, viz., person-centred counselling, reality therapy, CBT, solution-focused brief therapy, gestalt therapy and the remainder (2%) comprised a variety of other approaches. The extent to which person-centred counselling approaches was preferred is especially evident in ‘first preferences’, since respondents had the option of indicating up to three approaches.

As can be seen from Table 4.2, person-centred counselling was most popular, followed by reality therapy. Part of the reason for the popularity of person-centred counselling is that this approach is at the core of initial training and forms part of guidance counsellors’ formal qualification. Other approaches are additional training.

Table 4.2: Approaches to Counselling (N = 106)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Valid Percentage*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person-centred counselling</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality therapy</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive behaviour therapy</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution-focused brief therapy</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gestalt therapy</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other approaches</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The respondents were asked about the helpfulness of the approaches to counselling that they had indicated and Table 4.3 shows the perceived effectiveness of their first choice approach to counselling. From this table, it is evident that the guidance counsellors have a very positive view of the approaches/models that they use, with close to 90% taking the view that the selected approach helps ‘a lot’ or ‘a great deal’.

Table 4.3: Perceived Effectiveness of First Choice Counselling Model/Approach (N = 106)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helpfulness</th>
<th>Valid Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A great deal</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a lot</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Self-Perception of Competence, Confidence and Comfort

The guidance counsellors were asked to indicate (five-point scale from ‘not at all’ to ‘a great deal’) how ‘comfortable’, ‘confident’ and ‘competent’ they felt with the counselling aspect of their role as a guidance counsellor. As can be seen from Table 4.4, about three-quarters of the respondents rated their competence, comfort and confidence quite highly. As noted earlier, the internal reliability between these measures was quite high.

Table 4.4: Perceived Competence, Confidence, and Comfort with Counselling Aspect of Role (N = 106)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helpfulness</th>
<th>% Competence</th>
<th>% Comfort</th>
<th>% Confidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A great deal</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a lot</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at All</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked if they wished to give any additional relevant information in relation to these questions (competence etc.), close to half of the respondents (N = 51) gave additional details. These open-ended responses were coded with a view to examining emerging themes (constant comparison method described earlier) which fell into five broad categories: positive, negative, need for further training, challenging aspects and the need to link with other agencies.

The most frequent response (52%) was positive in the sense that these guidance counsellors felt that they could cope comfortably with the challenges even if they also indicated that the work was demanding. As one person said:

*I can say that I feel quite competent now but it is because of my own training, as I am currently doing my traineeship and seeing clients. While I always felt comfortable, training has made me competent. The reality training that I did over 20 years now was a great help.*

Another respondent said:

*If I did not feel comfortable, confident and competent in the counselling aspect of my job, I would not be able to do this... for both ethical and moral reasons. Additionally, I feel that if I am unable to deal with an issue, it is important to ask for advice or seek help from a third party.*

Sometimes these comments referred to the constraints within the school:

*My skills are under-used in this school... it is operated from a traditional ‘disciplines’ model. The management is very controlling and few referrals are made. I’ve been told to stick to Careers Counselling ... My work is interpreted as not supporting the discipline structure.*
Sometimes very serious challenges (29%) in the role were indicated:

When I completed my course…. it was more careers-based. Following incidents of self-harm and suicide, I felt I needed to do more in terms of being completely trained to deal with the issues of youth. I wanted to make sure that I would be in a position in school to make a difference …

Another set of comments was around training (8%), either in the way their experience of training had helped or with reference to a need for more training. One comment was quite positive in this regard:

In the beginning, I felt very uncomfortable but now after 10 years and training I have grown into it.

Another was much less certain:

I feel like I have some skills but I’m just concerned that I don’t know what to do next. All I learned in college was to sit there going ‘um, um, um,’ and reflecting back. A lot of the time I feel like the students are looking for more. It’s like 30 minutes of ‘um, um’ and then what. Sometimes it’s enough but sometimes I wonder if it is sufficient.

Another issue that was mentioned by a number of respondents (6%) concerned the need for linkages with other agencies. One comment illustrates this need:

It would really help me to feel more part of a team approach when students are in danger and it’s very stressful – e.g. suicidal ideation/self-harm/eating issues. I would love if there was a structured way to connect with HSE psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, gardai. I think some training in family/couples therapy would be very helpful in dealing with the many relationship issues that arise – e.g. between friends/parents/students.

Number of Students Presenting for Counselling, Nature of Counselling Actions and Number of Sessions

Respondents were asked about the number of students who presented for counselling, their year in school and their gender, from September 1st 2009 to December 22nd 2009 (a full term). What is most striking about the results shown in Table 4.5 is the very large standard deviation, thus indicating that there was a very substantial variation between guidance counsellors. This is also indicated in the range of responses, that is the highest and the lowest reported number. Sometimes, a large standard deviation can be due to extreme responses (outliers). However, removing the three most extreme responses for each year does little to reduce the variability.

With respect to the mean (average) number, there is a tendency for relatively more students to present for counselling in the senior years. This is especially the case with regard to the final year in school. Based on these figures, in the term under consideration, the mean (average) number presenting for counselling was just over 38 – but it should be stressed that there is major variation between respondents (the range and standard deviation are shown). Also, there may well be issues around record-keeping that make these questions difficult for guidance counsellors to answer fully.

Table 4.5. Mean and Standard Deviation of Number of Presenting Students in Each Year (N = 101)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SD (with extreme scores removed)</th>
<th>Range*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>13 (2-15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>10 (3-13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>12 (4-16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>28 (4-32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>26 (3-29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>38 (6-44)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Refers to the difference between the highest and lowest number reported.
Respondents were asked about the typical number of sessions per week in preventative, crisis, individual and group counselling. As can be seen from Table 4.6 the greatest concentration of work was on preventative and individual counselling sessions. Crisis counselling took just over three sessions on average and group sessions rather less than this. It will be noticed from this table that there is again substantial standard deviation especially in the case of preventative and individual counselling. Issues of school size are likely to be especially important in interpreting these figures.

Table 4.6. Types of Counselling Sessions Each Week
(N = 102)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SD (with extreme scores removed)</th>
<th>Range*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preventive</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>16 (3-19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>8 (2-10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>21 (6-27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>6 (1-7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Refers to the difference between the highest and lowest number reported

Guidance counsellors were asked about the typical number of sessions with students who present for counselling and the mean (N=99) was 5.0 (s.d.=5.0) (Range=14). They also said that the typical length of a session was just under 40 minutes which is the regular duration of a class.

Another interesting perspective on the time allocation can be gleaned from an item in the final section of the questionnaire relating to the proportion of time spent on counselling. The average percentage (N=96) was 33% with a standard deviation of 18% (Range=36%), following the elimination of the three most extreme responses.

3. Nature of Issues in Counselling

The section on the questionnaire of the ‘Nature of the Issues’ in counselling involved two questions which produced a complementary picture to give a view of the issues with which students presented and the extent to which these were challenging for the guidance counsellor. The respondents were asked to list at last three issues which students bring to counselling and to indicate how comfortable, confident and competent they feel in dealing with these. They were also asked to say which aspect of their role as guidance counsellor was the most challenging and to give details to explain their answer. All of the issues discussed below were mentioned by several people and give a broad indication of the issues encountered by guidance counsellors (rather than a quantitative measure of the concerns of young people).
The results are shown in Table 4.7, which shows the nature of the issue, the percentage of counsellors who mentioned this issue and one illustrative quotation in each case; this selected quotation is meant to illustrate the kind of comments made.

Table 4.7: Nature of Issues in Counselling  \( (N = 103) \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Illustrative Quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Issues</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Parental problems – as a guidance counsellor you get to hear the difficulties from both sides. Wanting always to support the student and maintain confidence can create a situation where either party withdraws, thus creating an even bigger issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Relational bullying among girls involving exclusion ... is a major issue and can result in eating disorders. There can be deep roots to this problem, usually underpinned by family or community structures/cultures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood disturbance</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Parents’ attitude to anxiety ... is most challenging and time consuming. Everyone involved in the child’s life need to work together and often this is not possible ... They often do not accept that anxiety needs to be managed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bereavement and loss</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Death of a parent by suicide is an issue I am experiencing with a client presently. It is extremely challenging but I feel I am developing a very good rapport with the client.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour difficulties</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>When behaviour problems in school result in constant truancy...is very challenging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide/ self-harm</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Suicide risk assessment – very difficult...despite training received to assess level of risk. It is not easy just to go home and forget about it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Relationships are often a major issue – students today have multi-relationships within the family dynamic –and this can lead to other issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational issues</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Some students have problems with time management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating disorders</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>I often listen to their story, the reason they are behaving like this resulting in an eating disorder ... is because of family circumstances etc. I cannot sort the family out and that is difficult.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance use</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>You are never sure when substance misuse is a factor in some other problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Issues involving sexual abuse where social services are involved can be very stressful, since the system is not really supportive to the young person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis pregnancy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Our role is problematic in such situations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Without question, family issues seem to be the greatest concern and such matters were mentioned in one form or another by 64% of guidance counsellors. Included were breakdown and separation, conflict with parents, father returning, family illness and alcoholism. As can be seen from Table 4.7, one guidance counsellor pointed out that the issues can get quite complicated. Another respondent talked of the difficulty of family issues in the context of the provision of social services:

*Having students with issues arising from home/family situation... where no matter what progress the student is making, the home/family remains the same and makes it difficult to develop and grow. Where outside agencies are called on, e.g. Social Work teams and referrals are made, there is little or no feedback or even acknowledgement and often the student hears nothing...*
The second most common issue (and mentioned by 35% of respondents) was **bullying**, especially being bullied. Different forms of bullying were mentioned and it is especially worth noting that relational bullying was evident in some cases (see excerpt in Table 4.7).

The next most common issue (mentioned by 33%) concerned **disturbances of mood** including depression and anxiety: panic attacks, low mood, negative thoughts (see Table 4.7). One guidance counsellor mentioned problems of **aggression** in the context of the demands made on their time and resources:

> Aggression, especially in our male students, is a big issue... They are unable to control their moods and are ready to hit out... being a danger to themselves and others. I find these need at least 2x40 minutes a week seeing them on Monday to set up the week, look at the problem areas and plan ways to cope, also try to meet them mind-week to see how the week is going... Often teen counselling is unavailable... They don't like the assigned counsellors and come back to the school guidance counsellor. Many times, aggression is learned behaviour from a difficult home background, family break-up: dealing with parents, school often needs to act as mediation/counsellor to both parents and students and the school.

**Bereavement and loss** were mentioned by 27% of the guidance counsellors. In some cases, this related to the family issues talked about above. Loss was seen to be all the more problematic if the bereavement was due to suicide: **Behaviour difficulties** in school, conflict with school authority structure, relationships with teachers, truancy and similar issues were mentioned by 25% of counsellors.

**Self-harm** including suicide, critical incidents and suicidal tendencies were mentioned by 25% of counsellors. Several identified this as one of the most challenging:

> Depressive mental outlook, especially suicidal thoughts – in these cases, I refer them on to cross-care clinic who are excellent.

Another guidance counsellor commented that this issue was something that could not be easily forgotten:

> Suicide risk assessment – very difficult despite training received to assess level of risk. It is not easy just to go home and forget about it.

Part of the problem seemed to be the lack of support in relation to issues like this:

> Mental health issues relating to depression and suicidal tendencies. In particular, access to mental health services for teenagers. The stigma that is attached to such services and the undue delay taken to gain access. Some GPs being far from engaged in the mental health of their young clients.

Issues like **relationships**, making friends, socialising, breaking up, and isolation were mentioned by 22% the guidance counsellors. This involved relationships both inside and outside the family. One comment was:

> Integration of students who have no friends and are very unhappy in school (is a big issue). Mostly, I find they are in a similar situation at home – or indeed home is difficult or perceived as ‘odd’ to students/friends and they have difficulty building and sustaining relationships.

**Educational issues** including career choice, subject choice, study skills, time-management, students wanting to leave school early, non-performance in school or in certain areas, and adjusting to school were mentioned by 21% of the respondents. It is
also worth noting that those who mentioned this area, referred to it as being central to their work.

Some commented that some students have issues but do not come to the attention of the guidance counsellor:

Many students have issues that I never hear about. Sometimes the visiting schools’ completions officer will mention a student and I may have little or no information on them. I believe strongly that if every single student had to meet a guidance counsellor at least 3 times a year, it would make a significant difference not only to the school but to their mental health, prevention of many problems, sorting out things at an early stage and ultimately save the State a LOT of money.

Eating disorders were mentioned by 17% of participants in the survey (see Table 4.7). Some commented that they were not qualified to deal with this issue:

In this situation, I would try to get the student seen by someone outside the school but increasingly in the present economic situation, the student stays with me due to long waiting lists.

Finally, a number of important issues were mentioned by less than 10% of guidance counsellors. While these issues were mentioned by a relatively small number compared to other issues, they are important and include sexual abuse, substance misuse, major stresses and pregnancy (see Table 4.7). Some respondents commented on the way in which these experiences can be stressful for them:

Issues involving sexual abuse where social services are involved can be very stressful, since the system is not really supportive to the young person (lack of resources etc.); young people may be very afraid and perhaps change the original information given. At times, reporting is difficult since the ramifications for the young person are huge (I mean if abuse is not ongoing – otherwise I feel the situation is more clear-cut).

Challenging Aspects of the Guidance Counsellor Role

As noted above, the respondents were asked to give details of the most challenging aspect of their work as a guidance counsellor and to give details to explain their answer. This was quite separate to (but could include) issues with which students presented. As will be apparent from the matters raised, the responses often represented an interaction of the role of guidance counsellors with the issues of students.

Table 4.8: Challenging Aspects of the Counselling Role (N = 100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Illustrative Quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time and space</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Creating the time and space to do the counselling work within the busy school day is a major issue… So many other issues arising spontaneously that cut across the counselling work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult students</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Suicide is the most serious matter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of recognition</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Staff don’t realise the importance of counselling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback from Agencies</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>The lack of response from Health Board workers is a problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression and aggression</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>I found it difficult working with depression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>I am not qualified to deal with this issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own counselling skills</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>I don’t have enough counselling skills.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from Table 4.8, the most common challenging aspects centred on work as a guidance counsellor, including time and space to do the job, time to reflect, the dual nature, nature of role, not being able to see all students (this was the most challenging issue for 30% of the guidance counsellors). One such comment was:
It is almost impossible to set aside specific times for counselling sessions given the constant barrage of expectations and other duties. Very difficult to walk from a classroom teaching environment to a counselling session.

