

# **The Complexity of Implementing a Guidance Counsellor Education Programme**

**T. Geary and J. Liston**

*Department of Education and Professional Studies, Faculty of Education and Health Sciences,  
University of Limerick, Ireland, e-mail: Jennifer.Liston@ul.ie*

## **ABSTRACT**

The Guidance Counsellor has a significant role to play in Irish secondary schools as they provide for the personal, social, educational and vocational development of the young people. At the National Guidance Forum (2007) the 'Guidance for Life' report was launched. In this report it suggests areas to improve in Guidance Services. One such suggestion it lists is to,

Ensure that people working in guidance are well-trained and supported, with proper quality assurance procedures in place.

(2007, p.34)

In order to observe such a suggestion an exploration into the efficacy of the University of Limerick graduate diploma in Guidance and Counselling in providing quality graduates to practice as guidance counsellors is taking place. This paper presents an aspect of the research which explores the theoretical frameworks and influences on the guidance counsellor education programme. The literature and course director's personal narrative on the course content of guidance counsellor education programmes show that variation exists who decides on the course content. This paper describes the complexity of implementing a Guidance Counselling education programme and suggests how this may be addressed.

## **INTRODUCTION**

When observing the Irish guidance and counselling context, the Education Act 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". Today the role of the guidance counsellor in Ireland is central to the whole guidance service which pupils receive. The roles which the guidance counsellor undertakes are listed by the National Professional Bodies for guidance counselling in Ireland namely, The Institute for Guidance Counsellors and the National Centre for Guidance in Education. Listed among the roles are counselling, support, assessment, information, classroom guidance activities, planning and organising workshop learning, referrals and professional development. Ryan 1993 noted how,

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 narrow concept of career guidance.

(1993, p.63)

A more recent study for The Economic and Social Research Institute in Ireland looked specifically at guidance provision in second-level schools. This study documented how “schools varied widely in the nature of the guidance counsellor’s role” (McCoy et al 2006, p.91). This study observed how variation existed in terms of the range of activities of the Guidance Counsellor and the balance of time spent on the areas of career guidance, educational support and personal support. When literature is examined closely to determine an explanation for this variation it is found that,

The priorities that guidance workers attach to their work tasks appear more a function of the particular type of training they have undertaken. They may not necessarily be a function of clients needs.

(McCarthy 2001, p.7)

Programmes such as the University of Limerick graduate diploma in guidance and counselling have a significant effect on the nature of guidance counselling people receive. The subject content and methods used to teach the content influence guidance counsellors not only during their participation in the programme but throughout their career and consequently the people they deal with. Therefore the initial education guidance counsellors receive is linked to their function as guidance counsellors. The aim of this research is to observe if the type of training offered at the University of Limerick is in fact, influencing the service graduates provide.

The graduate diploma in Guidance and Counselling at the University of Limerick is a two year part-time programme that is delivered over four semesters and includes an induction week, two residential weekends and two summer schools, a school placement and an industrial placement as part of the course. Participants are required to attend ten sessions of personal counselling each year of participating on the course. Participants can take part in the programme on campus at the University of Limerick or they may choose from three other outreach locations such as Carrick-on-Shannon Education Centre, Dublin West Education Centre or at Kerry Education Service Centre. The programme has been in operation at the University of Limerick for just over ten years and over two-hundred and fifty Guidance Counsellors have graduated from the programme.

In order to gain further insights into areas of interest for this paper a personal narrative was analysed from the course leader in MA in Education; Guidance Studies at the University of Derby. This is an online programme offered by the International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS) – a centre for excellence in research and professional development within the career guidance sector. The course is broken down into stages, so one can achieve related qualifications: Postgraduate Certificate in Education, Postgraduate Diploma in Education: Guidance Studies and MA Education: Guidance Studies and proceed through a stage format. McCarthy 2001 notes the significance of such a course as he states that,

There appears to be little attempt nationally, UK expected, to develop a training and qualifications structure that enables guidance workers to progress from non-expert to expert status.

