

## Careers Education in Schools in the Republic of Ireland

A paper for the NICEC comparative study of careers education in schools in the UK and the Republic of Ireland

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### Introduction

Few societies have changed so rapidly and so radically as has the Republic of Ireland in the past 30 years. Changes brought about by industrialisation and modernisation, which in other western countries took place over a period as long as 150 years, have in Ireland been telescoped into a much shorter time span. The changes have been particularly substantial in the cultural, social and economic circumstances of young people. Educational changes in the Republic of Ireland have evolved from economic, social and political influences within the country and from the latest trends in Britain, continental Europe and the United States of America. Career guidance and counselling, like all aspects of our educational system, have developed in response to these factors. As a consequence, the Irish guidance counselling service tends to be a compromise between the American model, which emphasises personal counselling, and the European model, which almost exclusively focuses on the concept of career guidance. This compromise in the Irish system is well illustrated by the way different practitioners devote different amounts of time to the various tasks involved in guidance counselling.

### Brief historical overview

One of the first public calls for a guidance service in the Republic of Ireland was made in a Report of the Commission on Youth Employment. In 1960 the first educational psychologist was appointed, with responsibility for developing a guidance service in the schools of the City of Dublin Vocational Educational Committee. In 1966 the guidance and counselling service in second-level schools was formally established by the Department of Education.

The establishment of a guidance and counselling service in the Republic in the late 1960s can be attributed to the following factors: firstly, the rapid industrialisation that took place in Ireland during this decade; secondly, a reduction in the rate of emigration caused by this industrialisation; thirdly, the availability of a wider range of careers for people within the country.

The guidance and counselling service in the Republic was at a relatively high level, by international standards, until cut-backs in the service were introduced by the state in 1983. Prior to this a guidance counsellor could be appointed to a school, in addition to regular teaching staff, on an ex-quota basis, in schools with 250 or more students. Following the cut-backs this ratio of 1 guidance counsellor to 250 students was raised to 1 to 500. In effect, this meant that if schools with fewer than 500 students wished to employ a guidance counsellor, they had to do so within the overall staff allocation of the school.

Relatively little published information is available on the evolution of the guidance and counselling service in second-level schools. However, in a paper prepared by officials of the Department of Education in 1979, it was reported that as many as 400 guidance counsellors were active in schools (O'Connor & Walshe). The findings of a survey conducted by members of the Department of Education's Psychological Service in 1984/85 showed that 69% of 316-second-level schools offered a guidance and counselling service, but that the extent of the service had been substantially reduced since the 1983 cut-backs in 25% of the schools (Department of Education 1987). In a survey of 78 second-level schools conducted in 1985 by the School Guidance Committee of the Department of Education, 78% of schools were found to have a guidance counsellor on the staff. Of this percentage 36% were appointed on an ex-quota basis, 35% were not ex-quota and 7% were shared between schools (Department of Education 1987). Furthermore, in a survey of 667-second-level schools, conducted by the Institute of Guidance Counsellors during the 1989/90 school year, 78% of schools were found to offer some guidance and counselling. When types of school are analysed it was found that 5% of community/comprehensive schools, 18% of secondary schools and 34% of vocational schools offered no guidance and counselling service (Institute of Guidance Counsellors 1990).

While some research has been undertaken since the late 1970s regarding the work of guidance counsellors, there is no evidence of any large-scale research in this area. In official documentation the role of the guidance counsellor is discussed in relation to three broad areas: firstly, the provision of information about educational, vocational and career choices; secondly, appraisal and assessment of students; thirdly, counselling for those experiencing learning or personal difficulties. This classification of the work of guidance counsellors is useful to the extent that it identifies the broad range of activities involved in their work. A consistent finding of various research studies shows that educational, vocational, and career counselling is the main

activity of guidance counsellors. In practice, the emphasis given to each of these activities is likely to vary depending of such factors as: school ethos, the interests and preferences of guidance counsellors themselves and other functions that guidance counsellors may be assigned to undertake by school management.