Along the same lines, another complained of the dual role:

*Isolation – lack of time – you can’t do what you don’t have time to do. I’m always chasing myself, no time to talk or plan or organise. I dump stuff in my office and head to class. There is huge frustration … but you can’t let that consume you. I try to be as effective as I can be with the time that I do have – really no time to do the job.*

The next most common challenges were two of the issues mentioned above in relation to student issues and included family issues and self-harm. These kind of issues were mentioned by 30% of the respondents (see table 4.8). Lack of formal recognition by school management or other teachers (and including the DES) was mentioned by one-tenth of the sample, particularly as this related to lack of recognition, understanding or support. One such comment was around the lack of understanding of colleagues:

*Staff sometimes seem to think that students are being pampered instead of being disciplined … don’t realise the need/importance of counselling.*

Issues around referrals were next most likely to be mentioned (8%), especially long waiting lists and the unavailability of a suitable agency in a time of crisis.

*Referral to outside agencies for issues such as depression (clinical), drugs, alcohol and psychiatric problems are beset by waiting lists and huge gaps between appointments. Support services for the over-16s are practically non-existent… or do not have the necessary capacity.*

There were also problems about the way that students were referred to the guidance counsellor:

*Referral system – people just stop me on corridor and refer a student – may not have time to deal with the student there and then – may need to go to class/have another appointment; staff expect me to be able to ‘fix’ the problem…*

Another issue was the speed with which some students were referred to them:

*The teaching staff’s inability to address/help students who have a problem. They are far too quick to refer the issue on without listening to the problem and often the problem could have been solved by the form tutor/year head. They often fail to realise that the guidance counsellor’s time is sacred and that they are dealing with students who have massive problems.*

Sometimes the problem was a lack of response or feedback from agencies to which students were referred (mentioned by 6%):

*Having students with issues arising from home/family … makes it difficult for the student to develop and grow. Where outside agencies are called on, e.g. Social Work teams and referrals are made, there is little or no feedback or even acknowledgement and often the student hears nothing and the care has to continue in school in a supportive way. These times are frustrating … because of the lack of response from Health Board social workers.*

In some cases, the counsellors mentioned a specific difficulty that students were experiencing. This is somewhat similar to the first category but somewhat different in emphasis in that the focus was on the nature of the problem and the inherent difficulty of helping the student. Some specific issues around depression and aggression were mentioned as challenging by 5%. One comment was:

*I find it energy-sapping working with a student in depression. Students who are depressed often prefer to have counselling outside of school.*
Related to this was the issue of students who had not been helped by others. One said:

When you meet a student who has previously been to doctors, given anti-depressants, seen a psychologist ... and hasn’t found any of it to be useful.

Similarly, some found (4%) the issues of sexual abuse particularly problematic:

Sexual abuse: I am not qualified to deal with this issue. I want to fix it so that it never happened and I can’t. (This is after having reported it).

Some respondents (3%) mentioned as a major issue their own counselling skills. One talked about this issue in the context of the dual role:

Working as a classroom teacher does not lend itself to counselling. I have 11 hours of each. I feel that it is impossible to be a teacher and have discipline problems etc. and then try to be a counsellor as well.

Another talked about the difficulty of maintaining professional expertise:

To reflect on my work constantly so that I don’t lose contact with the core conditions required (Rogers).

Finally, in response to this question about the most challenging aspect of their work, a small number (three or less in each case) referred to issues of a relatively small number of students. These included homophobic bullying, adoption issues and anger management.

In analysing these results, it became clear that no firm categorisation is possible. A particular challenge of the participants is around the interface of their working conditions on the one hand (e.g. having a teaching and counselling role) and the issues with which students present. The nature of the students’ problems presented the biggest problem for some guidance counsellors. Others referred to the lack of supports to enable them to meet that challenge.

### 4 Procedures for Referral to Guidance Counsellors and Referring Onwards

The guidance counsellors were asked to say how students were generally referred to them for counselling. Nine sources of referral were set out and they were asked to indicate on a five-point scale the frequency of referral by the group in question from ‘not at all’ to ‘a great deal’. The comparisons shown in Table 4.9 show the percentage of guidance counsellors who said a ‘lot’ or ‘a great deal’; this is a measure that is used for comparative purposes, rather than showing the full results for point on the scale. The results indicate that the Care Team, Principal or Year Head were somewhat more likely to refer the student while the other processes including self-referral were also quite common. The results shown in Table 4.9 give an overview of the referral sources through collapsing two categories (‘a lot’ and ‘a great deal’). To ensure that this gave an accurate picture, the five response options were also examined and showed a very similar picture to that in Table 4.9.

While there are obviously a variety of sources through which students are referred for counselling, some sources are less common, e.g. other students, chaplain and parents, as well as subject teachers. With regard to the chaplain, it might be that not all schools have a chaplain who spends a substantial time in the school.
Table 4.9: How Students are Referred for Counselling* (N = 103)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Referral Source</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Care Team</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year Head</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-referral</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Tutor</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Teacher</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaplain</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other student</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Table percentages refer to those respondents who said ‘a lot’ or a ‘great deal’. This is a measure for comparative purposes.

Referral Agencies Used Most Often

An important issue that emerged in this research was to do with referral to other agencies. Respondents were asked to say which three referral agencies they used most often, which yielded a total of 237 entries, since there were differences in the number of agencies mentioned by individuals. As can be seen in Table 4.10, the most common form of referral was to a psychological service (either NEPS or a HSE psychologist). This process accounted for close to half of the referrals, although it might actually be more, as some of referrals mentioned in the other categories may also be to psychologists. The next most frequently mentioned source of referral was a GP followed by social services and child/adolescent services. The fact that psychological services were mentioned by so many is obviously important in planning.

Table 4.10: Referral Agencies Most Frequently Used (N = 102)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NEPS/HSE Psychologist</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GP</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Services</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child and Adolescent Services</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other referrals*</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This included specific agencies that may possibly fall under the umbrella of those listed.

5. Supports and Stresses of Counselling

Support for Guidance Counsellors

Guidance counsellors were asked about the support that they received from various sources in their counselling role. Table 4.11 shows the perceived support from eleven sources of support including local sources (Principal, parents) and distal sources (national bodies including the DES, NEPS and NCGE). A simple way of categorising support is the percentage of respondents who thought that the level of support from a particular source was ‘sufficient’ or better.

These results indicate that in-school support is quite good (Principal, Year Heads, class teachers and students). Parents are also judged positively but somewhat lower. In contrast, ‘external agencies’ are generally perceived to be less supportive. Obviously, it is important to stress that these results are indicative of perceptions; furthermore, immediate influences are frequently rated more favourably than those perceived as being at a distance (Brehm, 2008).
Table 4.11 Perceived Support for Guidance Counsellors  \( (N = 104) \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>A lot less than needed</th>
<th>Less than needed</th>
<th>Sufficient</th>
<th>More than needed</th>
<th>A lot more than needed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year Heads</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Teachers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other guidance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEPS</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCGE</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IGC</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Initial Education</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Initial Education refers to the Director of the initial training programme in Guidance Counselling of the respondent.

Support from School Management and Colleagues on Specific Issues

The respondents were asked about the perceived support from school management and from colleagues with respect to four issues: ‘Having a counselling service for all students who wished to avail of it’, ‘the role of counselling in the work of a guidance counsellor’, ‘ensuring that the guidance counsellor can avail of regular professional supervision’ and ‘ensuring that the guidance counsellor can attend continuing professional development’. For each issue, they were asked about perceived support for each issue with respect to ‘school management’ and ‘colleagues’ on a five-point scale from ‘not at all’ to ‘a great deal’.

It can be seen from Table 4.12 and 4.13 that, in general terms, the level of support from management and from colleagues with respect to each of these issues was perceived to be quite strong. This level of support was especially the case with regard to ‘having a counselling service for all students’ as over three-quarters of respondents thought that school management supported them in this matter. It is also of note that school management was thought to be relatively more supportive with regard to each of the issues.

Table 4.12 Perceived Support on Specific Issues by School Management  \( (N = 103) \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Not a lot</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>A lot</th>
<th>A great deal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having a counselling service</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting role of counselling in the work of a guidance counsellor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring regular professional supervision</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate continuing CPD for guidance counsellors</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table entries are percentages.
Table 4.13 Perceived Support on Specific Issues by School Colleagues (N = 100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Not a lot</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>A lot</th>
<th>A great deal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having a counselling service</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting role of counselling in the work of a guidance counsellor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring regular professional supervision</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate continuing CPD for guidance counsellors</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table entries are percentages

Support and Supervision

With regard to ‘supervision’, the first question concerned whether or not the respondents had availed of supervision during the previous year. If they had availed of supervision, they were asked how many sessions, what was the nature of the sessions and why they had availed of counselling supervision. Conversely, for those who had not availed of supervision, they were asked to say why this was the case.

It emerged that 82% of the guidance counsellors in the study reported that they had been involved in supervision. As can be seen from Table 4.14, the vast majority had one or two sessions with a minority having more than this. In response to the question of what was the nature of these sessions, just 91% said that these were group sessions and a relatively small number indicated that these were individual sessions.

Table 4.14 Sessions of Supervision During Previous Term (N = 98)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of sessions</th>
<th>Valid Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 sessions</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4 sessions</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or more</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Every guidance counsellor who had been to supervision was asked to give reasons. Overall, the responses were quite similar. Guidance counsellors described feeling a need for support and also indicated that it was a valuable learning experience:

I need it. Many of my cases have an impact on me and I need to be listened to. Also, I get great insight from my fellow guidance counsellors into how they would deal with similar issues.

Another comment was along the same lines:

I need a confidential space to raise concerns re: legalities. I also receive beneficial direction and reinforcement re: my own counselling cases, and other cases allow me to extend my own experience.

One commented on how it allowed him/her to get new ideas:

Availing of experience and expertise of colleagues and supervisor. A chance to sound out with colleagues and an opportunity to gain new ideas and approaches.

A number of participants mentioned both self-care and how supervision helps them to acquire new skills:

It gives me the opportunity to seek help and support around the students I am helping… and to learn from all the cases brought up by all participants – thereby improving my skills, and to enhance my approach to self-care.
In the questionnaire, the guidance counsellors who indicated that they did not avail of counselling supervision, were asked why this was the case. Most of the reasons given had to do with inconvenience, including the unavailability of supervision at the particular times that suited the participant. This response is typical of the reasons:

I can’t attend it because the time and the location don’t suit and that is not the fault of the people running it. Due to work and family circumstances, I can’t access it.

Another response was quite similar:

The counselling supervision group I attended is no longer on-going and a new group is yet to be established.

In some cases, the problem seemed to be at school level:

I work between three schools, and two of these schools – despite specific instructions from the inspectorate - timetabled me so that I could not attend.

### Stressful Aspects of Counselling

Respondents were asked to say how stressful they found various aspects of their role, including expectations of others. Table 4.15 shows the percentage who said that these caused either ‘a lot’ of stress or ‘a great deal’ of stress. As in the case of Table 4.9, this is a measure that is used for comparative purposes, rather than showing the full results. The first matter to note here is that the overall level of stress experienced is not especially high, given the comparisons with other ‘positive items’ above. It is noteworthy that expectations of teachers are an important source of stress, as indeed are the expectations of parents, in contrast to the expectations of students. It is worth noting that the single strongest source was the ‘dual role’ of teacher and guidance counsellor but this was experienced by less than half of the respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Stress</th>
<th>Percentage*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of students</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of teachers</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of parents</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of Principal</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dual role of classroom teacher and guidance counsellor</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severity of presenting issues</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal complications arising from disclosures</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percentage who said that the source caused ‘a lot’ or a ‘great deal’ of stress: this is a measure for comparative purposes

### 6. School Policy

Respondents were asked if there was a school policy in relation to counselling and whether there was a written policy relating to several issues in their role as a school guidance counsellor (consent, confidentiality, record-keeping providing feedback, referral to other agencies, and policies on other relevant issues). They were also asked in an open-ended format to comment on school policies with regard to these areas.
Over half of the respondents (53%) indicated that there was a school policy in relation to counselling in their schools, but as will become clear from the question which followed, relatively more guidance departments seemed to have written policies (see Table 4.16). When asked about written policies in relation to issues in their role as a guidance counsellor, relatively more participants indicated that this was the case for the guidance department than was the case for the school. For only 56% of schools had a written policy in relation to confidentiality, more than 82% of guidance departments had such a policy. A number of participants explained the specific nature of the conditions of confidentiality:

Students are seen for ongoing counselling with the individual's consent. A parent's consent plus that of the individual is required for referral to outside agencies.

In some cases, consent is sought for a specific occasion while in others, the consent is obtained when students register in school:

In case of junior cycle students, written consent for counselling was usually given by signing a form. Now changing to one general consent from registration.

In some cases, there seems to be a lack of clarity even if there has been discussion on the topic:

Within the guidance subject plan, there is clearly-stated policy about the above issues. We have discussed the consent issue but nothing was formulated. Some parents have indicated that they do not want their children to receive counselling re: specific issues e.g. grief/bereavement.

With regard to issues of confidentiality, one guidance counsellor set out the considerations that determine their approach:

Professional relationship with confidentiality at the core of my work. All reasonable effort is made to maintain confidentiality. The guidance counsellor will inform students regarding legal limits. Finally, our practice is informed by the I.G.C. Code of Ethics.

A number of participants explained the specific nature of the conditions of confidentiality:

I explain to my student that confidentiality will be maintained except in cases of danger to self or others.

Others made essentially the same point:

All students are made aware that confidentiality shall be broken only if the student is hurting themselves or is being hurt by someone else.

Table 4.16. Percentage with Written Policy in Relation to Issues (N=102)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Guidance Department</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consent</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record-keeping</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing feedback</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral to other agencies</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results have a number of important implications. It is evident that a relatively high proportion of schools do not have a written policy on either counselling in general or on specific aspects. Furthermore, in many schools, while the guidance department has a policy on several issues, this does not seem to operate at school level.

In the subsequent open-ended section following this, the participants were asked to give details of these policies. With regard to consent, there were a number of comments regarding the procedure for obtaining consent:

All students must receive consent before seeing the guidance counsellor. Additional consent is required if a student is referred on to the school psychologist.

Some comments made a distinction between the consent of the individual and the consent of their parents:
Some other respondents explained the limits of confidentiality and the conditions under which information is passed on:

I explain that confidentiality is limited, and that information may need to be passed on to the Principal, however, the student would be fully informed about content of information passed on and what would happen … in case the Principal had to pass that on to HSE or parents.

This comment summarised what many had said:

This statement is made to all students attending counselling service: ‘anything we discuss here is confidential except where you are involved in something that is harmful to yourself or others/involve others or is illegal. Then I would have to speak to someone else but I would tell you before I do that’.

There was a good deal of consensus on record-keeping as well: One guidance counsellor said:

Date and class recorded in student’s journal. A card given at end of session for class teacher and a template is used to record session notes.

Quite a number talked about the precautions that they took to ensure that records were confidential:

Records and notes are written up as soon as possible after each session and kept in a locked filing cabinet in the guidance counsellor’s room.

Another talked about the limits of feedback:

Feedback which is necessary for the welfare, safety, academic progress of student… is only given...
Parents are fully informed within the boundaries of confidentiality.