(2001, p.7)

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING**

To begin any attempt to move toward a theoretical understanding of the efficacy of a guidance counselling education programme, a basic understanding of the development of Guidance Counselling must be outlined. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to present a comprehensive review of the theoretical literature on the development of Guidance Counselling,

points can be summarised under three categories, the influence of pastoral and religious roles and responding the client needs. As McLeod puts it,

To understand what counselling is, and what counsellors do, it is necessary to have an appreciation of the historical origins and development of this form of helping.  
(McLeod 1998, p.29)

Baker and Gerlers describe,

What we think of currently as school counselling did not begin with a formal design consisting of established goals, assumptions, and functions. It evolved to what it is today.  
(2004, p.10)

Baker and Gerler describe how responding to local needs was the main influence when initiating guidance type services. Parsons, Beers and Freud influenced the development of school counselling in the early years of the twentieth century in the United States by responding to the needs for the students they taught. This led to a growth in the 1920's and 1930's of the number of guidance teachers in schools however as Baker and Gerler note, "no widely accepted standards for training or practice existed" (2004, p.12).

As a result what emerged as the dominant school guidance model was described as trait and factor, or directive guidance which promoted enhancing normal adjustment, goal setting and assisting individuals to achieve satisfying lifestyles. Counselling included analysis, synthesis, diagnosis, prognosis, counselling, and follow-up and techniques for forcing conformity and changing attitudes were recommended. The directive approach to guidance ultimately proved to be too constricted. This was not the ideal situation, as the need for personal counselling during War times was at a high point in the United States, it was however the beginning and it led to improvements throughout the guidance and counselling service in the United States. Most significantly, Post World War II the work of Carl Rogers, which emphasised the counselling relationship and climate, gradually emerged as the dominant guidance function in the 1930's and 1940's. Baker and Gerler describe how "Rogers influence had moved school counsellors away from being highly directive towards being eclectic" (2004, p.13) during a time (1960s) described as the boom era in United States. Some of the great theories with regard to guidance and counselling are formed as a result of theorists systematic response to peoples needs be it psycho-social needs, goal setting needs or the need to be listened to. New roles for guidance counsellors have been devised over time. Baker (1994) cited Repetto et al (2008) states that the role of guidance practitioners is defined according to the tasks they carry out, and as these tasks change over time, counsellors must be prepared to exercise many different professional roles. Today guidance counsellors work in an environment which has accumulated a vast number of theories on guidance counsellor competency, career development and counselling theories. Repetto (2008) describes how based on increasing globalization, societal changes and technological changes there is a need to improve the initial and continuous education of guidance counsellors. However Repetto does state that there is little agreement on the type of training counsellors must receive in order to provide these services.

## **COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK**

Competency frameworks have been suggested as an appropriate model for the development of guidance counsellor education programmes. Hiebert (2008) describes an International Competency framework which included core competencies of client advocacy, client cultural differences, designing, implementing and evaluating guidance and counselling programmes

further to these competencies relatively new developments are considered in specialised competencies such as, Assessment, Information Management, Consultation and Co-Ordination, Community Capacity Building, Programme and Service Management are also included. The translation of the latest international competency framework is the challenge for course leaders and parties involved in devising programmes especially when the roles of the graduates of guidance and counselling programmes are already so diverse. However it is necessary that the international framework is implemented as it is described “as the basis for creating a tailor-made set of qualifications” (Repetto 2008, p.184)

Using a common framework across countries will promote a common way of viewing career-life development and a common way of describing the types of competencies needed to deliver quality educational and vocational guidance services.

(2008, p. 184)

Repetto 2008 notes that a competency framework can be used as a first step in developing training modules to address the training needs of guidance counsellors. The challenge is that with variation recognised between guidance counselling education programmes how then will international competencies be translated into the individual guidance counsellor education programmes.

## **THE FOCUS OF THE INDIVIDUAL GUIDANCE COUNSELLOR EDUCATION PROGRAMME**

From looking closely at the University of Limericks programme it can be described as a course with psychological emphasis. With the University of Limerick programme focusing on the psychological aspects of guidance counselling the standard and focus on the personal counselling dimension is emphasised. Psychology, sociology and economics are all connected with guidance counselling programmes and practice but the extent to which each underpins a guidance counselling education programme is debated in literature widely. In the UK context Watts & Law (1996) describe how trends in the past have seen many changes in the focus of guidance counselling.

Indeed as a crude generalisation, it could be argued that whereas in the 1940's and 1950's the careers field was dominated by psychology, in the 1960's and 1970's this dominance was challenged in the UK by sociology, and in the 1980's and 1990's by economics.