The counsellor role in providing information about careers and courses of study has become more complex in recent years. Some reasons for this development include: firstly, an increase in the proportion of students who stay in the school system after the junior certificate examination; secondly, an increase in the range of senior-cycle courses and post leaving certificate courses; thirdly, the expansion of third-level education and training options at home and abroad. Some counsellors are involved in vocational preparation courses and transition year programmes and may seek opportunities for students to obtain work experience in local industries. Furthermore, the counselling aspect of guidance counsellors' work has become much more demanding due to many changes and problems encountered by people in modern society. In the 1993 National Survey, conducted by Professor Liam Ryan of Maynooth College on behalf of the IGC and referred to above, it was stated that 'the role and work of the guidance counsellor has changed dramatically in the past 25 years'.

In 1991, provision for expansion of the guidance and counselling service was made in a proposal for the recognition, on an ex-quota basis, of 0.5 of a whole-time post for guidance in schools in the 350-499 enrolment category.

It is now proposed to refer to more recent research findings with regard to guidance and counselling. In the school year 1999-2000 the Department of Education and Science (DES) conducted an audit of the guidance and counselling provision in post-primary schools. The key findings from this audit are as follows:

**Under-utilisation of guidance allocation**

There was significant under-utilisation by school management of the allocation to guidance given by the DES. This applied in 23% of secondary schools, 25% of community and comprehensive schools, and 44% of vocational and community colleges. The audit findings also show a marked non-compliance with DES Circulars on the use of the guidance allocation to schools.

**Guidance in junior cycle**

25% of schools which participated in the audit reported that no guidance counsellor time was spent with junior cycle students. The smaller the school the more likely this was to happen: e.g. 38% of schools with less than 200 students, 39% of schools size 200-249, and 31% of schools size 250-499 students. In general terms, 78% of all schools reported that less than 30% of guidance counsellor time was spent with junior cycle students.

**Facilities for guidance**

The overall picture with reference to the provision of office, telephone line, computer, internet access, and access to photocopier, fax, secretarial and administrative support was positive.

**Profile of guidance counsellors**

Just over 50% of guidance counsellors working in school in 1999-2000 obtained their guidance qualification since 1986. 23% of all guidance counsellors working in post-primary schools were listed as having qualifications other than postgraduate ones in guidance and counselling obtained in the Republic of Ireland.

An important policy initiative was taken by the Irish Government in 1995 with the establishment of the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE). This Centre was established to support and develop guidance in all educational settings and to inform the policy of the Department of Education and Science pertaining to guidance. Since NCGE's inception in 1995 the Centre has contributed to government policy through the development of a number of policy documents and initiatives that have supported and contributed to the development of new and existing guidance services across educational settings.

The National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) was established under the aegis of the DES in 1998. Its main initial tasks were to manage the implementation of the government's Schools IT 2000 Initiative, to develop ICT policy proposals and to provide policy advice to the DES. The free provision by government to second-level schools of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Internet connectivity dedicated to guidance has resulted in the utilisation of ICT for guidance purposes and has influenced the way guidance is delivered in schools. Under the Schools IT 2000 Initiative Programme, grants for the provision of computers and internet access for guidance counsellors were issued to schools in December 1999 and March 2000. A National In-service Training course in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Skills for Guidance Counsellors was developed and delivered in the year 2000. This course was developed in conjunction with the NCGE and the IGC.

A Grant for software, to the amount of £350, was also made available to each school. This was in addition to a free copy of Qualifax, which was also funded by the NCTE. ScoilNet is the National Educational Portal, which acts as a resource regarding the provision of information, advice and support to schools on Schools IT 2000. Guidance information is provided in two sections of the website: (i) Your Future; (ii) Guidance. The importance of ICT in Guidance was emphasised by the Secretary General of the Department of Education and Science in his opening address at the IGC's Annual Conference, 2000.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) was established in 1999, on an administrative basis as an Executive Agency of the DES. Included in the functions of this service are to advise the Minister of Education and Science on the policy, general principles and planning for an efficient and effective Psychological Service for children and young people within the education sector. The work of NEPS psychologists encompasses individual casework with children and young people. NEPS also provides a consultation service for teachers and parents, school based projects relevant to educational psychology and the general promotion of mental health in schools. At post-primary level, NEPS psychologists liaise closely with guidance counsellors. The priority from 2000 to 2004 is to put a comprehensive psychological service in place to address the needs of primary and second-level schools.

