

Increased inequality: An analysis of Irish guidance counsellors' perceptions of the impact of budgetary cutbacks across different school types

Liam J. Harkin

Equality discourses informed this study on the impact of budgetary cutbacks on guidance in Irish schools, which found that funding inequalities between fee-charging schools and schools in the Free Education Scheme (FES) contributed to unequal reductions in guidance. Factors such as social class, familial habitus, parent-power, cultural, social and economic capitals, and institutional habitus were shown to influence young people and their parents' decision-making, and in turn the guidance provided in schools. As FES schools prioritised career guidance over counselling, students experienced compromised care, as counselling was neglected and the guidance service became a reactionary crisis intervention service. In fee-charging schools there was no change.



Introduction

The backdrop to this research was a fundamental change in how guidance¹ resources were allocated in Irish schools. For forty years, the Department of

1 The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) defined *guidance* in the educational context as 'a range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence, designed to assist students to make choices about their lives and to make transitions consequent on these choices' (NCGE, 2004, p.12). The Department of Education and Science clarified guidance further as encompassing "the three separate, but interlinked, areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance" (DES, 2005, p.4).

Education and Skills² (DES) operated a centralised, standardised guidance allocation system, based on student enrolments. The allocation was ex-quota (i.e. it was separate and in addition to teacher allocations) and one full-time guidance counsellor³ was allocated per 500 students in a school. In the budget of 2012, a cost-saving measure was introduced which stipulated that guidance hours had to be provided from within each school's teacher allocation, with the responsibility delegated to individual school heads to decide on the 'appropriate guidance' (DES, 2005: 4) allocation).

Research questions

The aim of the research was to explore guidance counsellors' perceptions and experiences of changes in schools during the year after the removal of the ex-quota guidance allocation. The research questions were suggested by an Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) guidance audit (IGC, 2013), which revealed a 59 per cent reduction in one-to-one guidance in schools and concluded that this reduction was not equally spread across all school types. The IGC audit did not explore reasons for the unequal reduction or the differing impacts across school types. These

2 The abbreviation DES covers the three different terms used for this Government Department in the last 40 years: 'Department of Education', 'Department of Education and Science' and 'Department of Education and Skills'.

3 *Guidance counsellor* is the professional title used by the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC), in Ireland, to describe the role of the lead person delivering the guidance service in schools.

gaps suggested the following research question: 'What impact has the removal of the ex-quota guidance allocation had across different school types?'

Theoretical framework

The main theoretical frameworks underpinning the research were equality discourses, notably those of Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh (2004) and Lynch, Baker, Cantillon and Walsh, (2009). In this research, I placed career and educational guidance within an equality discourse, where students and their parents are seen to make education and career choices relative to social class, familial habitus, capitals and institutional habitus. In doing so, I aimed to analyse the impact of the budgetary cutbacks on guidance across different school types.

Literature review

In order to explore any unevenness in guidance provision in schools, Baker's concept of inequality in education (Baker et al, 2004) was examined. Baker argued that unequal access to educational resources leads to unequal participation and unequal outcomes in education, manifested as a social class issue where working-class students are unable to access, participate in and achieve in education on an equal footing with middle-class students. Within Irish schools, given the holistic nature of the Irish guidance model,⁴ guidance counsellors can be considered as having the capacity to counteract some of the main inequalities prevalent in schools, in particular in relation to inequalities of love, care and solidarity (Lynch et al, 2009).

Bourdieu's (1973) 'habitus' and 'capital' discourses articulated how inequality in education is reproduced, in terms of economic, cultural, social and class reproduction. As guidance in schools essentially involves helping students make choices (NCGE, 2004), Bernstein's (1970) insight into restricted student choice, and Lareau's (2003) discourses around middle-class 'concerted cultivation' highlighted differences in educational and career decision-making across school types influenced by factors such as social class and capitals, institutional habitus and career guidance. Students in socio-economically disadvantaged schools

and communities were found to have different social and cultural capitals to students in middle-class schools and neighbourhoods (Lareau, 2003; Rudd, 2003; O'Brien 2005). School choice and school success was linked with social class, familial habitus and cultural / social / economic capitals (Walkerline and Lucey, 1989; Allat, 1993).