(1996, p.1)

With guidance counselling education programmes easily categorised into those with psychological, sociological and socio-economic emphasis the question is will the translation of international competencies into modules on guidance counselling education programmes reduce or further extend the variation between programmes.

Upon examining the International Competencies it is obvious that the scope of training programmes will need to expand dramatically in order to give practitioners the competencies they need to provide quality services in a global society.

(Repetto 2008, p.178)

In order to examine the relationship between international competencies and the focus of education programmes the specific context of Ireland and the University of Limerick Programme is considered. Chamberlain and Delaney in article entitled 'Guidance Counselling in Irish Schools' state that,

Although broad parameters were derived from theoretical models developed in the United States and Europe, it is felt that the form taken by school guidance in Ireland should meet the distinctive educational and cultural needs of Irish society.

(British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, 1977, Vol 5, no.1 pg 51)

The Irish guidance counselling service is among a minority of European Countries which takes a personal counselling emphasis. The breakdown of what areas guidance covers in a number of European countries is analysed in an ERSI report 'Guidance for all?' From the breakdown one can see that the emphasis in Europe is on the Vocational and Educational guidance of students with few countries providing personal guidance. Ireland however is among one of the few countries that does support personal guidance. The ERSI report describes how,

International work (OECD, CEDEFOP and World Bank reports) has tended to focus attention on the nature of career guidance services operating in schools, giving considerably less attention to the more 'personal counselling' dimension of the role which has traditionally been a feature of Guidance Counselling services in Irish schools.

(2006, p.13)

A study by the Department of Education cited in Shiel and Lewis (1992) shows the involvement of personal counselling in Irish Secondary School,

The 1985 survey of the School Guidance Committee ranked individual personal counselling as the activity in which they engaged most frequently at Junior-Cycle level.

(1992, p.11)

In setting the context for the research it was recognised that the strength of the personal dimension in guidance counselling in Ireland may be due to the work and influence of Carl Rogers. Many similarities between the development of guidance counselling in Ireland and America also come to light when setting the context for the development of guidance counselling. When we look at the British context McGuinness describes how "In 1979, Her Majesty's Inspectorate published a report (DES, 1979) in which they described 'the personal development of children' as 'the central purpose of education'" (1998, p.8). This suggests that personal counselling was held with high esteem in the education system in Britain. However as we read on McGuinness describes a country which evolved with more of a focus on "testing, vocationalism, central control and, of course, the market place." (1998, p.8) Economic commentators feel this may be the way forward and countries such as Norway and Poland have also recognised this view by separating out a distinct career guidance role. In the ERSI report it states,

Within such 'holistic' systems like Ireland, economic commentators warn that there is a danger that career and educational guidance in schools can be marginalised within the broad concept of guidance.

(McCoy et al 2006, p.15)

They maintain that counsellors spend much of their time dealing with pupil's personal problems and are possibly falling short of helping pupils with educational, vocational choices and long term career planning. However it has been argued that by complying with such economic views would in turn led to a situation where,

Pupils and students are viewed more as future contributors to the national economy, valuable for that potential contribution, rather than as intrinsically valuable for their humanity.

(McGuinness 1998, p.9)

It has also been argued that it is impossible to separate so distinctly career and personal guidance. Porfeli et al (2005) describe Super's (1984), Krumboltz's (1994) and Holland's (1997) theories of career development by doing this they note how it is both the person and the context as well as the process and content orientations collectively that provide the most complete picture of career development. The guidance and counselling system in Irish secondary schools has recognised this climate, as guidance counsellors integrate personal counselling into the service they provide pupils. The education programmes which guidance counsellors attend play a significant role in the type of guidance service offered in Irish schools. The University of Limerick graduate diploma in guidance and counselling reinforces the literature which suggests Ireland places a strong emphasis on the personal dimension of guidance and counselling. The dominance of a certain education focus can influence the type of guidance counselling service people receive.

## **WHO DECIDES ON THE PROGRAMME?**

Professor Van Esbroeck, 2000 described how European surveys in relation to the career guidance and counselling provisions, the roles and tasks performed within the services and the training and qualification of guidance and counselling staff indicate that there exists an extreme variety. Programmes are said to be devised with a top-down or bottom-up approach. Sultana 2009 describes how both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses.

A key consideration here is which strategy is best suited to ensure sensitivity towards changing roles in a rapidly changing environment. If frameworks are built around the competences excellent practitioners have demonstrated in the past, they may fail to identify evolving competence requirements unless they are up-dated regularly.