### Statutory requirements

Under the Education Act (1998) guidance is a basic universal entitlement for second-level students. In addition to its normal allocation of teachers, each school is allocated a minimum amount of guidance time, ranging from eight hours per week in small schools with fewer than 250 pupils, to two whole-time posts in schools with in excess of 1,000 pupils. Guidance modules are included on the Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational and Transition Year Programmes. The guidance and counselling service is linked with support services such as: Home-School Liaison, Social Personal and Health Education, and the Stay in School Retention Initiative.

The Education Act (1998) was the first time that legislation was passed dealing with the provision of the guidance and counselling service within the education system in the Republic of Ireland. The Act outlines the responsibilities that the Minister for Education and Science and second-level schools have in relation to guidance and counselling. The Minister has responsibility for prescribing the guidance curriculum in partnership with relevant groups in education and providing students with support services based on their needs. Guidance is identified as a 'support service' in the Act. Schools are required 'to ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices'. This provision has implications for schools in that they are required by law to provide a guidance service to all students.

Under the Education Welfare Act 2000, an Educational Welfare Board was established to monitor school attendance and to keep children at risk in school. The general functions of the Board were identified as ensuring that a child receives a minimum education, and promoting the importance of education in society. Powers include assessing the development of a child to ensure that he or she is receiving a minimum education and to develop plans for children at risk. It is envisaged that the Act will have an impact on improving retention rates in schools and to providing outreach services to early school leavers. Implications for

the provision of guidance and counselling services in formal (second-level) and informal (Youthreach) settings may include liaising with children at risk and providing interventions and support to the child.

Within the education system, DES priority target groups relating to second-level education include the following: young people at risk of school drop out, disadvantaged groups such as ethnic minorities, the travelling community, those suffering from social and economic disadvantage, early and unqualified school leavers on second chance education and training programmes. These groups are identified in policy documents including: The New Deal on Educational Disadvantage (1999), The National Development Plan (2000- 2006) and the Equality Act (2000).

### Curriculum guidelines

This section describes the functions of guidance counselling which were outlined in 'Guidelines For the Practice of Guidance and Counselling in Schools', published by the DES in association with the NCGE in February 1996.

#### 1 Counselling

The guidance counsellor draws on knowledge, skills and attitudes from his/her training and experience, to help pupils make decisions, solve problems, change behaviours or effect changes in their lives. Counselling should be offered on an individual or small group basis. The focus of counselling may be on personal, educational and career issues, separately or in combination. The guidance counsellor provides a caring context for counselling young people in personal crisis.

#### 2 Consultation

The guidance counsellor engages in a two-way process of consultation with parents, teachers, school management and referral agencies. Consultation may include advocacy by the guidance counsellor on behalf of a pupil.

#### 3 Assessment

The guidance counsellor uses a range of psychological tests for a variety of purposes, for example, prediction of academic performance, categorisation of occupational interests, assessment of behaviour, educational and career planning, personal and social development. Information from these sources, supplemented by school records and public examination results, enables the guidance counsellor to assist a pupil in decision-making, problem solving, behavioural change and life changes.

#### 4 Information

The guidance counsellor helps pupils to acquire useful information to assist them in decision-making. This entails knowing what information pupils require, identifying sources of useful information, setting up systems for acquiring, storing and disseminating information, and showing pupils how to process and use information.

## 5 Classroom guidance activities

Classroom guidance activities fall into three main categories:

- (i) Skills enhancement, decision-making, job search, preparation for work placement, study skills, life skills.
- (ii) Developmental programmes, improving self-esteem, gender equity, issues of concern to pupils.
- (iii) Information giving, education training and employment, opportunity awareness and pathways.

## 6 Referrals

Referrals cover two types of activity:

- (i) Referrals by the counsellor – the guidance counsellor recognises that an individual pupil needs assistance from other qualified helpers outside of school and organises the provision of such assistance following agreed procedures with the school, parents and local agencies. Guidance counsellors need to establish links with appropriate sources of help and have a system for monitoring results.
- (ii) Referrals to the counsellor – teachers, school management and parents may refer pupils to the guidance counsellor. The voluntary participation in counselling of the referred pupil must be respected by all concerned.