The familial habitus of the home and the institutional habitus of the school were shown to be very similar for middle-class children, but very different for working-class students (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Institutional habitus was demonstrated to have a significant impact on students' decision-making processes, making some choices virtually unthinkable and others possible (ibid). Students in schools in socio-economically disadvantaged communities presented as unconfident, finding it difficult to identify with people who have prestige, status and power (Wilson, 1987; Massey and Denton, 1993). This lack of self-esteem creates a challenge for adolescents who have restricted opportunities or little cultural/social capitals available to them, to integrate their identity with a particular career outside their own habitus (McDonough, 1997; Reay, David and Ball, 2005; Smyth and Banks, 2012).

Schools also view guidance differently depending on their institutional habitus (McDonough, 1997; Foskett, Dyke, and Maringe, 2008; McCoy, Byrne, O'Connell, Kelly and Doherty, 2010; Smyth, Banks and Calvert, 2011). Students in middle-class schools generally receive more career guidance than in working class schools (Mullen, 2009). Middle-class schools focus on subjects that facilitate college entry and they may have more advanced guidance facilities available, which reinforce student beliefs and parental ambitions on progression to higher education (McDonough, 1997). Students in Irish working-class schools have different requirements of a guidance service to those in middle-class schools, notably a much bigger demand for counselling services (Smyth and Banks, 2012).

Guidance can have a positive impact on the development of students' career-related skills and can provide the information on careers that may not be available in some homes (Foskett et al, 2008). Guidance is seen to be a significant factor in influencing students from non-academic backgrounds to consider higher

⁴ See I above.

education by challenging their assumptions, and acting as a counter to existing attitudes, knowledge and perception (McCoy et al, 2010). Guidance counsellors in schools in working-class communities can provide some of the missing resources that students in middle-class areas may take for granted (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000) and can be important sources of college-related information for young people with no family traditions, or experience, of higher education (Smyth et al, 2011).

Methodology

The research methodology was a two-phase, sequential, exploratory, mixed-method, phenomenological approach. Phase one, an online survey, was conducted in May 2013, with a volunteer sample of 273, out of a population of 837 guidance counsellors in 723 schools. This equated to a return rate of 33 per cent for guidance counsellors and 35 per cent for schools, which is within an acceptable range (Nulty, 2008). It was representative of the population with regard to school types and in terms of geographic location when compared with a similar survey involving the same population (IGC, 2013). Phase two involved 12 one-to-one structured interviews conducted in November and December 2013, which aimed to fill in gaps, provide more in-depth information and confirm or refute information from phase one. The interview sample was two-thirds volunteer, and one-third purposive. It was representative of the population in terms of school types. The questions in both phases were largely qualitative and open-ended. The research was carried out according to the ethical guidelines of St. Patricks College, Dublin City University.

Data analysis

The quantitative analytical strategy involved the use of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to generate basic descriptive statistics in order to describe the representativeness of the sample. As valid percentages had been employed in the analysis of quantitative data in two prior studies involving the same population (IGC, 2013; NCGE, 2013), both of which dealt with a very similar research topic, a decision was made to also use valid percentages in this study, in order to make judgements and comparisons about whether there were differences

between the various school types. Tests of statistical significance or inferential statistical tests were not calculated. The qualitative analytical strategy was based on the constant comparative method (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994), which in turn drew on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Glaser and Strauss (1967). A qualitative data analysis software package (QSR NVivo10) was used to assist in the coding and management of the qualitative data. It enabled all data movements and coding patterns to be logged and conceptual categories and thought progression to be mapped. This ensured that all stages of the analytical process were traceable and transparent. It assisted in the production of an audit trail, where all data could be traced back to an individual survey respondent or interview participant - a key criterion for establishing trustworthiness and plausibility of a qualitative study. Illustrative quotations were used as a way of providing evidence for interpreting the qualitative findings.