Similarly, this guidance counsellor gave particular priority to confidentiality:

Feedback is provided to parents/teachers and Principal only after clearing first with the student i.e. when it is within the bounds of confidentiality.

A number of others talked about the feedback to the Principal and parents:

If there is an issue of concern, it will be brought to the Principal’s attention or if parents are called in, they will be informed of any further developments and monitoring.

Participants comments on several aspects of the process and policy on referral, including how the referral was made, to whom they were made, the type of issues that require such a referral, and the conditions, particularly regarding permission. With regard to the process, one participant said:

Referrals are discussed at weekly meetings with Principal and chaplain and a decision is made by the group – parent/student are informed, if appropriate and safe.

Another talked about the distinction between routine and specific kinds of referral:

Routine referrals to NEPS, OT, Speech and Language therapy are undertaken by the guidance counsellor…in the case of statutory reporting, this is the responsibility of the Principal.
Some others talked about the kind of issues that would be relevant for referral:

For issues beyond the remit of the school, that require more time than that available to the guidance counsellor or that require family counselling, or where the student is in immediate danger e.g. suicide... we make the referral as appropriate.

Many commented on the importance of parents being involved in referrals:

Parents consent would be sought (if appropriate) to the referral or, if required, parents would be informed that we were making the referral.

7. Gauging the Impact of Counselling

The question on assessing the impact of counselling was open-ended and simply asked how the participants gauge its impact. Virtually all respondents answered this question, some in considerable detail (N=101). Broadly, the responses fell into four categories. One set of responses indicated that it was virtually impossible to measure the effectiveness of their work, while a second group set out quite systematic ways in which they tried to gauge this. A third set of responses identified what they thought was one particularly worthwhile approach while the final group set out the shortcomings of any approach to establishing with certainty how they were faring.

In the first category, some talked about the limitations of any approach, for example:

I don’t gauge the impact because it’s not for me to gauge it, as counselling is a process which the server benefits from but then the students decide it’s time to finish. The number of self-referrals is very big in this school, many times it’s a one-off session where they just want to be listened to or want to tease something out.; common phrases the students use are ‘they got stuff off their chest’ or ‘they feel lighter/easier’.

Other participants described systematic ways in which they study the impact of their work:

Through feedback from school surveys, student council, student learners, Year Heads, and class tutors and parents. Probably the most important feedback is from the clients themselves and from observing and monitoring them in class and at break/at leisure.

Our behaviour/points system in the school also helps monitor anger management/personal responsibility issues and mitching/withdrawal.

Another approach was to see how the students had progressed after the sessions. One response was:

I have no quantitative method of gauging its impact. I judge it by the fact that students are willing firstly to return and engage with me on a regular basis ... and over time on whether they themselves are happier towards the end of their time in counselling and that they have found a way of moving forward and dealing with their own issues. I also check in from time to time with those who have completed counselling to make sure that they are coping and allow students to return to counselling if they feel they need to talk some more.
Along the same lines, another guidance counsellor described how he does this informally:

I suppose how the person can better deal with their presenting issue. Do they seem happier, have they stopped cutting, is the weight loss stopped, have they stopped bullying, have they made an appropriate CAO choice, are their grades improving, have they told Mum that they are sexually active (pregnant), how is the referral working out, have they some level of control over alcohol? Drug intake. Hard to get empirical evidence – more a qualitative judgement.

A related comment was around the way in which situations can vary:

Varies hugely. Sometimes one intervention is sufficient and can bring about great healing and resolution. Other times, students are stuck in very difficult life situations and the most I hope to achieve is to make their life in school more manageable for them – in that respect, I consider us quite effective. I gauge the impact from feedback from students, parents, colleagues and pastoral care meetings.

A similar comment from another respondent:

It depends. I had a successful intervention with a 1st Year student there last week which I was very happy about. If the student remains able to function or declares their sense of self, it appears to have been of some use. It really is very hard to gauge. They may have big issues and I'm only here for a couple of months then I'm gone. Maybe it's not right to get students to divulge a lot of sensitive issues when I'm going to be gone in a while.

Recommendations from Guidance Counsellors in Survey

In an open-ended format, the participants in the study were asked to say what recommendations they would make to each of the following: School Principals, the DES, the National Centre for Guidance in Education, the Directors of Studies of Guidance programmes, the Institute for Guidance Counsellors and ‘others’. Since virtually all of the participants made recommendations to at least one of these stakeholders, we present the main themes emerging in these comments. However, relatively more recommendations were directed to School Principals and the DES (over half of the respondents) and an overview of these is presented in Table 4.17. The percentage in this table is the percentage of those who made a recommendation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Illustrative Quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>Satisfaction with support</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>My Principal is very supportive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need for greater understanding</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>I would like the Principal to ensure staff understand the importance of the service in a school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time and resources</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>There is a need to allocate all hours granted to guidance ... it is most unjust to do otherwise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education and Skills</td>
<td>Allocation of staff</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>There is a need for one guidance counsellor (full-time) for every 200 students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need for directions and related matters</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>An information booklet on recognised practice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Seventy percent of the respondents made a recommendation to Principals. The most common response (35%) regarding School Principals was that they were supportive; when this comment was made it was usually without further qualification. The next most frequently made comment centred (32%) on the need to have a greater understanding of the service being provided in the school by guidance counsellors and how this might be facilitated by the Principal. One such comment was:

I want him to give time to developing and writing up policy in conjunction with all the relevant parties, including students … so that we all agree what the service is about.

Finally, 30% commented on the need to ensure that the time and resources allocated to this area was used for that purpose:

We are not a quick fix or substitute teacher to slot in when some teacher is out. There is a need to allocate all hours granted to guidance… it is most unjust to do otherwise.

There were a number of specific points made in relation to how Principals might assist in making the service better. There were comments about the referral process:

It would be great to draw up a more precise method of referral of students for the school counselling service.

Another suggestion focused on the kind of counselling that would be better:

Preventative counselling is easier! In a crisis … is too late to be getting involved.

There were also some points made about the organisation of the service within schools:

If possible, have guidance office away from Deputy Principal – students facing discipline issues are in vicinity of guidance office.

This comment summarised most of the other comments that were made:

I want the Principal to continue to support me through adequate resources, attendance at in-service, ongoing training, development of programmes … should also recognise the limits of the resource of counselling…. it is not a quick-fix resolution. Students may need to be placed on a waiting list due to the demands on a service that is voluntary and confidential.

With regard to the DES, 65% of the respondents made recommendations. Virtually all of these were concerned with resources, including allocation of staff, facilities and training. Over half of comments (55%) were concerned with allocation of staff (See Table 4.17). One comment spelled this out in detail:

To fully recognise counselling as part of our work, to provide more paid supervision for us, to recognise that societal issues pervade schools and if we’re better facilitated it might cost the State less in later life. To see the necessity for full-time guidance counsellors in every school, to not need to teach other subjects, to allow us to attend conferences without having to fight every year over substitution and supervision. Acknowledge and validate what we do instead of always knocking the work we do. 500 is the cut-off point for a full-time guidance counsellor – does the DES imagine that having 450 studs in a school is very different? Recognise that it is the amount of time we have that matters and therefore 400/450/500 students or less, demand the same amount of time.

Some of the recommendations were of a fairly modest nature (35%):

An information booklet on recognised practice and guidelines on how to keep within these parameters.
The next set of recommendations concerned the Directors of Studies in Guidance Counselling (or the Director of the initial training programme taken by the guidance counsellor). Less than half of the sample (45%) made recommendations and these could be broadly categorised as concerning the course content, the status of the course/qualifications, as well as some specific ideas on how the courses might be enhanced.

With regard to course content, the most frequent response was that there was a need to make the course more skills-based. The three suggestions of this respondent are typical (especially the stress on time management skills):

More emphasis should be given to time management training, personal de-stressing strategies, and more time on courses given to counselling.

In relation to the status of the courses, a number of guidance counsellors mentioned the importance of accreditation and recognition by the DES and, in particular, the need for full-time courses:

Ensure that training courses are full-time courses of at least one year duration; part-time course dilute the personal development work essential for those intending to work as guidance counsellors.

Some specific suggestions about courses included the following:

To bring in people from referral agencies and have them explain their roles and the relevant procedures.

There was also a suggestion as how course directors might be helped to develop their courses:

That they spend some time in schools finding out what happens and what we are dealing with. That they then help train guidance people to deal with these problems.

Eighteen percent of the respondents made a recommendation regarding the NCGE. Of those, the vast majority focused on training, either the structure of training or the content. One suggestion was that there was a need for:

Short in-service courses rather than the modular course on offer regarding whole school guidance planning.

Another person stressed the need for courses outside of Dublin:

To facilitate courses outside of Dublin even at weekends or during the summer, as travelling and working the following day after a course day is very debilitating.

Some comments concerned the issues that should be dealt with in training:

We need on-going training on a whole range of issues: gender issues/sexuality; cyber bullying; behavioural problems, alcohol, drug, family issues involving drug/alcohol abuse, anxiety/panic/depression/phobias, mood disorders.

There were also a number of very positive comments including:

…they provide an excellent service.

With regard to the IGC, the same percentage of respondents commented as in the case of the NCGE, i.e. 18%. These comments fell into three categories, the most common being around the excellent support that they received, the second around the direction the IGC should take and the third referred to specific aspects of the organisation.

Several positive comments were made about the helpful role:
They are a great support – they should be funded full-time by the DES.

Other comments centred on the kind of resources with which courses might be provided. One comment was:

Nowadays with changing needs, there is a need to develop on-line resources.

Along the same lines:

The Institute should know what our job entails and they need to act on our behalf in making representations for the support and training we need on an ongoing basis.

There were a number of comments about the IGC as an organisation:

Good for networking but very 'old school' – traditional values, emphasis on academic, not enough consideration of the academically/socially disadvantaged.

A comment with a somewhat similar tone was:

To be more supportive of second-level students and devote more time to their cause and less time to all the other recently-joined groups, especially the adult education groups.

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9. Final Comments from Guidance Counsellors

Generally speaking, 'final comments' do not add much to a questionnaire; the present survey was somewhat exceptional. It should be acknowledged that the respondents gave great attention to all parts of the questionnaire but especially to open-ended questions. It is particularly interesting, therefore, that so many (N=67) responded to the section that asked for any further comments. These broke into two broad categories: some mentioned issues that had not emerged in earlier questions, while some others strengthened views that had been expressed earlier.

Some of the comments centred on changes in the curriculum/school priorities and how this impacted on their work. Particular attention was given to changes in SPHE and also in relation to Relationships and Sexuality Education:

There’s lots of scope for overlaps within SPHE but since SPHE has been diluted by the Department of Education, guidance issues suffer within overall provision in classrooms when SPHE suffers, e.g. bullying, drug and alcohol, fighting violence, RSE and related issues, mugging, personal safety, school community building, class atmosphere building.

As noted above, the guidance counsellors were generally satisfied with the support available in most schools. However, a few mentioned that the circumstances of their work make it quite lonely at times:
Research on the Practice of Counselling by Guidance Counsellors in Post Primary Schools

I often feel that the counselling aspect of my role as guidance counsellor can be very lonely, as often there is nobody to bounce ideas or get suggestions off. Sometimes, one can feel isolated by members of staff for not sharing details about a student which have been revealed during a session.

It is also worthy of note that there are significant fluctuations in the demands on the participants, particularly relating to the time of year:

The school year has an influence on the service – e.g. May is rarely a busy month because the students know that there is an end in sight and the service does not continue over the summer. The demand, therefore, varies – it ebbs and flows: can be very busy and not so busy. Part of the ebb and flow is related to my perceived availability e.g. the service has become much busier since Christmas. After holidays is usually very busy.

A very interesting perspective is given on students’ perception of counselling (at least in some schools). They are not always ready to miss a class for a counselling session, even if they are ready to be involved in counselling:

Since I began work as a guidance counsellor, the school environment has become more complex. Students are more willing to engage in the counselling process but do not like to miss class, especially Maths/English and practical classes. Counselling support outside the school timetable but within the school is a preferred option for many senior students which I occasionally offer with the consent of parents.

Of those guidance counsellors who completed and returned the questionnaire only three respondents to this section expressed dissatisfaction with the research process. One wrote that:

I think that this questionnaire is far too time-consuming – there is no time of year where school counsellors have time to spare – we are all over-loaded. I never work only my 22 hours a week.

A second person answered as follows:

I would like to add something in relation to the questionnaire itself. I believe it to be biased to generate a particular response. I find it difficult to believe that it meets with the ethical standards of the College.

A third guidance counsellor enclosed an additional sheet with her questionnaire expressing how undervalued she feels in her work as a guidance counsellor, how little support she receives and how unhappy she was with the questionnaire as is clear in the following extract from her comments:

I feel very annoyed that I should receive a letter with this questionnaire that states that you ‘anticipate that it will take approximately 25-30 minutes to complete’. This emphasises to me that you have no understanding of what we do in school and that we are not in a position to keep statistics as we go along. I have spent approximately three hours completing this questionnaire and I don’t feel that I have done it to my satisfaction but I cannot afford any more time.

In contrast, many guidance counsellors expressed support for the research through their written comments and/or in person by availing of the opportunity of meeting with the researchers at the National Conference of the Institute of the Guidance Counsellors. Many also expressed a willingness to be involved in participating in focus groups, if needed. It is important to highlight that there were a number of positive, affirming views expressed throughout the survey:

I enjoy this challenging aspect of my work - there is scope for much more work in my school, but there is so much work to be done besides.

And finally:

I enjoy the variety of both guidance and counselling and would be strongly against either being diluted.
Chapter Summary

A number of conclusions emerge from the survey. Firstly, the majority of guidance counsellors were satisfied that their initial training prepared them for their counselling work and a similar percentage had been involved in in-service training following their initial qualification. Secondly, with regard to models of counselling, five main approaches emerged: person-centred counselling, reality therapy, CBT, solution-focused brief therapy, and gestalt therapy. Furthermore, the vast majority of the guidance counsellors felt confident, competent and comfortable in the counselling role. Thirdly, there were substantial variations in the number of students who presented for counselling, with a tendency for students in senior years to be relatively more likely to be seen for counselling. Fourthly, of the various issues of students in counselling, family issues, bullying and mood disturbance were prominent while other significant issues included bereavement and loss, behavioural problems, suicide/self-harm, relationships and educational issues.

The results also showed that no one source of referral to guidance counsellors was dominant while students who were referred onwards were most likely to be referred to a psychological service. Guidance counsellors generally thought themselves well supported in their role but the expectations of teachers and parents as well as the dual role of counsellor/teacher were sources of stress.

There were considerable differences between schools in the extent to which policies on counselling were in place and, in many cases, policies had been developed at guidance department rather than at school level. Finally, the guidance counsellors made several recommendations, particularly relevant to Principals and the Department of Education and Skills.
Phase Two of the research involved focus groups with guidance counsellors who were practising in second-level schools. Three groups were held in May 2010 and the fourth in September 2010. A total of 25 guidance counsellors participated. Three of the focus groups took place immediately following professional guidance meetings. The fourth was held with guidance counsellors who attended specifically for the purpose of participating in the research. In line with the mixed methods methodology, the four groups were chosen in different ways as described in Chapter 3, Methodology.