## 7 Vocational preparation

This refers to the provision of experiences that promote the career development of pupils and prepare them for transition to work, training and higher education. Examples of such experience are work experience, work shadowing, visit to workplaces, career exhibitions, etc. Furthermore, the Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programmes include material related to educational guidance and career development. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), in addition to revising syllabuses within the established Leaving Certificate Programme, is also involved in increasing the vocational orientation of each subject. This is to ensure that the subjects in the Leaving Certificate will be more relevant to the needs of students in the future. Many schools also include guidance modules and work experience in their Transition Year programmes.

## 8 Guidance programme planning

The guidance counsellor assists the principal/school management and relevant staff in drawing up the school guidance programme and in reviewing its operation.

## 9 Evaluation of school's guidance needs and services

Gathering information about the school's guidance programme and reporting the results of the evaluation are critical for the development of the guidance service in school. At a minimum level the guidance counsellor should keep records in a systematic way of how his/her time is being

used. The reporting of results to the school partnership gives visibility to the work of the guidance counsellor and transparency to the guidance service provided.

The nine functions listed are both demanding and challenging to the guidance counsellor, especially in relation to:

- (a) The management of the guidance counsellor's time between the different functions;
- (b) Meeting the wide range of needs and expectations of the various consumers, pupils, parents, staff, school management;
- (c) Providing a meaningful guidance service that takes into account the number of pupils in a school and the number of hours per week allocated for guidance activities, which may include pupils on Post Leaving Certificate Programmes as well as ones with special needs.

The first set of Guidelines relating to the provision of Guidance and Counselling in second-level schools were issued in 1996. The Guidelines outlined the roles of schools, staff and the DES in the guidance process. Many school staff recognised, for the first time, that they had a role to play in guidance as a result of these Guidelines. Guidance counsellors themselves were clearer regarding the nature of their role after the publication of the guidelines. These Guidelines are currently being revised.

In September 1999 all second-level schools were allocated a minimum of eight hours of guidance time per week.

The results of an audit of the guidance service that was undertaken in 1999/2000 showed that the additional staffing allocation for guidance to second-level schools by the DES was not being utilised by all schools. This led to the DES adopting a targeted approach to the provision of additional support to schools for guidance purposes. Under the Guidance Enhancement Initiative 2001, schools were invited to submit proposals for additional staffing resources for guidance purposes. Proposals that included the following were given priority: (a) establishing links with local and business communities; (b) promoting the uptake of science subjects at senior cycle; (c) a focusing on disadvantaged pupils. As a result of this initiative the equivalent of 50 full-time guidance posts have been provided, benefiting 103 schools to date.

Careers education classes are a normal part of a school's guidance programme. While there is no mandatory hours requirement, the classes tend to take place at senior cycle. In certain Leaving Certificate Programmes e.g. Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), careers education is a formal part of the curriculum. Careers education also forms part of the Transition Year Programme (TYP).

Second-level schools in the free education scheme are allocated the following number of guidance hours by the Department of Education and Science.

Schools with up to 250 pupils	8 hours per week
Schools with 250 - 499 pupils	11 hours p.w.
Schools with 500 - 799 pupils	22 hours p.w.
Schools with 800 - 999 pupils	33 hours p.w.
Schools with 1000 or more pupils	44 hours p.w.

Recently 103 second-level schools received extra guidance hours under the Guidance Enhancement Initiative (GEI) and therefore would have a greater number of guidance hours per week than shown by the above table. The use of the allocation of guidance hours is left to the discretion of the individual school. The Education Act (1998) requires that schools provide pupils with appropriate guidance. However, the recent audit highlighted that the majority of schools provide little or no guidance to pupils in the junior cycle.