Findings

The eight main findings are presented by theme, with selected illustrative quotations where appropriate. In such cases, responses from the online survey participants are indicated by an individual number (e.g. Respondent 17), while comments from the interviewees are indicated by pseudonyms (e.g. Lily).

1. While the change in the method of guidance allocation had a negative impact on all schools, the biggest observed differences were between guidance counsellors in fee-charging schools and those in schools in the Free-Education Scheme (FES).⁵ A greater proportion of respondents in FES schools had a negative perception of the change than in fee-charging schools. There was also a difference in the actual reduction in guidance hours between both school types, with a greater proportion of respondents (69 per cent) within FES schools experiencing a decrease than in fee-charging schools (44 per cent).
2. The reasons why a greater proportion of FES schools than fee-charging schools reduced their guidance hours were that:

⁵ This paper presents findings related to fee-charging and FES schools only, and findings for other school types are not presented.

- fee-charging schools were able to access additional sources of finance and funding unavailable to FES schools;
 - parent power had an impact on decision-making around guidance services in fee-charging schools, and
 - both the school management and the parents in fee-charging schools regarded guidance as important.
3. The decisions made by fee-charging and FES schools had different impacts and unequal outcomes:
- affective care was eroded in FES schools, but not in fee-charging schools.
 - students in FES schools did not have the same opportunities as those in fee-charging schools to identify and discuss their aptitudes and interests.
4. Differing school management approaches to guidance allocation contributed to unequal outcomes. A guidance counsellor in a fee-charging school wrote:

'No negative changes for me, but I know that is not the experience for many guidance counsellors. Little has changed in the private fee paying schools as parents demand a professional service as they consider they are paying for it.'

(Respondent 161)

The impact of the devolving of responsibility for guidance provision to schools in Ireland mirrored what had happened in other countries, such as New Zealand and the Netherlands where the negative outcomes included increased inequality in guidance provision and a lack of quality assurance (McCarthy, 2012; Watts, 2011). It also paralleled changes in England in 2012, where schools were given the autonomy to 'decide what careers guidance services to make available for their pupils' (Andrews, 2013: 14), resulting in a deteriorating service (UK Parliament, 2013) with inherent 'weaknesses' (ibid: 12), and 'profound gaps' (Simms, Gamwell and Hopkins, 2014: 16).

5. Guidance counsellors reported differences in parental attitudes to guidance in fee-charging and

FES schools. They speculated that parents from fee-charging schools recognised the importance and benefits of a guidance service for progression to higher education and that this may have influenced its retention in these schools:

'Parents who send their sons and daughters to fee-paying schools expect a level of service based around progression into third level, and career guidance is seen as an integral part of getting their sons or daughters into the right course and into the right college.'

(Lily)

6. Guidance counsellors in FES schools experienced a much greater demand for counselling than those in fee-charging schools and often it was impossible to meet the need:

'I found students had difficulty accessing the service because they knew how busy I was and would often say – "I tried to see you last week, but you're a hard woman to catch and I didn't want to bother you."'

(Respondent 12)

7. In allocating resources, many FES school heads prioritised student academic achievement and teaching over counselling. They removed guidance counsellors from guidance duties and gave them an increased academic teaching timetable, resulting in reduced counselling provision. Heads of fee-charging schools did not do this.

'My biggest fear is that due to lack of time, I will not have been able to help a child in need. In my Junior classes there seems to be a wave of self-harm happening among students. I am concerned that due to time in the classroom, I cannot see these children. I can no longer provide the ongoing support to students who need it. I can only see students on a two or three weekly basis, but knowing these students need greater support.'