(2009, p.23)

McCarthy 2001 describes both approaches are in existence when he describes how across countries there is wide variation on who decides the content and methodology of initial training for guidance workers. McCarthy observed that in Finland it is the course trainers who decide on content and methodology. In Ireland it is the course trainers & Professional Association and in the UK it is the trainers, Professional Association & Government who influence the programme. When looking further at curriculum development in education the concept of backward mapping is significant to consider in this context. Back-ward mapping (Elmore, 1994) assumes essentially that the closer one is to the source of the problem the greater is one's ability to influence it.

Guidance counsellor education programmes provide graduates with the training required to address client's needs/problems.

The problem-solving ability of complex systems depends not on hierarchical control but on maximising discretion at the point where the problem is most immediate.  
(1994, p.247)

With this considered the importance of the bottom up approach in guidance counselling would be suggested as the more appropriate at addressing client's needs.

## **THE NEED FOR A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

While a review of literature indicates variation in the guidance counsellor role and the link is made to the guidance counsellor education programme, a theoretical framework is needed in order to understand if this link which is causing variation in the type of guidance counselling the client receives. Therefore, in order to systematically understand the conditions that cause a variation in the type of training guidance counsellors receive, the authors perceive that a theoretical framework which encompasses guidance counsellor competencies, interplay between national, international and institutional policy and considers the sociological, psychological or socio-economic focus of a programme is needed.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to observe the University of Limerick graduates the following statement has been considered.

Any attempt to shape the field of CG by identifying what qualities and traits CG practitioners should aspire to develop, and what training programmes can do in order to promote the development of such traits, should be mindful of the complex and contested issues that surround the endeavour

(Sultana 2009 p. 29)

Sultana 2009 concludes his paper on 'Competence and competence frameworks in career guidance; complex and contested concepts' by describing how ways must be found to address the critiques that have been made of the different versions of competence-based approaches, particularly their tendency (a) to be reductionist and fragmentary in relation to tasks that are complex and integrative of many dimensions of the self; (b) to define good practise solely in relation to institutional norms rather than in consultation with practitioners or service user; and (c) to forget that there are aspects of human behaviour which are more likely to be caught rather than taught, and that therefore, excellence is sometimes the result not of targeted training as much as socialisation into (and by) a community of established practitioners. Considering the above this research strives to imply a methodology which is respectful of the complexity of area, is open-minded to the definitions of good practice across institutions and acknowledges the significant human behavioural aspect. Based on this a pragmatic approach combining both qualitative and quantitative methods (mixed method approach) has been implied. The methodology aims to identify the mixture of constructions that exist and bring them into as much consensus as possible.

A pragmatic, multi-method approach to educational research attempts to map out or explain more fully the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one stand point and in so doing making use of both quantitative and qualitative method types.

(Cohen et al 2000, p. 112)

To date an in-depth literature review has taken place and the emerging themes have been explored through personal narratives from course directors therefore exploring the human behavioural aspect. To explore this research further questionnaires of qualitative and quantitative nature will be administered to all graduates of the University of Limerick programme to discover career paths, the roles they provide to the guidance service and the continuing professional development needs they have. Finally Focus Groups with graduates from the three University contexts will take place. This paper presents the findings from the in-depth literature review with a specific focus on literature surrounding guidance counselling policy development. Also findings from the course directors personal narrative from the University of Limerick and University of Derby are presented. Cohen et al describe how,

Recent accounts of the perspectives and interpretations of people in a variety of educational settings are both significant and pertinent, for they provide valuable ‘insights into the ways in which educational personnel come to terms with constraints and conditions in which they work’

(2002, p.165)

As this method takes place during the earlier stage of the research Lincoln and Guba (1985) cited Cohen and Manion suggest that a validity check at this stage may include respondent validation. When the narrative accounts were analysed the participants were then sent summaries which they could add to or check the adequacy of the analysis. The analysis then took the form of discourse analysis to discover patterns and consider the human behavioural element.

## **FINDINGS**

As previously outlined variation between countries exists with regard to the content and methodology of guidance counsellor education. From analysing the course directors’ personal narratives the role they play in decision making and the government and professional association influences are observed. Firstly observed in both course leader narratives were the influences on the course they run and if these influences correspond with McCarthy’s 2001 findings. McCarthy observed that In Ireland it is the course trainers & Professional Association who influence the programme. This can be said to be true for the University of Limerick programme as the course leader documents this throughout the narrative.