Table 5.1 below contains details of the guidance counsellors who participated in the four focus groups regarding gender, whether they had completed the survey in Phase One and the number of years experience they had.

### Table 5.1: Profile of Participants in Focus Groups by Gender, Involvement in Phase One (Survey) and Years of Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Completed Survey</th>
<th>Years Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>6-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5.2: Profile of Participants in Focus Groups by Type of Group, Gender, Involvement in Phase One (Survey), Type of School and Years of Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Completed Survey</th>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>Years of Experience as GC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IGC Branch</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Boys fee-paying</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Girls fee-paying</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Girls fee-paying</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Boys fee-paying</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Fee mixed</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Girls non-fee paying</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Girls fee paying</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Boys non-fee paying</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Girls fee paying</td>
<td>30+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Boys fee-paying</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Co-ed VEC Com College</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>DEIS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No yes pilot</td>
<td>Girls fee-paying</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Girls Voluntary Secondary</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Boys Diocesan</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Co-ed VEC</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Co-ed Community College</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Co-ed VEC</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Boys Catholic non-fee</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Girls Voluntary Sec</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The guidance counsellors who participated were asked to discuss three questions:

1. Their experience of the counselling aspect of guidance counsellors working in second-level schools in Ireland;
2. The recommendations they would make with regard to this role;
3. Anything else they would like to say in relation to this area.

### Method of Determining Key Themes that Emerged during the Course of the Focus Groups

The following steps were carried out to determine key themes that emerged during the course of the four focus groups:

1. A transcript of each focus group was written up;
2. The various comments that guidance counsellors gave in response to each of the three questions were compiled into separate documents and considered at length by each researcher separately and then together;
3. Participants’ responses were categorised according to themes that the researchers identified as a result of their in-depth analysis;
4. Some quotations were chosen as typical of the views expressed by more than one guidance counsellor and/or more than one focus group. Other quotations were chosen to illustrate how some guidance counsellors had different opinions to other guidance counsellors in their group and/or in other groups;
5. The decision was made not to quantify how many times a particular point was made, as the purpose of the focus group was to elicit participants’ opinions. It was not possible, given that the groups were made up of people who were self-selected, rather than randomly selected, to generalise any comments, irrespective of how often or seldom they were said, to the general population of guidance counsellors.

### Notes:

1. The role of the researchers in conducting the focus groups was to provide an opportunity for the participants to say whatever they wished in response to the three questions. It was not part of their role to inform, lead or challenge any participant in his or her view.
2. The researchers observed during one focus group how one person’s view was not supported by some other guidance counsellors who were present. Immediately following the group, they were asked by that person not to include those comments, and the request was respected.

3. In three of the four focus groups, each participant spoke. In the largest group, one person chose to stay completely silent.

4. The opinions and recommendations that were expressed during the focus groups were those of the people who made them. The researchers are aware that some of these may be considered by other guidance counsellors and stakeholders as inaccurate or unnecessary.

Themes:
The following themes emerged during the four focus groups:
1. The practice of ‘counselling’ in second-level schools;
2. The demanding nature of the counselling role;
3. The supports guidance counsellors receive in the counselling role;
4. The benefits of the counselling role.

These themes are developed below and will be followed by a description of the participants’ key recommendations which focused on increased support and recognition.

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2. The Practice of Counselling in Second-Level Schools (Theme 1)

It was almost unanimously agreed by guidance counsellors in each focus group that the counselling aspect of guidance practice is an integral part of the role as a whole and cannot be separated, as the role is a holistic one. There was widespread recognition that ‘every meeting with a student can potentially end up as a counselling interview’ and that ‘counselling skills are needed in everything’ – ‘quite often students will come for a career issue but something else will emerge’. Having the ‘guidance piece’ meant that it was ‘easy to talk to students about subject choice and was easy to break the ice in the office’. It also meant that ‘students do not need to be seen to be in trouble or that there is something wrong before they have a valid reason to go to the guidance counsellor’.

It became clear that the term ‘counselling’ was used in different ways to mean different things according to the training and experience of the guidance counsellors, as well as the particular nature of their role as defined by the School Principal. For instance, one guidance counsellor who had additional training as a psychotherapist was insistent that guidance and counselling are two separate things. For her, ‘counselling’ did not mean ‘using counselling skills in a supportive way’ as was understood by some other guidance counsellors, but rather ‘counselling’ in a more formal, therapeutic way.

Other guidance counsellors who had done additional training at their own time and expense agreed with this view, as they felt competent to work in ‘counselling’ students with a range of serious difficulties. More newly-qualified guidance counsellors expressed the view that their ‘role was to a huge extent referral’ and that ‘we are not full-time counsellors or psychotherapists’ and that
‘part of our competency is knowing when to refer’. One person drew attention to how a child may not actually need counselling but instead could need medical intervention and that it was for a GP, not the guidance counsellor, to decide. Concern was expressed at the possible risks to the school, as well as to the student, if guidance counsellors worked outside their area of competence and one drew the analogy that ‘a GP doesn’t take on a patient for open heart surgery’.

Specific aspects of counselling practice varied, e.g. in one school, the guidance counsellor had three specific guidance periods a day and after that there was an open-door policy for students to attend for counselling. In another, a guidance counsellor had three to four slots a week for counselling which tended to fill up very quickly. Guidance counsellors in some schools have limited time for counselling as they are responsible for carrying out psychometrics throughout the school, whereas learning support teachers do this work in some other schools.

Practice in referring to the guidance counsellor varied, with students self-referring in some schools and being referred by teachers and/or parents in others. Where guidance counsellors had specific back-up support, such as from the VEC psychological service, the counselling role was defined very clearly in terms of providing short-term support and referring on, if appropriate. Other guidance counsellors described working on a much longer-term basis with students who had difficulties such as eating disorders, as they found that they had no agency to refer these students to.

Guidance counsellors who had eight or more years’ experience made frequent reference to how the range and severity of issues with which they were dealing had changed over time. There was a ‘huge need for counselling’ and ‘always a lot of students to be seen’. Issues mentioned include stress, State examinations, eating disorders, family conflict, child protection, marital separation, bereavement, self-esteem, cultural issues and, increasingly, complex family situations such as where a ‘parent’ was not a child’s actual parent or foster parent. While one guidance counsellor described young people as ‘not being in touch with their feelings’, another disagreed. He described how ten years previously, boys were very reluctant to come to him for counselling, whereas now they are more than willing to ‘come in and insist on being heard’. Frequent reference was made to how varied the counselling aspect of the role was and how the guidance counsellor ‘never knew what to expect’.

The school environment was recognised by the majority of guidance counsellors as the ideal location for a guidance and counselling service, e.g. ‘school can be a comforting environment’, ‘it is an oasis for students’ and ‘the guidance counsellor is often the only teacher to know every student in the school’. The opposite view was also expressed in that ‘school is not the ideal place to be providing counselling and there are certain times of the year when it is not right to delve too deeply, as there is too much going on like exams’.

Opposing views were expressed regarding the dual roles of guidance counsellor and teacher. For some, this was the ideal as ‘students will go to who they know and if they are familiar with someone from the classroom, they will go to that person more’. The opposite view was that ‘the dual role is difficult because if you’re teaching other subjects too, you need to have discipline and then it is difficult to have counselling sessions’ and ‘it is a real struggle – I am a class teacher one period and a guidance counsellor the next – I don’t think it is possible to do both’. This conflict clearly places demands on guidance counsellors. Further demands are described in Section 2.
While several guidance counsellors referred to the specific demands generated by the range of issues ‘lots of very complicated cases, lots of students’ and the dual nature of their roles, each of them agreed that lack of time gives rise to enormous pressure. Some of them described working many hours unpaid, before school, during lunch-time and after school. Getting the time to follow-up on particular children was ‘an impossible task’ and was very frustrating. It was ‘hard to get to see everyone’ and ‘hard to provide continuity’. In many schools, particularly where there was only one guidance counsellor, it was very difficult to get the time to make contact with students in the junior classes. Getting recognition that guidance counsellors could give more with more time and more resources was difficult. One guidance counsellor described very clearly how ‘counselling doesn’t fit in the timetable’, citing an example of how students timetabled for individual careers interviews would need to be rescheduled if, as often happened, an unexpected crisis occurred. Another spoke of how earlier that day, she had had the dilemma of a distraught child who was still upset and could not be left alone when she was due to teach a class:

When a child is distressed, it is not a five-minute thing – it can take a lot more time, spill over into other areas and we need to prioritise as it is not streamlined into a class period.

While every term carried its particular tasks and challenges, several guidance counsellors noted that the first term seemed to require particularly skilful juggling such as helping First Years settle in and meeting every Leaving Certificate student for a one-to-one interview.

One guidance counsellor described her desire to make herself accessible to all students as she took her responsibility to provide a ‘duty of care’ to every student seriously. She emphasised how she could only do this by referring students with serious difficulties to outside agencies. The process of making such referrals created demands for many people. Lack of resources, long waiting lists, no set contact person and limited hours to make contact all add to the difficulties. One guidance counsellor reported having received a letter from her local child and adolescent therapeutic services asking her not to refer anyone else as their waiting list was closed.

While several guidance counsellors referred to their colleagues in the school as important supports, others felt that the confidential nature of their job caused tension between them and other teachers. A very different demand from staff was the tendency of some teachers and/or Principals to involve guidance counsellors in a wide range of issues that create time pressure on the counselling role.

Concern was expressed about the ability of young, inexperienced teachers to manage the conflicting demands and it was recognised that everyo
There was widespread agreement among the guidance counsellors in the focus groups that they needed more support in the counselling aspect of their role. While recognition was given to the DES in respect of its support for in-service training and supervision, it was not seen to be enough, for example:

*Given the level of need for young people, increased funding would be a good investment and would allow the guidance counsellor to work earlier with young people.*

Concern was expressed that:

*I am not sure if the Department of Education and Science values the work that guidance counsellors do – we are over-worked all of the time. Who else would provide that service?*

Several people referred to the decrease in the ratio of guidance counsellors to students from 1:250 to 1:500 as proof of how little valued, recognised and supported their role was by the DES.

The Inspectorate of the DES was described as being unsupportive and even ‘vaguely insulting’ as:

*The guidance counsellor is being treated purely as a subject teacher as if the other part (counselling) wasn’t worth investing in’.*

The view that guidance counsellors ‘spend their lives training with no recognition’ was also seen as a way that the DES fails to recognise and support them, and reference was made to how teachers of children with special needs receive an increment in their salary for additional qualifications, while they did not.

Direct reference was also made to the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) for not providing enough support to guidance counsellors. Training modules such as Guidance Planning were described as ‘creating more stress than giving relief’ and while some guidance counsellors thought that the Centre has done very little, they saw it as being able to ‘do so much with advanced counselling skills’.

Some guidance counsellors described having a very supportive School Principal and teaching colleagues, while others’ experience was less positive. Several people described how beneficial it was for them to work with the support of a care team in the school. Others referred to the move in some schools to develop internal resources such as Rainbows as a great support to guidance counsellors in their work.

Two other agencies were specifically mentioned by guidance counsellors as being supportive to them in their counselling role. The first was the VEC and some VECs were recognised as providing psychological support and direct referral sources to guidance counsellors working in their schools. The second was the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) which was recognised as providing strong support through the annual conference, workshops, training, branch meetings and its advocacy role.

The guidance counsellors in the focus groups were considerably less positive about other agencies. They described how a child could be attending a range of other services and the guidance counsellor might not know. Some described other professional groups as appearing not to fully respect the
profession of guidance counselling. As noted above, it was commonly difficult to access referral services such as those of the HSE and there was consensus that a child needed to have serious difficulties before being accepted into a service for treatment. One guidance counsellor described how the HSE can expect more from guidance counsellors if a child is in care, describing how she was asked to go to numerous care meetings. There was agreement among guidance counsellors in one focus group that while other professionals seem able to ‘sign off’ on a child, a guidance counsellor cannot. Their work is never done and they acknowledged that ‘it is probably easier to compartmentalise if you do not see the child every day’.

There was unanimous agreement as to how highly supervision was valued by guidance counsellors. Relatively inexperienced practitioners found it helpful to realise that ‘everyone else is in the same boat’. There was a great relief expressed in being able to ‘say things the way they are’ and respondents described the benefits, such as the support they received during critical incidents, as very powerful. While some guidance counsellors felt that the amount of supervision provided was sufficient, the vast majority was clear in recommending that more be provided and that every guidance counsellor be supported by the School Principal to attend. Guidance counsellors also referred to informal support structures they had developed so that they could phone colleagues in other schools for support.

The Benefits to Guidance Counsellors of the Counselling Role (Theme 4)

Given the range of demands, limited resources and insufficient support that guidance counsellors described and the unpredictability of their work (‘you can’t plan a day as you never know what will arise’), the passion and commitment of every one of the guidance counsellors who participated in the focus groups was striking. They explained this by referring to the ‘privileged relationship’ they have with their students, how they are a ‘one-stop-shop which can do great work’, and how ‘you couldn’t continue in it if you didn’t enjoy it’. There was general acceptance that while the range of work can be frustrating and challenging, the variety is also energising and very enjoyable. Some of the guidance counsellors referred to the huge satisfaction they feel when past pupils come back to visit, or when students overcome challenges and do well. They agreed that they really like the ‘helping relationship’ aspect of the job and that it provides them with greater scope to get to know students better and to work with them in different ways than is possible for subject teachers. There was also a recognition that the counselling aspect of the role of the guidance counsellor is not very different from teaching in that it can ‘show the students all the possibilities they can do’.
Recommendations from Guidance Counsellors with Regard to the Counselling Role

During each focus group, guidance counsellors were asked what recommendations they would make regarding the counselling role. It is important to note the following:

1. That each recommendation listed below was immediately supported by other guidance counsellors who were present;
2. That most of the recommendations below were mentioned in each of the four focus groups;
3. That the researchers’ role in this point of the research is to report the recommendations made by participants in the focus groups, irrespective of whether they agreed with them and/or the particular recommendation had already been implemented.