(Respondent 189)

8. There were differences between fee-charging and FES schools in the quality, capacity and approach of the counselling service which suggest increased inequality:

- The counselling service was mostly reactive in FES schools and mainly preventative in fee-charging schools;
- There was very restricted access to one-to-one appointments in FES schools and easy access in fee-charging schools, as this participant from a fee-charging school explains: 'the management in our school has done everything to keep a dedicated guidance and counselling service in the school at a very difficult time, in terms of funding and teaching allocation' (Respondent 188).
- Having to wait a long time for counselling was the norm in FES schools: '...doing emergency counselling on corridor between classes. When I ask students why did you not come to me sooner they tell me "you were too busy", this is very sad' (Respondent 191). There were no waiting lists reported in fee-charging schools.
- Guidance counsellors in FES schools were under constant time pressure: 'it's a bottomless pit, it's really a case of prioritising, you're fire-fighting, you just do what you can' (Violet in a rural Community College). This was not the case in fee-charging schools as Rosemary, a guidance counsellor in an urban, fee-charging girls school outlined: 'I didn't watch the clock, if they needed a little bit more time I gave it and if they needed to come back again that was fine.'

Conclusions

Three main conclusions were reached from the research findings:

1. A diversified service model of guidance developed, as guidance was viewed differently by individual school heads.
2. While all schools experienced a reduction in guidance, this was not equal across all school types, with the biggest differences being between fee-charging and FES schools.
3. Students in FES schools experienced compromised care from guidance services, due to a large

reduction in counselling appointments. The demand for counselling in FES schools increased, but as many schools prioritised career guidance, counselling was neglected and it became a reactionary crisis intervention service.

Significance of conclusions

This study has added to the discourse on educational equality and has contributed to an understanding of the different ways guidance operates in the institutional habituses of middle-class and working class schools. It reaffirmed earlier studies that guidance services in fee-charging (or middle-class) schools emphasised career guidance over counselling, mainly due to parent-power, and a greater cultural, social and economic capital, while on the other hand FES (or working class) schools experienced heavier demands for counselling. This thesis adopted a largely qualitative approach to the research, and in so doing, addressed a gap, complimenting previous quantitative studies. It provides in-depth information on the lived experiences of guidance counsellors over the course of a year of change and challenge. For policy makers, the thesis has shown that the removal of a centrally-controlled, ring-fenced model of guidance allocation, and its replacement by a devolved, flexible responsibility to individual schools for allocating guidance resources, has had largely negative outcomes, resulting in a weakened care structure in some schools and increased inequality in guidance provision across schools. To quote McCarthy (2012): 'the discretionary approach promotes inequality of access to services... and inequality in obtaining comparable career learning experiences and quality assured experiences' (p. 8).