**Note:** The school week in the Republic of Ireland consists of 22 timetabled hours

### Inspection and quality assurance

The function of the guidance and counselling inspectorate was formerly part of the role of psychologists who worked within the DES. In effect the other facets of their role, i.e. assessment, support and advice, were frequently carried out by the psychologists. With the establishment of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) formulation of policy and the inspection role now remain in the DES. At present there is an Assistant Chief Inspector, with responsibility for Guidance and Counselling, a Senior Inspector, and two recently appointed Inspectors. The Education Act defines 'guidance and counselling services' as one of the 'support services' which the Minister provides to students, or their parents, schools or centres for education, while stating that one of the functions of a school, is to 'ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices'. The recent developments will greatly change the position of guidance and counselling in schools, as now there is a statutory obligation to provide access to appropriate guidance. The Education Act also states the role of the Inspector as being advisory, supportive and evaluative. The establishment of a Guidance Inspectorate places new emphasis on the importance of Guidance and Counselling and is the beginning of mainstreaming the subject. All of these recent developments will give a new quality assurance to the guidance provision.

The quality of the guidance and counselling service is monitored through:

- (a) The guidance inspectorate
- (b) Guidelines for guidance programme planning in schools

- (c) Monitoring and evaluation of allocations under the GEI 2001.

### Guidance counsellor training and professional development

The first professional training course for guidance counsellors was established in the Department of Psychology, University College Dublin, in 1967. A small number of graduates from this course commenced work as full-time guidance counsellors the following September. In July 1968 the Department of Education ran a summer course in guidance for selected teachers as the first step in a programme of training in pupil guidance. In 1971 the Advisory Committee on Pupil Guidance issued its report which recommended counselling as an integral part of the guidance service and proposed adequate training for those engaged in providing this service for young people. Subsequently a second course in guidance and counselling commenced at the Mater Dei Institute, Dublin, which was open to graduates, qualified teachers and others with equivalent qualifications.

Today a number of one-year, full-time programmes and two-year, part-time programmes for guidance counsellors exist at various universities throughout the country. In addition, postgraduate programmes in guidance counselling are also available. Teaching qualifications plus a postgraduate qualification in guidance have been mandatory standards since 1971 for appointment of guidance counsellors in second-level schools. The initial training of guidance counsellors is at present being reviewed between meetings of the NCGE and Course Directors in line with changes in the provision of guidance and counselling services.

### Professional associations

The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) is the professional body representing guidance practitioners in both second-level schools and the adult education sector. The Institute has a liaison and advocacy role with government departments, management and trade union organisations, national parent bodies, higher and technical institutions, employment and training agencies, representatives of industry and a wide range of non-government organisations.

The Institute has a Constitution and a Code of Ethics. It promotes standards for entry into the profession and for the practice of guidance and counselling. For professional membership of the IGC it is a requirement by the organisation that a person is qualified in guidance. The IGC does not act as a licensing body but does give formal recognition to initial training programmes and qualifications based on its criteria. The professional development of members is supported through in-career development and training.

The Institute is a member of the European Association for Counselling (EAC), and the International Association for Education and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG).

The Institute is represented on a number of advisory committees including: Review of Initial Training Courses in Guidance, Working on the establishment of course accreditation standards. It lobbies government on professional issues.

The Institute publishes a Journal for members annually and a Newsletter five times within the academic year. Management of the Institute is undertaken by an elected President and a National Executive whose membership is drawn from 13 branches throughout the Republic.

In 1968 the first bodies representing guidance counsellors were established namely: the Association of Guidance Teachers and the Institute of Guidance and Counselling. These bodies were disbanded in the early 1970s and one body, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors was formed. The Institute wishes to promote the highest standards of professional practice among its members. It now has a membership in excess of 1,000, with members providing a service in second-level schools and colleges, third-level colleges, and the adult sector. The membership also includes private practitioners.

The Institute has an office in Dublin which was established in 1997.

### **The future**

The National Development Plan (NDP) 2000-2006 was published by the Government in agreement with the European Commission in November 1999. A key objective of the plan is to tackle the problem of early school leaving and low educational attainment. Included in the Plan, under 'Social Inclusion Measures', is the School Guidance Service. The service is described as playing a major role in preventing early school leaving and is recognised by the Plan as vital in ensuring each pupil gains the maximum benefit possible from the education system. The Plan views the guidance service as facilitating pupils going onto further education/training/employment and as providing guidance regarding options available to pupils.

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