Recommendations made by Guidance Counsellors:

1. That the DES defines the guidance counsellor’s role;
2. That the ratio of guidance counsellor to student is restored to at least 1:250, although there was much support for the view that it be lowered to 1:200;
3. That the DES gives a clear directive to schools that hours allocated specifically for guidance are not be used for other purposes;
4. That guidance counsellors are given an input into how the guidance hours in schools are used;
5. That the DES provides more supervision and that all guidance counsellors are facilitated by school management to attend;
6. That the DES provides more support to school management to enable guidance counsellors to do their role, e.g. to provide substitution to allow them to attend relevant training;
7. That the Guidance Inspectorate of the DES is overhauled so as to proactively support the counselling aspect of the role of the guidance counsellor;
8. That the counselling role is given a greater priority by the DES, NCGE, the IGC, schools and referral agencies through provision of more counselling time and more recognition of the complexity of that work;
9. That initial training in guidance counselling should focus on giving more practical experience;
10. That recognition is given for in-service training which guidance counsellors currently do on their own time and at their own expense;
11. That NCGE provides ongoing practical training in the form of continuing professional development which is appropriately accredited and that it is recognised by the DES;
12. That schools are given the additional support of professionally-trained counsellors to complement and support the work of the guidance counsellor;
13. That all schools offer the same level of counselling service;
14. That each school has a student support team to support the work of the guidance counsellor;
15. That initial training courses for guidance counsellors are expanded to two years to allow for the introduction of basic counselling skills courses;
16. That additional resources are provided for guidance counsellors to help them in their work with students with special needs.
7. Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we described phase 2 of the research involving focus groups with guidance counsellors who were practising in second-level schools. A total of 25 guidance counsellors participated. They were asked to consider three questions around their experience of the counselling aspect of their role, the recommendations they would make with regard to this role, as well as anything else they would like to say in relation to this area. The method of analysis and the results of the research are described.
Phase Three of the research involved consultative groups with stakeholders which were identified by members of the Steering Group. They were the DES, the IGC, the NCGE, Directors of Studies in Guidance Counselling, NEPS and the NAPD. Table 6.1 contains the dates the meetings took place and the number of people who participated in each group.

Table 6.1. Details of the Six Stakeholder Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>No. of Participants</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IGC</td>
<td>12/6/2010</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>IGC Offices</td>
<td>Following meeting of IGC Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCGE</td>
<td>7/7/2010</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NCGE Offices</td>
<td>Arranged meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>14/7/2010</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>DES Buildings</td>
<td>Arranged meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSGC</td>
<td>8/9/2010</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NCGE Offices</td>
<td>Arranged meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEPS</td>
<td>9/9/2010</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Green Isle Hotel</td>
<td>Following business meeting of NEPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAPD</td>
<td>9/2010</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Radisson Galway</td>
<td>During NAPD Conference</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The people who participated were asked to discuss three questions:

1. Their understanding of the counselling aspect of guidance counsellors working in second-level schools in Ireland;
2. The recommendations they would make with regard to this role;
3. Anything else they would like to say in relation to this area.

Method of Determining Key Themes that Emerged During the Course of the Consultative Groups

The following steps were carried out to determine key themes that emerged during the course of the six consultative groups:

1. A transcript of each consultative group was written up;
2. The various comments that participants gave in response to each of the three questions were compiled into separate documents and considered at length by each researcher separately and then together;
3. Participants’ responses were categorised according to themes that the researchers identified as a result of their in-depth analysis;
4. Some quotations were chosen as typical of the views expressed by more than one participant and/or more than one consultative group. Other quotations were chosen to illustrate how some participants had different opinions to other participants in their group and/or in other groups;

5. Very often when one participant made a comment, the others in the group agreed;

6. The judgement of the researchers was used with regard to when to identify comments as coming from a particular group and when to be more general;

7. The decision was made not to quantify how many times a particular point was made as the purpose of the consultative groups was to elicit participants’ opinions. It was not possible, given that the groups were made up of people who chose to attend, rather than having been randomly selected, to generalise any comments, irrespective of how often or seldom, they were said, to the views of stakeholders.

Notes:

1. The role of the researchers in conducting the consultative groups was to provide an opportunity for the participants to say whatever they wished in response to the three questions. It was not part of their role to inform, lead or challenge any participant in his or her view.

2. As some groups were smaller than others, some participants had more opportunity to express their views and opinions.

3. Some participants were more informed with regard to the counselling role of guidance counsellors than others.

4. The opinions and recommendations that were expressed during the consultative groups were those of the people who made them. The researchers are aware that some of these may be considered by some other guidance counsellors and stakeholders as inaccurate or unnecessary.

5. Some of the themes raised as areas of concern by participants of the stakeholder groups are similar to those raised by guidance counsellors who participated in the focus groups.

6. In each consultative group, participants checked if other participants agreed with the recommendations they were making.

7. Some of the recommendations made by participants of the stakeholder groups are similar to those raised by guidance counsellors who participated in the focus groups.

The following themes emerged as key areas of stakeholders’ concern:

1. The need for counselling to be available for second-level students;

2. The personal qualities required by guidance counsellors;

3. The need for high standards in initial training;

4. The lack of clarity re: the counselling aspect of the guidance role;

5. The importance of supports for guidance counsellors to receive in their counselling role;

6. The need for the views of children and parents as key stakeholders to be ascertained and considered.

These themes are developed below and will be followed by a description of the key recommendations which the participants of the consultative groups made about clarification of the role and increasing supports and recognition for guidance counsellors.
The Need for Counselling to be Made Available for Second-Level Students (Theme 1)

Demand for Counselling
There was agreement among the six consultative groups that there is a huge demand for counselling among second-level students. The range, intensity and frequency of difficulties which students experience were emphasised, and there was concern that there are not enough resources currently available to meet their needs. There was a recognition that students’ lives have become more complex and that changes in the nature of families can lead to many young people experiencing difficulties. Some of the difficulties cited were family breakdown, peer pressure, suicidal feelings, eating disorders, substance abuse issues, cyber bullying, anger management, teenage pregnancy, sexuality issues and stress related to exams. The preventative role of counselling was also stressed: ‘the one-to-one counselling needs to be recognised, valued and protected because it has a preventative role’.

Personal Attributes Required by Guidance Counsellors (Theme 2)

Guidance Counsellors’ Commitment to their Work
Guidance counsellors, in general, were recognised by each of the consultative groups as ‘being very caring people who typically are extremely personally committed to their work’. Some participants noted that guidance counsellors’ initial training ‘emphasised the necessity for them to address personal issues in their own lives so as to be better able to respond to the needs of the students in their care’, although not all of the stakeholders were aware of this need. Guidance counsellors were seen to be extremely committed to ongoing professional training, ‘frequently embarking on courses in their own time and at their own expense’. There was recognition that they are frequently over-stretched, carry huge workloads, have particularly stressful demands such as the increase in students affected by suicide and that they are not sufficiently supported.

Guidance Counsellors’ Ease with Counselling
There was recognition in each of the consultative groups that ‘some guidance counsellors were very comfortable with the counselling aspect of their role while others were considerably less so’. Some of the participants thought that it might have been to do with when they were trained, as some of the more experienced guidance counsellors were described as being ‘more comfortable with guidance than counselling’, while others described more recently-qualified guidance counsellors as being ‘better able to combine the ‘dual role’ of guidance and counselling’. The personality of guidance counsellors was seen to be an important factor in whether they were suited for the counselling aspect of their role or not and whether young people would relate to them. Some participants of the consultative groups described instances where young people refused to go to the guidance counsellor to discuss personal issues but were happy to talk about careers. The opposite scenario was also described.
Lack of Clarity about Role Leads to Confusion
Participants of each consultative group referred to the lack of clarity which existed about the counselling aspect of the role of guidance counsellors. This lack of clarity was seen to lead to a lack of agreed consensus which in turn resulted in problems and confusion. Through the various collective interviews, a clear picture emerged of guidance counsellors who were extremely committed to helping the students in their care. There seemed to be great variation, however, in how they were seen to be carrying out their role and in how the various stakeholders felt that they should be doing so. A view was shared by the many participants in the consultative groups that ‘the initial training in guidance counselling did not give guidance counsellors a professional counselling qualification, so that it was not appropriate for them to be doing therapeutic one-to-one counselling with students’. Instead, their role was described as being ‘mainly one of referral and support using the counselling skills they had developed’. Counselling was seen to be ‘firmly embedded as part of guidance’ and could ‘not be separated from it’.

The opposite view expressed by some representatives of the consultative groups was that guidance counsellors were qualified to act as counsellors with their students and that ‘given the lack of referral sources, they had an onus to work with students on an ongoing basis’. Some of the stakeholders referred to the history of guidance counselling in Ireland and how the Irish system, which is based on the American rather than the British system, has long received positive recognition and a member of one group noted that it has been described as ‘the best model in Europe’. The holistic model on which the training is based indicates that guidance counsellors have a counselling role in each aspect of their work: personal, educational and vocational. Several people spoke clearly of how impossible it was to separate ‘counselling’ from ‘guidance’: ‘We need to see counselling as an integral part of guidance that is not to be ring-fenced’.

Guidance counsellors were described by some participants of the consultative groups as having a ‘key role in preventative approaches within schools’. This was seen by some as meaning that guidance counsellors have an integral role in providing SPHE in schools. A contrasting view expressed by other stakeholders was that the work of the guidance counsellor was completely separate from the SPHE programme in schools.

Lack of Consensus Regarding the Function of Additional Training in Counselling
While there was recognition that many guidance counsellors have engaged in additional training to become professionally-trained counsellors, there was a lack of consensus among participants of the consultative groups as to whether this actually equipped them to work therapeutically with students in their school in their capacity as guidance counsellors. Some considered that ‘it was not within their remit, regardless of additional qualifications’. Others felt that ‘the initial training was sufficient for guidance counsellors to work as counsellors’. A third view emphasised that ‘some guidance counsellors were better able for the counselling role as a result of training in specific therapies such as reality therapy’.

Different Views within Consultative Groups as well as between them
Understanding of the counselling role varied considerably within consultative groups as well as across them. For instance, several times during one
consultative group, the counselling practice of a guidance counsellor in one school was seen to differ considerably from someone in another school. In some schools, the guidance counsellors, Principals and Deputy Principals hold regular meetings and work together as part of the school's care team. In others, the Principals do not know who attends the guidance counsellor and were ‘not made aware of any difficulties unless there is a crisis, such as when a student is suicidal’. Some guidance counsellors work on programmes such as SPHE as part of their job, while others have no involvement whatsoever. In some schools, the guidance counsellor was described as ‘being an important member of the school’s care team’, while in others he or she ‘very deliberately works independently and attends meetings with other staff, only very reluctantly, when specifically invited’. Some participants in one consultative group agreed with an individual who expressed surprise that ‘the guidance counsellors complained of being overworked and tired, given the relatively small number of students they worked with’.

Lack of Consensus Regarding Issue of Confidentiality
The actual process of engaging in discussion in this area highlighted for the group participants just how little shared understanding and common practice there actually is. Practices differ also in terms of how the issue of confidentiality is understood. It was reported that in one school ‘the guidance counsellor does not inform anyone (not even the Principal or parents) that a child is attending for counselling unless the student expresses concerns around self-harm and/or abuse’. In other schools, ‘there is an emphasis that the guidance and counselling service is not confidential’.

Guidance counsellors are also seen to differ in practice in how they provide, or refuse to provide, feedback to other members of staff. Lack of feedback was reported as causing particular difficulties for concerned teachers who may have initiated the referral. In one school, ‘a list of students who attend the guidance counsellor is placed in the staffroom’ while in another ‘teachers are informed as a matter of course if a student attends the guidance counsellor for more than three sessions’.

Working within Areas of Competence
While there was agreement in each consultative group about the integrity of individuals who work as guidance counsellors, concern was expressed by several participants that guidance counsellors may act outside their area of competence with students who have severe difficulties. Examples were given of ‘inappropriate probing’ and one participant quoted a student as saying ‘don’t ever send me to that person again’. There was recognition that the initial training in guidance counselling equipped guidance counsellors with basic counselling skills and that these were invaluable in all aspects of their work: i.e. the personal, educational and vocational. However, there is a lack of consensus as to where the limits of competence lie and whose responsibility it is to ‘police’ guidance counsellors to ensure that they do not act outside their area of competence: e.g. Guidance counsellors have one understanding, Principals have others and trainers have another.

Reference to Legal Acts, Policy Documents, Reports and Best Practice
Reference was made to documents such as the Education Act (Ireland 1998), the Report of the National Guidance Forum (NGF, 2007), the Code of Ethics of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors and ‘Guidance for All’ by the ESRI to illustrate how guidance counsellors are expected to approach the counselling aspect of their work. The Education Act (1998) was described as ‘emphasising that guidance counsellors have a responsibility to provide guidance to every child in secondary school’. This Act puts the onus on them to respond to the ‘silent child’ as well
as the child who expresses specific needs. Given the very limited resource that guidance counsellors are in schools, it was seen by one group participant as ‘inappropriate that they should engage in ongoing one-to-one therapeutic work with children’. The view was taken that ‘they should use their skills instead to benefit all’. Their role as ‘teacher’ was seen to be fundamental and class work was described as ‘the most economical way of providing guidance’.

**Referral**

While there was general recognition that the system of school-based guidance counsellors worked well in supporting students, the question was asked as to whether students themselves would prefer to talk to someone who was not on the school staff. There was a lack of consensus in relation to guidance counsellors’ role in referring students with serious difficulties on to the appropriate agencies. The view that there are not adequate referral sources available was not seen to be a good enough justification for guidance counsellors continuing to work in a counselling relationship with students when it was apparent that they needed to be referred on. Continuing to work with students outside a guidance counsellor’s area of competence was mentioned by several participants of the groups as possibly ‘creating more problems’ such as ‘a legal case being taken against the school’.

A different point which was made in relation to referral had to do with ‘a false picture which can emerge regarding a reduced need for external agencies if guidance counsellors are perceived to be coping well’. There was concern that ‘there seems to be a lack of awareness of the limits of competence’ and the shared view that ‘clear guidelines on referral need to be put in place’. Again, the range and diversity of practice in this area became apparent through the process of the consultative meetings. In some schools, the practice of referring a student on for professional help to an outside agency involved the School Principal/Deputy Principal as well as the guidance counsellor. In others, the care team, which includes other people such as the chaplain, home-school liaison officer and Year Heads, is included. In yet others, guidance counsellors make referrals independently without informing the Principals that they have done so.

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5. **The Importance of High Standards in Initial Training (Theme 4)**

Each of the stakeholders referred to the importance of high standards in initial training. This includes care in the selection of students, as it is recognised that ‘some people are not suitable for the counselling role’. Concern was expressed that ‘training has not kept in tune with the increasing demands placed upon practitioners’. The question was raised in one group by one participant and supported by the others as to how it ‘is possible for one year’s training to fully prepare individuals for the complex and demanding role of the guidance counsellor’.

The representatives of the Directors of Studies in Guidance impressed the importance of being committed to working together to ensure that the initial training is and continues to be of a high standard. Their view that there needs to be ongoing training to build on initial training was shared by many participants in the other stakeholder groups.
6. Supports for the Counselling Role (Theme 5)

The role of the guidance counsellor was described by one participant as ‘the loneliest job in the school’ as ‘due to the confidential nature of their work, they are often separate from other members of staff’. There was recognition that while ‘supports do exist and are welcome, these are often insufficient’. Key areas of support which were specified are described below:

The Role of Supervision in Providing Support

There was recognition from each group of stakeholders that the counselling aspect of the guidance counselling role could be personally very challenging and that support is essential. Opinions differed as to the extent to which available support is sufficient. The DES and the IGC were recognised by many participants of the consultative groups for their work in implementing a supervision process which was seen to be ‘essential in supporting guidance counsellors in the counselling role’. Opinions differed as to whether the provision of five sessions a year is sufficient. Concern was also expressed that ‘there seems to be no monitoring of whether guidance counsellors availed of supervision or not’.