References

- Allat, P. (1993) *Becoming Privileged: The Role of Family Processes*, in Bates, I. and Riseborough, G. (eds) *Youth and Inequality*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Andrews, D. (2013) *The Future of Careers Work in Schools in England*. http://www.thecdi.net/write/The_future_of_careers_work_in_schools_in_England_March_2013.pdf (accessed 17 June 2013).
- Baker, J., Lynch, K., Cantillon, S. and Walsh, J. (2004) *Equality: From Theory to Action*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bernstein, B. (1970) Education Cannot Compensate for Society, in *New Society*, 15, 387, 341-7.
- Bourdieu, P. (1973) Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction, in Brown, R. (ed) *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change*. London: Tavistock, 71-112.
- Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cabrera, A.F. and La Nasa, S.M. (2000) *Understanding the College Choice of Disadvantaged Students. New Directions for Institutional Research*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Department of Education and Science (2005) *Guidelines for Second Level Schools on the Implications of Section 9(c) of the Education Act (1998), Relating to Students' Access to Appropriate Guidance*, Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Foskett, N., Dyke, M. and Maringe, F. (2008) The Influence of the School in the Decision to Participate in Learning Post 16, *British Educational Research Journal*, 34, 1, 37-61.
- Glaser, B. G. and Strauss, A. L. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Institute of Guidance Counsellors (2013) *National Audit of Guidance and Counselling Practice in Second Level Schools in Ireland, 2011-2014: Report of Findings Phase 3*, Dublin: IGC.
- Lareau, A. (2003) *Unequal Childhoods*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*, London: Sage.
- Lynch, K., Baker, J. Cantillon, S. and Walsh, J. (2009) Which Equalities Matter? The Place of Affective Equality in Egalitarian Thinking, in Lynch, K., Baker, J. and Lyons M. (eds) *Affective Equality*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Massey, D. S. and Denton, N.A. (1993) *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Maykut, P. and Morehouse, R. (1994) *Beginning Qualitative Research: A Philosophic and Practical Guide*, London: The Falmer Press.
- McCarthy, J. (2012) Cutting Education Slack, in *Guideline*, 39, 2, 6-9, Dublin: Institute of Guidance Counsellors.
- McCoy, S., Byrne, D., O'Connell, P.J., Kelly E. and Doherty, C. (2010) *Hidden Disadvantage? A Study on the Low Participation in Higher Education by the Non-Manual Group*, Dublin: HEA / ESRI.
- McDonough, P.M. (1997) *Choosing Colleges: How Social Class and Schools Structure Opportunity*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Mullen, A.L. (2009) Elite Destinations: Pathways to Attending an Ivy League University, in [*British Journal of the Sociology of Education*](#), 30, 15-27.
- National Centre for Guidance in Education (2004) *Planning the School Guidance Programme*, Dublin: NCGE.
- National Centre for Guidance in Education (2013) *Review of Guidance Counselling Provision in Second Level Schools, 2012-2013: Report of the Findings*, Dublin: NCGE.
- Nulty, D. (2008) The adequacy of response rates to online and paper surveys: what can be done? *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33, 3, 301-314.
- O'Brien, M. (2005) *Making the Move. Students' Teachers' and Parents' Perspectives of Transfer from First to Second-level Schooling*, Dublin: Marino Institute of Education.

Reay, D., David, M.E. and Ball, S. (2005) *Degrees of Choice: Social Class, Race and Gender in Higher Education*, Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

Rudd, T. (2003) *ICT and the Reproduction of Inequalities: A Bourdieuan Perspective*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Bristol: University of Bristol, Graduate School of Education.

Simms, M., Gamwell, S. and Hopkins, B. (2014) *The Changing Role of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) in Young People's Transition into the Labour Market*. Unpublished paper presented at the 2014 British Sociological Association Annual Conference, at the University of Leeds, from 23 - 25 April 2014.

Smyth, E. and Banks, J. (2012) 'There was Never Really Any Question of Anything Else': Young People's Agency, Institutional Habitus and the Transition to Higher Education, in *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 33, 2, 263-281.

Smyth, E., Banks, J. and Calvert, E. (2011) *From Leaving Certificate to Leaving School. A Longitudinal Study of Sixth Year Students*, Dublin: ESRI.

UK Parliament. (2013) *Career Guidance and Young People: The Impact of the New Duty on Schools*, Seventh Report of Session 2012-13, House of Commons Education Committee, London: The Stationery Office.

Walkerdine, V. and Lucey, H. (1989) *Democracy in the Kitchen: Regulating Mothers and Socialising Daughters*, London: Virago.

Watts, A.G. (2011) The Proposed Model for Career Guidance in England: Some Lessons from International Examples, *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 27, 32-39.

Wilson, W.J. (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

For correspondence

Dr Liam Harkin,
Guidance Counsellor,
Carndonagh Community School,
Church Road, Carndonagh, Co. Donegal F93 VK61,
Ireland.

liamjharkin@gmail.com

Thesis title:

From ex-quota to in-quota: An analysis of guidance counsellors' perceptions of the impact of 2012 budgetary cutbacks on their care work across different school types.

St. Patrick's College, Dublin City University.