*The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) had through its executive set down specific requirements for various elements of programmes of study in Guidance Counselling. I did not view these national standards as limits to my personal and professional interests I felt very reaffirmed by these national standards as they set out the IGC’s requirements in both content and duration of the counselling theory and skills, experiential group work and professional issues of any emerging programme.*

The standards set by the National Professional Body (IGC) have influenced the University of Limerick course. The course leader himself has a substantial influence on the course when the extract below is considered.



*Elements of the programme which were very strong from the beginning were the counselling theory and skills, the experiential group process, which closely reflected the strengths of myself.*

A rationale for the evidence of a course leader's influence is documented later in the narrative when the University of Limerick course leader describes how the first external examiner for the programme Dr. Bill Law concluded that the strong focus on the psychology of the human person and theories and practice of counselling were as a result of the focus of the programme in which the course leader studied.

*Bill pointed out that the programme could just as easily be focused on a sociological or testing/assessment slant. He discussed with me how the professional development of Course Directors has a very strong influence on the type of programmes which they develop, lead and teach on. This came as no surprise to me as I know that I was "playing" to my professional strengths. I was also aware that I was "playing" to my personal and my broader educational strengths.*

In the University of Derby course leaders narrative it is noted how government and professional body links are observed in the course content however the influence of the course leader is also strongly observed. This is an interesting observation and it confirms Dr. Laws theory on how the course leaders training can reflect in the course they run.

*I want to make sure that all practitioners who have an interest in developing, growing their practice, and the ability to engage in the level of study will have access to a course of this nature.*

Both course leaders documented in the narratives that before becoming course leaders they were involved in national projects regarding guidance.

*I developed an interest in quality issues and got involved in the pilot for the Guidance Council Quality Standards when they were being developed in 1999.*

*I had worked for a year on the National Executive of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors during which time the Executive drafted and published a document mapping out the specific role and functions of the Guidance Counsellor and the Guidance Service within second level education. This work also influenced and shaped my thinking at the design stage of the programme.*

The influence of undertaking work at a national level in the area of guidance and counselling lead to a clear translation of national guidance and counselling documents into the course content of their respective programmes. The translation however of international policy documents is less evident in the course leader's narratives.

With the course leader now recognised as having a significant influence on the programme content it is necessary to look at the influences on them before becoming course leaders. When the personal narratives are examined closely it can be seen that both course leaders document a significant influence with links to the type of course they run. In the University of Limerick

course leaders narrative the education he received in the area of client-centred therapy stands out as influential when analysing the narrative.

*The work of Carl Rogers in particular influenced me deeply at this stage of my life. His focus on the quality of relationships with people which includes, empathy, non-judgmental positive regard and genuineness were conditions for helping others.*

In the University of Derby's course directors narrative it shows how her practice rather than education was the major influential point.

*I had the opportunity to get involved in training voluntary and community advice workers, I spent the year travelling around the Black Country working in lots of estates and training providers supporting practitioners to understand and develop their adult guidance skills. It was this experience which probably had the most profound effect as I became and still am passionate about professional development for practitioners. I worked with some practitioners on very poor estates who were barely literate but we were able to work through and get them a qualification.*

The final extract chosen from each of the narratives shows that while variation between course leader's background, practice and education exists the overall vision they aspire to for these students is quite similar.

*We want our students to be able to make informed and considered contributions to the debate within their workplace, their professional associations and with their peers. We want our students to be critical thinkers who can challenge from an informed and considered perspective.*

*Students on the Graduate Diploma in Guidance and Counselling are both challenged in their thinking processes as well as in their interpersonal and intrapersonal domains of learning.*

## **CONCLUDING POINTS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Presently one can observe the international variation in guidance counselling education programmes and the variation as to who decides on the programme. This in effect causes the implementation of a guidance counsellor education programme to be a complex task. The complexity of the personal narrative which includes the course leaders own experience and education mixed with the difficulty of trying to bring National policies, professional body frameworks and institutional policy is substantial. This is an ongoing issue which course leaders need to address through awareness, membership of professional guidance and counselling forums and continuing professional development.

From here this research will explore the graduates of the three research guidance counselling education programmes in order to ascertain if the education programme they completed influences the type of guidance counselling they provide and within what competency framework are they working.

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