The Role of the DES in Providing Support

While there was acknowledgement by some participants of the role of the DES in funding the supervision programme, it was described as not being enough. The fact that the majority of guidance counsellors receive no financial reward for this work was seen by some participants ‘as proof of how under-valued the work of the guidance counsellor is’. While some schools provide a post of responsibility for guidance counsellors with a financial allowance, these were described as being the exception, rather than the rule. The point was made by several representatives that ‘many guidance counsellors work over and above their agreed number of hours as well as engaging in a wide range of training in their own spare time and at their own expense’.

The DES was seen to have a supportive role as part of the Whole School Evaluation programme, although opinions varied as to how supportive this actually was. Aspects of the counselling role, such as the confidential nature of the work with students, were seen by some participants as creating challenges for Inspectors of Guidance. The model of inspection was described as ‘not being conducive to evaluating the effectiveness of the counselling aspect or the competence of the guidance counsellor’ e.g. ‘The subject inspection model does not offer any scope to evaluate the effectiveness of counselling.’

One participant of a consultative group noted that while ‘there seems to be an assumption that guidance counsellors who operated under the IGC Code of Ethics acted responsibly in this area, formal inspection is necessary’. Concern was expressed as to the level of training Inspectors actually receive in inspecting guidance counsellors as while they each have received some basic level of training, it was reported that there was only one specific Inspector of Guidance and Counselling in Ireland at the completion of this research.

The point was made by representatives of two consultative groups that ‘in the current economic climate, the fact that guidance counsellors continued to be exempt from the embargo on recruitment’, and that ‘cuts in funding had not been imposed in areas such as the funding of supervision, speaks volumes in terms of how the DES does in fact value and support their counselling role in particular’.
The Role of School Management in Providing Support

There was general agreement among participants that ‘school managers can allocate guidance and counselling resources as they wish’. While some School Principals and Boards of Management were described as being extremely supportive of the counselling role, others are seen as being less so, e.g. ‘You could have a great counsellor in the school and management could block it or help it blossom’.

Guidance counsellors were seen to be at the mercy of their managers e.g. ‘the job can be eroded’, ‘there is huge abuse out there with school management’, ‘there is no system to check what’s happening on the ground’, and ‘there is no policing role’. Instances were given where guidance counsellors are used as substitute teachers. There was real confusion as to how ex-quota guidance hours are used. Concern was expressed by some consultative groups that ‘if guidance counsellors were scheduled for class hours, it could be at the expense of hours available for one-to-one counselling’. However, a different view was expressed by a representative of another stakeholder group that: ‘While some practitioners don’t see class-delivered guidance as part of their role, it is’.

One breakdown of the recommended ratio of ‘guidance’ to ‘one-to-one counselling’ was 17:5 hours. Principals were quoted by some of the participants of the consultative groups as saying that ‘some guidance counsellors insist on spending a lot of time doing counselling and refuse to teach subjects such as SPHE’. Some schools were described as being ‘particularly supportive of the need for young people to have counselling by ‘buying in’ the services of professional counsellors as an additional service in their schools’.

As noted above, many people recognised through the consultative interview process just how varied the counselling aspect of the guidance role is. Differences emerged in how the role was defined, carried out, understood and supported as well as in how the guidance counsellor involved and informed the principal and care team.

Other Staff Involved in Caring Roles

Several participants referred to how ‘the guidance counsellor has changed from being the only professional in the school with a specifically caring role to being part of a wider team’. In schools where the pastoral care team is effective, it was described as working very well, although concern was raised that ‘some guidance counsellors see themselves as not part of such teamwork’.

The Role of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors in Providing Support

It was recognised by the various groups that ‘the majority of guidance counsellors working in Ireland are members of the IGC’. This body was credited with doing a huge amount of important work for its members such as ‘organising an annual conference, training workshops, supervision and branch meetings, having a key lobbying role and providing advice to students and parents through national helplines’. However, concern was expressed that ‘the IGC has a limited role and that it could be doing work that is more rightly the responsibility of other bodies, such as the DES. It is a professional body and should not have sole responsibility’. The point was made by some representatives of different consultative groups that some guidance counsellors may give sole credit to the IGC for support such as supervision, and not recognise that the DES provides the finance, grants time, and pays substitutes for guidance counsellors so that they are able to attend activities such as supervision and the annual conference.

The Role of NEPS in Providing Support

Each of the consultative groups, including NEPS, was unclear as to what NEPS’ role is in supporting the counselling aspect of the role of guidance counsellors. The level of training, type of experience
and job description of a NEPS psychologist was seen to vary, as well as the service received in schools. In some schools, the NEPS psychologist is seen as ‘someone who offers supports in the form of identifying children with special needs’. In other schools, he or she ‘is a key person in providing the guidance counsellor with support with issues that emerge in the course of their counselling work with the students’. While it was acknowledged that ‘NEPS is not a counselling service’, some NEPS psychologists were described as being ‘professionally-trained counselling psychologists’ and ‘all of them are expected to have basic counselling skills’.

Time was seen to be a real challenge in that while ‘NEPS psychologists might want to (and be competent to) offer real support to guidance counsellors in the counselling aspect of their work, they might actually not have the time to do so’, particularly as so much of their work was described as ‘supporting the State Examinations office in processing applications for Reasonable Accommodations in State Examinations’.

The Role of Directors of Studies in Guidance in Providing Support
The training courses in guidance counselling were seen as being ‘essential in ensuring that graduates know how to act within their area of competence when in the counselling role’. The participants of one group were very particular to highlight the necessity that ‘those who chose to be guidance counsellors should work on their own personal issues’. Some participants of another group had questions as to the type of training that guidance counsellors get and were unclear as ‘to the focus on personal issues, competencies and knowledge of when to refer students on to others’.

The Role of the NCGE in Providing Support
A lack of consensus was expressed by several participants of some consultative groups as to the specific role of the NCGE in supporting the counselling aspect of the role of the guidance counsellor. Some people saw it in terms of ‘providing training, e.g. advanced counselling skills’, while others saw it more in terms of ‘policy work’. One concrete example of how useful the Centre has been in supporting guidance counsellors’ work was mentioned by participants of one group as the list of referral sources which it compiled. The participants of the NCGE consultative group acknowledged that ‘many guidance counsellors do not understand the nature of their role and the limited resources available to the Centre’.

The Role of Other Agencies in Providing Support
Each of the consultative groups saw ‘a real problem where referral agencies offer a low level of support to guidance counsellors’. While many guidance counsellors do refer students with serious issues to appropriate agencies, they find that, ‘due to long waiting lists, insufficient resources or turnover of personnel, the young person actually does not get any additional support and continues to rely on the support of the guidance counsellor’. Reference was made to guidance counsellors being ‘excluded from case conferences’ and ‘not receiving feedback following referral’. Several participants referred to ‘the additional pressures which guidance counsellors experience due to a requirement of certain agencies that they can only be contacted at particular times’. One participant described the frustrations and difficulties associated with being told by external agencies that ‘children who had expressed the desire to take their own lives would not be seen for six months’. The role of external agencies in supporting schools was one that was seen to be one of growing importance in the future. One participant, endorsed by others, expressed a view that ‘the focus of the past ten or fifteen years was on the area of disability and the focus of the next ten or fifteen years will be on mental health.’
7. **Children and Parents are Key Stakeholders and their Views need to be Ascertained and Considered (Theme 6)**

The point was made repeatedly by the participants of the consultative groups who were interviewed in this research that ‘children and their parents are key stakeholders and that their views need to be obtained and considered’.

8. **Recommendations from Participants of the Consultative Groups with Regard to the Counselling Aspect of the Role of Guidance Counsellors**

The following recommendations were made by the various stakeholder groups interviewed for this research.

**Role**
1. That the stakeholders meet to establish clarity re: the counselling aspect of the guidance role;
2. That the role of guidance counsellors in relation to counselling be understood, respected and supported by the key stakeholders, as well as by referral agencies;
3. That NEPS clarifies its role in supporting guidance counsellors in this area and makes a statement to that effect to other stakeholders;
4. That there is a need for a shared understanding of expectations and protocols and that school managers and other staff in school be informed of what is involved in the role of the guidance counsellor.

**Training**
1. That the Directors of Studies in Guidance Counselling formulate a shared understanding of what guidance counsellors are competent to do with regard to the counselling role and that this understanding is shared with the other stakeholders;
2. That there is a recognition of the limits of what initial training courses can achieve and the need for continuing professional development (CPD) and that guidance counsellors are actively supported to avail of CPD and given appropriate recognition by the DES and their school management for doing so.

**Referral**
1. That guidance counsellors be made aware of the necessity to refer students with complex and/or serious issues to appropriate agencies;
2. That guidance counsellors should receive more consideration from referral agencies (e.g. the HSE) concerning issues such as students being seen within a reasonable time-span, involvement in case meetings, inclusion in ‘need to know’ information, and feedback;
3. That there is a need for guidance counsellors to be aware of their own boundaries and limitations and of the need to refer on, when appropriate.
Students and Parents
1. That the views of students and parents are sought as a follow-up to this research.

Support
1. That recognition and increased support are given to guidance counsellors by the DES and that this is in the form of financial remuneration for their training and qualifications;
2. That one guidance counsellor is provided to every 250 students;
3. That the full allocation of guidance hours should be used;
4. That each post-primary school employs a minimum of two full-time guidance counsellors;
5. That all guidance counsellors should avail of the counselling supervision that is available to them and that they should be supported in doing so by their school management;
6. That the role of NEPS with reference to reasonable accommodation for State Examinations is reviewed to reduce its impact on the time available for service delivery and support to guidance counsellors in post-primary schools;
7. That psychologists should focus on providing support to guidance counsellors for emergency cases;
8. That the resourcing obligations of the National Council in Special Education be met;
9. That additional resources to support the counselling role (such as a referral manual online or a named NEPS psychologist who will take referrals) are allocated.

Policy
1. That the competencies proposed by the National Guidance Forum (NGF, 2007b) are brought into guidance counselling guidelines in second-level schools;
2. That guidance counsellors take an active role in school planning;
3. That guidance counsellors are encouraged to collaborate with colleagues as part of care teams in schools;
4. That guidance counsellors work with students from the point of school entry rather than focusing solely on senior cycle students.

Chapter Summary
This chapter described Phase Three of the research involving consultative groups with stakeholders which were identified by members of the Steering Group. They were the DES, the IGC, the NCGE, Directors of Studies in Guidance Counselling, NEPS and the NAPD. The methodology for extracting the themes in these discussions was described and the themes emerging were set out. The themes that emerged concerned the need for counselling to be available for second-level students, the qualities required by guidance counsellors, the need for high standards in initial training, a lack of clarity regarding the counselling aspect of the guidance role, the importance of supports for guidance counsellors and the need for the views of children and parents as key stakeholders to be ascertained and considered. The recommendations made by the consultative groups are also summarised.
Chapter 7: Discussion

What Can be Learned From This Research

Overview
This chapter considers the main outcomes of the study in the light of the aims and methodology, as well the main themes in the literature review. Some of the key findings are summarised and their implications are considered.

Aims and Methodology
The research reported here focused on the practice of counselling by guidance counsellors who worked in post-primary schools in Ireland from September 2009 to 2010. It was commissioned by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) and was supported by a Steering Group consisting of representatives from the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the NCGE, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC), the Directors of Studies in Guidance and a Research Psychologist.

As noted at the outset, the aims of the research were:

• To investigate the current nature (including demographics), scope (including counselling training) and context of counselling provided by guidance counsellors in post-primary schools.

• To inform and make recommendations to key guidance stakeholders about the practice of counselling in post-primary schools.

• To investigate perceptions regarding counselling practice as exemplified in the Review of Guidance in Second-Level Schools (Department of Education and Science, 2006).

These aims were achieved through a process consisting of a literature review that focused on relevant research and policy statements, with particular attention to the challenges faced by young people. We also drew attention to the major shortcomings in the extant work particularly, as they provide guidelines for counselling by school guidance counsellors. The decision to use a mixed methods (combining quantitative and qualitative techniques, approaches and concepts) approach in the research was guided by the exploratory nature of the study i.e. there was no specific idea or hypothesis to be tested, thus suggesting that an inductive strategy was appropriate. However, the terms of reference also have an emphasis on precision, suggesting that there was a need to go beyond an initial exploration and should yield quantitative outcomes that would inform policy and practice. The decision to use mixed methods was influenced particularly by the need for triangulation and expansions. We wanted to establish that one approach was supported by the results of another and also we wanted to find out how the results from one approach (survey) could be enriched and expanded through the use of another approach (interviews).

In line with this perspective, a survey of a random sample of guidance counsellors working in Irish post-primary schools was carried out and subsequently there were focus group meetings with guidance counsellors and consultative meetings with interested stakeholders, i.e. the DES, the NCGE, the IGC, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), the Directors of Studies in Guidance and the National Association of Principals and Deputy
Principals (NAPD). The Steering Group considered that the views of students who attend second-level schools and their parents were outside the scope of this research.

The survey consisted of two kinds of questions: those with structured responses (multiple choice) and which can be easily quantified and open-ended questions which in this survey differed from each other. For some open-ended questions (e.g. naming of referral agencies, number of students seen) there were obvious constraints on respondents’ responses while for some other open-ended questions there were relatively fewer constraints (e.g. recommendations to DES). This in turn resulted in different possibilities for quantification. Structured questions were easily quantified and open-ended questions were quantified following coding. Attention was drawn to the challenge of open-ended questions as they are more likely to be skipped than are structured questions.

Criteria by Which Outcomes are Gauged

As might be expected, the research findings yielded a substantial body of information. The very difficult question is how we give priority to particular outcomes and, by implication, how we come to conclusions and make recommendations. The decision to highlight certain findings below is based on the consensus and strength of findings in the context of the terms of reference of the research and relevant policy statements. Thus, while we have sought to base these as much as possible on the principles of triangulation and expansion, our judgement of what was a priority was also guided by judgements about the implications of the findings for policies as these have emerged in Chapter 2. Given the complexity of both the findings and challenges of policy statements, we are conscious of making judgements. However, to present findings without interpretation or emphasis would, in our view lessen, the value of the research.

Context

What we have done below therefore, is to draw together the information gathered through researching the practice of counselling by guidance counsellors working in Irish post-primary schools by looking at a key question: ‘What can be learned from the research?’ In answering this question, we are also guided by the overview of literature on policy and empirical research considered in Chapter 2. It will be recalled that, in that chapter, it was emphasised that counselling is one of seven guidance activities that assist students to make choices. In the light of this requirement, it was clear from policy statements that there was a need for schools to be flexible regarding the time allocated to counselling as well as to balance the time available to the guidance counsellor/s for individual counselling against their responsibilities to the full student body in the school.

Our discussion of the key findings is also influenced by the evidence regarding the challenges faced by young people including matters of well-being, relationships and sexuality and the experience of being bullied in school. The evidence reviewed in Chapter 2 showed that transition challenges (primary to post-primary), diet and health can be a major issue for many young people. Finally, some of the international issues in school counselling considered in that chapter are especially relevant including the distinctive role of the school counsellors as well as the effectiveness of counselling and the well-being of school counsellors.

In the next chapter, the recommendations that have arisen from an examination of key findings are considered.
3. **Key Findings from This Research**

1. **Guidance Counsellors and Key Stakeholders**
   **Recognised that Guidance Counsellors are Highly Committed to Carrying out the Counselling aspect of their Role.**
   This point emerged from several sources. All of the guidance counsellors surveyed reported that they had specific training in guidance counselling, with 93% having been trained in Ireland. While 59% felt that they were prepared ‘a lot’ or ‘a great deal’ for the counselling aspect of their role, 62% had undertaken further training in counselling, which 75% described as helping them in their work ‘a lot’ or ‘a great deal’. A key point was made by many guidance counsellors, in both the questionnaires and the focus groups, that much of this training was taken at their own expense, on their own time, with no formal recognition in terms of salary or time in lieu by their school management.

2. **There is Not a Shared Understanding of What the Counselling Dimension of the Role of the Guidance Counsellor Involves.**
   One of the most prominent findings from this research is that there is not a shared understanding of what the counselling aspect of the guidance counsellor’s role involves, either among guidance counsellors themselves or among the key stakeholders. In some ways, this might seem to be a surprising finding to emerge from the research given the number of reports produced in recent years to define the work of guidance counsellors. As noted in Chapter 2, the 1998 Education Act mandates Irish post-primary schools to ‘use their available resources to ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices’ (Ireland, 1998, section 9c). The counselling aspect of the role is seen to be integral and has evolved from ‘a compromise between the American model which emphasises personal counselling and the European model which almost exclusively focuses on the narrower concept of career guidance’ (Ryan, 1993, p. 63). The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) listed counselling as one of eight activities of the guidance counsellor (the others are support, assessment, information, classroom guidance activities, planning and organising workplace learning, referrals and professional development) (NCGE, 2004; 1996). The Department of Education and Science (DES, 2005) identified counselling as being a key part of the school guidance programme and stated that counselling ‘has as its objective the empowerment of students so that they can make decisions, solve problems, address behavioural issues, develop coping strategies and resolve difficulties they may be experiencing’ (p.4) and recognised that counselling in schools may include personal, education and career counselling.

   The Consultative Process which was carried out by The National Guidance Forum (Hayes & Murray, 2006) found that counselling and information giving were the aspects of guidance which the 635 respondents to Phase One of the research rated most highly. The Competency Framework for Guidance Practitioners which was produced by the National Guidance Forum listed counselling as one of four main competency areas of guidance. It described counselling as including the competencies to:
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- engage in personal counselling either individually or in groups;
- clarify the professional and ethical issues in group counselling and group guidance;
- help individuals to develop a personal life plan;
- engage in appropriate supervision to develop counselling skills and to progress work with individuals;
- recognise when it is necessary to seek the support of other professionals in the counselling role.  
(NGF, 2006, p.7).

It is interesting in the light of this current research to read in the National Guidance Forum Report (NGF, 2006) that:

The guidance counsellor will be able to engage in personal counselling with individuals around issues such as stress, transitional difficulties, relationship issues, personal/sexual identity, group culture pressures, health issues and bereavement. In cases where the degree of disturbance to the mental well-being of the individual is significant, the guidance counsellor will be able to make appropriate referrals to specialised professionals. This includes, for example, cases where individuals disclose issues such as suicide ideation, addiction, self-harm, sexual abuse, and eating disorder.  
(NGF, p. 16).

From these various reports, there would appear to be a very clear understanding of what is within the remit of the counselling role of the guidance counsellor and when they are expected to refer students on to more ‘specialised professionals’. Yet the present data demonstrates variation was found between guidance counsellors with regard to the number of students they saw for counselling, the number of counselling sessions and the percentage of time that they spent on prevention, crisis or individual counselling. Schools differed in terms of the number of guidance counsellors they had, the hours they had available for counselling and the emphasis they placed on the counselling aspect of the role.

It is evident from the information supplied in this research that very different models of counselling by guidance counsellors are practised. These include person-centred counselling, reality therapy, cognitive behaviour therapy, solution-focused brief therapy, gestalt therapy as well as a variety of other approaches. There is no suggestion that only one approach should be taken by guidance counsellors. However, there would be merit in having evidence for the efficacy of these approaches to be made available in the context of their effectiveness for particular problems.

Sixty-eight percent of guidance counsellors who responded to the questionnaire answered ‘a lot’ or ‘a great deal’ when describing their level of competence in working with issues students bring for counselling. This contrasted with the concerns expressed by some stakeholders that some guidance counsellors acted outside their area of competence by not referring students with difficulties on to external agencies. There were definitely two views of what the counselling role entailed – the first was to work with students with all sorts of difficulties, for as long as it took, while the second saw a clear distinction between the counselling role of the guidance counsellor and that of a professional counsellor.

During the course of this research, it emerged that the directors of the various guidance counselling training courses in Ireland are actively working together to ensure that graduates from each course will have reached a comparable level of competence and will be aware of the need for continuing professional development as well as ongoing personal support in their work as guidance counsellors.
3. Guidance Counsellors perceive themselves as not Supported Sufficiently in the Counselling Aspect of their Work.

Guidance counsellors described students coming to them for counselling with a wide range of issues and a varying degree of severity. Problems included concerns to do with family, such as marital break-up or parental pressure; to do with peers such as bullying and relationship issues; to do with academic areas such as concerns about exams, teachers and future career; and finally issues to do with the self, such as suicidal ideation, aggression, self-harm, pregnancy and concerns to do with sexuality, abuse, depression, anxiety or eating disorders. These issues reflect the challenges encountered by young people (reviewed in Chapter 2).

There was a consistency in the written replies to the questionnaire and the more detailed verbal responses in the focus groups regarding the challenges guidance counsellors faced in responding to the students in their care and the level of support they perceived themselves as having. While there was clear recognition of the benefits of supervision, there was a view among guidance counsellors that supervision was mainly helpful for newly-qualified people in their first five years of the role.

Over 95% of the guidance counsellors who completed the questionnaires referred to other guidance counsellors as being supportive to them in the counselling aspect of their work. Students, Year Heads, class teachers, Principals and the IGC were described by over 80% of respondents as providing a level of support that was ‘sufficient’, ‘more than needed’ or ‘a lot more than needed’. These figures were 60% for the NCGE, 50% for NEPS and only 35% for the DES. It is interesting that Principals received such a high rating, as many of the comments in the questionnaires and the discussions in the focus groups and with the stakeholders focused on the diversity of support that School Principals and Deputy Principals are perceived to give to guidance counsellors with regard to their practice of counselling.

There were mixed views as to whether it is appropriate for guidance counsellors to be involved in curricular programmes such as the SPHE programme and some guidance counsellors clearly resented being time-tabled for class work to teach SPHE. However, there was the strong view expressed by some of the stakeholders that guidance counsellors have an obligation to ensure that each child who needs it receives guidance, and with the scarce resources available in all schools, the most advantageous way of doing this is through guidance class-time. As Social, Personal and Health Education is now an obligatory subject on the curriculum up to Junior Certificate level, the relationship with the prevention aspect of counselling has been recognised with key topics (including emotions, self-esteem, hostility, relationships and sexuality) being directly relevant to counselling.

The IGC receives prominent mention as a source of support to guidance counsellors in the form of organising supervision, providing regular branch meetings and continuing professional development, particularly in the workshops at the annual conference. It is important to note that while the contribution of the IGC was recognised as important, some of the stakeholders felt that the DES was not recognised for providing the funding for these activities. Confusion existed with regard to the role of the NCGE - some guidance counsellors expressed dissatisfaction that it did not provide enough training and support in the area of counselling. There did not seem to be an awareness or appreciation of the broader
role of the NCGE in supporting and developing guidance practice in all areas of education and in disseminating the policy of the Department of Education and Skills in the field of guidance, as described on their website (http://www.ncge.ie/).

Mixed views were expressed by both guidance counsellors and stakeholders regarding the extent to which psychologists working with NEPS had a role in supporting guidance counsellors in their counselling role – an outcome that is consistent with the findings of the Inspectorate (DES, 2009) which found that in some schools, good contacts were established with the designated NEPS psychologists while in others no such person was assigned to the school. Our understanding is that NEPS is actively in the process of clarifying these issues. It is encouraging that 62% of respondents to the questionnaire saw the Directors of their initial training courses as giving on-going support to them in their work.

Less encouraging is the finding that only 35% of the respondents to the questionnaires described the DES as supportive in the counselling aspect of their work. Many of the guidance counsellors who participated in the focus groups were particularly aggrieved that the counselling aspect of their work was not formally recognised as part of the Whole School Evaluation process. Perhaps the perception of the DES not providing sufficient support may be inaccurate if it is not given credit for providing funding for ongoing training and supervision, particularly, as one stakeholder pointed out, at a time of severe cutbacks in practically all areas of Government expenditure. Nevertheless, the perception that the ratio of guidance counsellors to students had returned to the level of 1 guidance counsellor per 500 students was a cause of intense dissatisfaction among guidance counsellors. The report ‘Looking at Guidance, Teaching and Learning in Post-Primary Schools’ was produced by the Inspectorate of the DES in 2009. It examined the effectiveness of guidance, drawing on the findings of fifty-five reports on inspections of guidance carried out from September 2006 to May 2007, along with more than 1,100 questionnaires administered to students where inspections took place. It is interesting in the context of this research that the Inspectors made no specific reference to the counselling aspect of the guidance counsellor's work apart from reporting that only 18% of students surveyed named the guidance counsellor as someone they would go to if they had a personal problem. In discussing this issue as part of the stakeholders’ meetings, it emerged that due to issues of confidentiality, it was not seen as appropriate for the Inspectorate to formally evaluate the counselling aspect of the role, but that there was no intention to dismiss its importance. Particular emphasis was placed by some of the stakeholders on the role that guidance counsellors have in whole school planning, as well as in formal care support structures. The research by the Inspectorate found that ‘provision for students experiencing a personal crisis tended to be managed at a whole school level, and their reports encouraged this collaborative practice’ (DES, 2009, p.17).

External referral agencies were highlighted by guidance counsellors and stakeholders as providing insufficient support to students in crisis and to the guidance counsellors who were working hard to support such students. Long waiting lists, poor communication, difficulty in making contact and frequent turnover of staff in the external agencies were cited as causing particular difficulties. It is important that the review of international studies showed the importance of support for counsellors in stressful circumstances.
4. The Views of the Students and their Parents need to be taken into Account when Considering the Practice of Counselling by Guidance Counsellors.

The report of the Inspectorate (DES, 2009) noted that 18% of students they surveyed stated that they would go to the guidance counsellor for help or advice if they had a personal problem while the majority stated that they would go to a friend or friends (75%) or to family (67%). They noted that fewer than one in five students said they would seek support from the guidance counsellor if they had a personal problem, which was in accord with other research, such as that carried out by the ESRI and reported by Smyth et al (2004). Concern was expressed by some stakeholders as well as guidance counsellors in the focus groups that the students and their parents were not included in this research. The Review of Guidance in Second-Level Schools (DES, 2006) highlighted differences in perception of counselling by guidance counsellors among Principals, guidance counsellors, young people and their parents. A limitation of the current research is that it is not possible to compare the perceptions of guidance counsellors and stakeholders with those who choose to use, or not to use the service, the students and their parents.

The issues that did not emerge in the data (including that from stakeholders) are as interesting as those that did. Two that are of particular interest are early school leaving and examination stress. In one of the most recent studies of early school leaving, Byrne & Smyth (2010) drew attention to the fact that dropping out of post-primary school is still a major issue and that the figures have remained largely unchanged for the last decade. They note the various initiatives that need to be taken and the importance of ‘joined-up thinking in relation to tackling this matter’. In their recommendations, they give special mention of the important role of guidance counsellors in prevention.

The issues of examination stress and the pressure of the ‘points system’ are talked about frequently. While there was some oblique mention of this in the questionnaire/focus groups, it did not emerge as a major issue. What is not clear is whether this is an issue that guidance counsellors do not encounter or whether it is regarded as an inevitable consequence of the system. Matters to do with examination pressures merit further investigation and it is important to consider the views of the students and their parents with regard to these.

5. Guidance Counsellors Need to be More Informed as to the Benefits and Importance of Whole School Guidance Planning and Policies.

The Inspectorate emphasises guidance planning as part of formal whole school planning (DES, 2009), including involvement of other qualified staff members to ensure that policies are in place. This view is strongly supported by other stakeholders, particularly the NCGE. The research indicates a range of opinions among guidance counsellors as to the necessity of having policies on consent, record-keeping and evaluation. A relatively high proportion of schools do not have a written policy concerning these matters although there was a high level of knowledge with regard to the IGC’s Code of Ethics (http://www.igc.ie/about-us/code-of-ethics). Where policies did exist, they tended to differ substantially from one school to another. For example, with regard to consent for counselling, in some cases consent was sought for a specific session while in others, the consent is obtained when students register in school.

It is clear that guidance counsellors have very different ways of gauging the impact and effectiveness of their work. In the survey, one group indicated that it was virtually impossible to assess the effectiveness of their work, while a second group set out quite systematic ways of doing so, while a third group set out the shortcomings of any approach to establishing effectiveness of their practice.
4. Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed some of the main findings of the study in the light of the aims and methodology of the work and in the context of policy statements on counselling by guidance counsellors. It is clear from the research that guidance counsellors have a strong commitment to counselling; this was clear in their own views as well as that of stakeholders. It is also clear, however, that there is not a shared understanding of what the counselling role should involve. While guidance counsellors see themselves as having reasonable support from some sources, the overall level of support was not seen to be adequate in relation to counselling. There are indications that it would benefit the work of counselling if the views of students and parents were taken into account. Finally, there is a need for guidance counsellors to be more informed as to the benefits of whole school guidance planning.
Chapter 8: Recommendations and Conclusions arising from this Research

This research was carried out to provide details of the practice of counselling by guidance counsellors in post-primary schools. The rationale, methodology and results have been presented and discussed. Following the introduction and specification of the terms of references of the research in Chapter 1, the policy background and a review of relevant studies were set out in Chapter 2. The methodological approach and the rational and details of the mixed methods were set out in Chapter 3 while in Chapter 4, the results of the survey of guidance counsellors were described. The main outcomes of the focus group interview with guidance counsellors and with stakeholders were provided in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively.

**Basis of Recommendations**

In the previous chapter (Chapter 7), we discussed some of the central findings of the research as a whole. We highlighted certain findings based on the consensus and strength of findings, taking into account the terms of reference of the research and relevant policy statements. A number of features of the research lend credibility to the conclusions and recommendations set out below. These include the eagerness and sincerity with which the research participants engaged in the research in both the quantitative and quantitative components. Furthermore, the use of mixed methods allowed for an examination of the main issues from more than one perspective. We would claim, therefore, that our results are of a high degree of validity or trustworthiness.

Our confidence in the central findings is bolstered by the use of the combination of structured questions, open-ended questions that were subsequently quantified and the analysis of themes which can be derived but which are not deemed appropriate for quantification (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2005). Essentially, our decision to use mixed methods is based on the belief that credibility of the findings would be enhanced through use of multiple methods (Elliott et al, 1999). We are not suggesting that each and every finding merits the same level of confidence. For instance, some findings emerged consistently in the questionnaire analysis and in focus groups, while other outcomes reflect the views of a relatively small number who had completed open-ended questions towards the end of that questionnaire. For those reasons, we have set out the criteria by which we identified the key outcomes (in Chapter 7).

In making the recommendations below, we have been guided by the central outcomes of the research as set out in Chapter 7. However, we are also conscious that recommendations as to what should happen require further specification of when and how this should happen. Thus, in making recommendations, we have taken into account the reality of how policy and practice are generated. For example, it will be noticed that many of the recommendations are directed at actions to be taken by the DES.
1. Recommendations

1. Role:
   • That the Department of Education and Skills clarifies what exactly the practice of counselling by guidance counsellors involves, its limits and how it can be supported, evaluated and developed.

2. Referral:
   • That representatives from the DES, the NCGE, the IGC, NEPS and the NAPD meet with representatives from the HSE and other key referral agencies to agree a policy on referral, communication and feedback.

3. Support:
   • That the DES maintains and strengthens the guidance counsellor’s practice of counselling through additional supports such as reducing the ratio of students to guidance counsellor, providing regular supervision and CPD and acknowledging and formally rewarding the additional training.

4. Training:
   • That guidance counsellors be given continuing professional development to ensure that they work with models of best practice in line with their code of professional ethics and that they refer to other agencies, when appropriate.
   • That the issues which students present to guidance counsellors for counselling are monitored on an ongoing basis so as to inform the course content of initial and continuing development education courses;
   • That existing providers of programmes for the education of guidance counsellors should be encouraged to collaborate with a view to providing a post-graduate programme that is particularly geared to the needs of guidance counsellors with regard to counselling.

5. Policy:
   • That attention is given to co-ordinating the SPHE programme with guidance counsellors’ work in counselling;
   • That all guidance counsellors have a written policy on their counselling role.

6. Evaluation:
   • That Whole School Evaluations should include a focus on the practice of counselling by guidance counsellors;
   • That the views of students and their parents are considered in future in evaluation of and research on the counselling practice of guidance counsellors.

2. Conclusion and Final Comments

In conclusion, the researchers would like to highlight what struck them most in the course of carrying out this work. It is tempting when reporting research to emphasise only the hard facts – what others have found previously in the literature and what the respondents replied to the questionnaires, what focus groups and consultative interviews said – and miss the more subtle area of how those people who participated in the research presented. From the first meeting with the members of the Steering Group, the researchers were very clear that people cared about this research.
Those guidance counsellors who participated in the Pilot Study not only willingly completed a lengthy questionnaire but also completed an evaluation form to indicate how it could be improved. The researchers were surprised that the results from the Pilot Study highlighted that the questionnaire be lengthened rather than shortened and became more aware of just how important it was for people to know as many specific details as possible regarding the practice of counselling by guidance counsellors. They were, therefore, not surprised when such a large number of guidance counsellors completed the detailed and even lengthier questionnaire in Phase One. It is fair to say, however, that they continued to be surprised throughout the period of this work by the immediate supportive response of everyone who was invited to participate in focus groups and consultative interviews. People willingly stayed behind after work or meetings to participate and several guidance counsellors who worked in areas outside the specific remit of this work, i.e. post-primary schools, were keen to contribute also and were disappointed when they could not do so. Participants of the stakeholder consultative groups travelled from various parts of the country and despite very busy schedules, prioritised the consultative meetings with the researchers.

Why were people so supportive of the research? The hard data points very clearly to the diverse views and practice regarding counselling by guidance counsellors. The most impressive finding for the researchers, however, is just how much every single person who participated in the research cares about the practice of counselling by guidance counsellors.

While there is no doubt that many may disagree with the opinions that participants in this research expressed, the question arising from the research is not whether each individual is right or wrong, but instead how the counselling role of the guidance counsellor can be strengthened, supported and developed. Definitions of the guidance counsellor’s role have been detailed in many documents. The counselling role is without doubt recognised as necessary and essential by guidance counsellors themselves, as well as by the various stakeholders consulted for this research. We know from this research that support does exist for guidance counsellors in their counselling role through the DES, the NCGE, the IGC, NADP, NEPS and the Directors of Studies in Counselling. The concern that was expressed that some guidance counsellors may be acting outside their area of competence in relation to their counselling role may be as a result of perception rather than hard fact. Guidance counsellors who are members of the IGC (which are the majority) are bound by their professional Code of Ethics, which makes it clear that it is the duty of the guidance counsellor to work within the limits of his/her competence. The more informed other stakeholders, including students and parents, are of the type of training (initial and continuous development) guidance counsellors undertake, the definition and limits of their counselling role, and the importance of support and understanding, the better – for guidance counsellors and for the students in their care.

The researchers would like to thank each of those most sincerely for giving so much of themselves and by so doing making this research possible.


support service.


### Appendix: Questionnaire

#### Section A: Information on School (Q.1 to Q.6 inclusive please tick one option)

1. **School type**
   - Voluntary Secondary
   - Community School/Comprehensive School
   - Community College
   - Vocational School

2. **Gender of pupils in school**
   - Boys
   - Girls
   - Boys & Girls

3. **How many pupils are currently enrolled in your school?**

4. **What is your school’s weekly allocation of guidance counselling hours?**

5. **What weekly allocation of guidance counselling hours do you have?**

6. **Which of the following best describes the community served by your school?**
   - Urban
   - Medium size town/rural
   - Mainly rural

7. **Is your school?**
   - Fee paying
   - Non-fee paying but not in DEIS
   - Non-fee paying in DEIS

#### Section B: Information on Guidance Counselling Qualifications:

8. **Guidance counsellor’s qualifications:** (Please tick more than one if applicable)
   - Qualification in guidance counselling obtained within Republic of Ireland
   - Qualification in guidance counselling obtained outside Republic of Ireland
   - No formal qualification in guidance counselling

   If (c) please give details: ______________________________________

9. **What year was your qualification in guidance counselling obtained?**

10. **To what extent do you feel your initial training in guidance counselling prepared you for the counselling aspect of your role?**

    Not at all  Not a lot  A little  A lot  A great deal
11. Have you done training in counselling in addition to your initial training in guidance counselling?

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If ‘Yes’ please give details of this training:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Title</th>
<th>Accreditation Body</th>
<th>Year Obtained</th>
<th>Extent to which course helped meet the challenges of the counselling aspect of your role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12. Please list the counselling model/approaches you use and indicate how helpful they are in the counselling aspect of your work:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Counselling model/approach</th>
<th>How helpful it is in counselling aspect of your work?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Section C: Information on Counselling Aspect of Role:

13. Please give details of the counselling aspect of your role from 1st September 2009 to 22nd December 2009 in terms of the number, year, nationality and gender of students presenting for counselling:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of students and % of case load</th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>3rd</th>
<th>4th</th>
<th>5th</th>
<th>6th</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Caseload</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Irish</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please include any additional information you consider important in relation to the students you have seen for counselling from 1st September 2009 to 22nd December 2009.
14. Please give details of the counselling aspect of your role from September 2009 to 22nd December 2009 in terms of the typical number of class periods per week engaged in preventative, crisis, individual and group counselling:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preventative</th>
<th>Crisis</th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

15. What is the typical time duration of your counselling session? 

16. What is the typical number of sessions you spend with a student presenting for counselling? 

17. Please give details of how students are generally referred to you for counselling:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Referral Source</th>
<th>Frequency of Referral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-referred</td>
<td>Not at all Not a lot A little A lot A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other student</td>
<td>Not at all Not a lot A little A lot A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Not at all Not a lot A little A lot A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year Head</td>
<td>Not at all Not a lot A little A lot A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Tutor</td>
<td>Not at all Not a lot A little A lot A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Teacher</td>
<td>Not at all Not a lot A little A lot A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care Team</td>
<td>Not at all Not a lot A little A lot A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaplain</td>
<td>Not at all Not a lot A little A lot A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Not at all Not a lot A little A lot A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>Not at all Not a lot A little A lot A great deal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
18. How comfortable, confident and competent do you feel in the counselling aspect of your role as guidance counsellor?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>Comfortable</th>
<th>Confident</th>
<th>Competent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>Not a lot</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A little</td>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>A little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A great deal</td>
<td>A great deal</td>
<td>A great deal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please give details if you would like to explain your answers:


Section D: Nature of Issues

19. Please list the most frequent issues which students bring to you for counselling and indicate how comfortable, confident and competent you feel in dealing with these: (Please feel free to add in additional issues if required)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue and Frequency</th>
<th>Levels of Comfort, Confidence and Competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issue:</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximate number</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who presented with</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this issue from</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2009</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inclusive:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue and Frequency</td>
<td>Levels of Comfort, Confidence and Competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue:</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Competent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Approximate number of students who presented with this issue from September to December 2009 inclusive:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue:</th>
<th>Comfortable</th>
<th>Confident</th>
<th>Competent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>Not a lot</td>
<td>A little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>Not a lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>Not a lot</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20. What is the issue you consider to be the most challenging in the counselling aspect of your role of guidance counsellor? Please give details to explain your answer:

_________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
### Section E: School Policy

21. Does your school have a written policy in relation to counselling?  
   - Yes [ ]  
   - No [ ]

22. Has your school and/or the Guidance Department in your school a written policy in relation to how you manage the following issues in your role as guidance counsellor?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Guidance Department</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consent</td>
<td>Yes [ ] No [ ]</td>
<td>Yes [ ] No [ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality</td>
<td>Yes [ ] No [ ]</td>
<td>Yes [ ] No [ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record-keeping</td>
<td>Yes [ ] No [ ]</td>
<td>Yes [ ] No [ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing feedback</td>
<td>Yes [ ] No [ ]</td>
<td>Yes [ ] No [ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral to other agencies</td>
<td>Yes [ ] No [ ]</td>
<td>Yes [ ] No [ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other issues: please specify</td>
<td>Yes [ ] No [ ]</td>
<td>Yes [ ] No [ ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If ‘Yes’, please give details of these policies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Details of School Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record-keeping</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral to other agencies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy on other issues to do with counselling aspect of role</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
23. **What are the three referral agencies you use most often?**

   **Referral agencies used most often**
   1. 
   2. 
   3. 

24. **In what ways do you gauge the impact of your counselling?**

Section F: **Supports**

25. **From 1st September to 22nd December 2009 inclusive, did you avail of counselling supervision?**
   Yes [ ] No [ ]

26. **If you have availed of counselling supervision from 1st September to 22nd December 2009:**
   - How many sessions did you avail of? [ ]
   - What was the format of the supervision sessions?:  Individual [ ] Group [ ] Other [ ]
   (if ‘other’ please specify) 

27. **If you have not availed of counselling supervision from 1st September to 22nd December 2009, please specify why you have not.**

   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
28. How much support do you think there is from (a) school management and (b) colleagues, with respect to the following?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Levels of Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having a counselling service for all students who wish to avail of it</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Management</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not a lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not a lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of counselling in the work of a guidance counsellor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Management</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not a lot</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not a lot</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring that the guidance counsellor can avail of regular professional supervision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Management</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not a lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not a lot</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A little</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring that the guidance counsellor can attend continuing professional training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Management</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not a lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not a lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A great deal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
29. Please give details of how students are generally referred to you for counselling:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Support</th>
<th>Levels of Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year Heads</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other guidance counsellor(s) in school if applicable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other guidance counsellors working in other schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor of counselling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education and Science</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEPS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Centre for Guidance in Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute of Guidance Counsellors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of your training programme in Guidance Counselling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
30. Are there any other sources of support for your counselling role that you would like to see introduced?  
Yes ☐  No ☐
If ‘yes’ please give details of this support:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

31. How stressful do you find the following in the counselling aspect of your role?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Measure of stress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of students</td>
<td>☐ Not at all ☐ Not a lot ☐ A little ☐ A lot ☐ A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of teachers</td>
<td>☐ Not at all ☐ Not a lot ☐ A little ☐ A lot ☐ A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of parents</td>
<td>☐ Not at all ☐ Not a lot ☐ A little ☐ A lot ☐ A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of Principal</td>
<td>☐ Not at all ☐ Not a lot ☐ A little ☐ A lot ☐ A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Dual role’ of classroom teacher and guidance counsellor *</td>
<td>☐ Not at all ☐ Not a lot ☐ A little ☐ A lot ☐ A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
<td>☐ Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severity of presenting issues</td>
<td>☐ Not at all ☐ Not a lot ☐ A little ☐ A lot ☐ A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal complications arising from disclosures *</td>
<td>☐ Not at all ☐ Not a lot ☐ A little ☐ A lot ☐ A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
<td>☐ Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>☐ Not at all ☐ Not a lot ☐ A little ☐ A lot ☐ A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>☐ Not at all ☐ Not a lot ☐ A little ☐ A lot ☐ A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>☐ Not at all ☐ Not a lot ☐ A little ☐ A lot ☐ A great deal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Section G: Recommendations

32. What recommendations would you like to make to each of the following regarding the counselling aspect of your role as guidance counsellor?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education and Science</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directors of Studies in Guidance Counselling (or the Director of your initial training programme in guidance counselling)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Centre for Guidance in Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute of Guidance Counsellors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Section H: Personal Information:

33. What gender are you? Male [ ] Female [ ]

34. What is your age range? <26 years [ ] 26-35 [ ] 36-45 [ ] 46-55 [ ] >55 [ ]

35. How many years are you practising as a guidance counsellor (including this current year)? [ ]

36. What proportion of your time as a guidance counsellor is spent in the counselling aspect of your role? [ ]

37. What county in Ireland do you work in? [ ]
### Section I: Additional Comments:

38. Is there anything else you would like to add with regard to the counselling aspect of your role as guidance counsellor? (Please feel free to include additional pages, if required)?

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We very much appreciate your taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Feedback on the overall findings of this research will be available from the National Centre for Guidance in Education in December 2010

*Professor Mark Morgan*

*Dr. Claire Hayes*
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