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# A guidance process gap: Exploring school guidance provision in a multicultural Ireland

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## Abstract

This research explores the guidance needs of young people from immigrant backgrounds in Ireland *and* the competencies of guidance counsellors in schools to address those needs. Findings indicate that the traditional school guidance approach, developed for a homogeneous student group of the majority population, is not appropriate for this cohort of young people. The author proposes that a *Guidance Process Gap* arises when the relationship between the young person of immigrant background and the guidance counsellor is negatively impacted by various barriers to engagement and makes recommendations to address this gap.

**Key words:** school guidance, guidance process gap, multicultural, intercultural, guidance counselling, Ireland

## Introduction

The Republic of Ireland has been known as a country of high emigration (Glynn, 2012; DFA, 2017). However, since the early 2000s, Ireland has been characterised by higher levels of immigration. Seventy-seven per cent of the population identify as White-Irish and 69 per cent identify as Catholic, which reflects what Tracy (2000, p. 15) described as the national identity of 'Irishness' or 'WHISCS' (i.e. White, Heterosexual, Irish, Settled [i.e. non-Traveller] and Catholic). But, by 2025, the national estimates of population report

that 16.3 per cent of the almost 5.5 million people 'usually resident' in Ireland identify as 'non-Irish' citizens (CSO, 2025). This means that Ireland has become a more diverse and multicultural society, where the 'new Irish' (Kamusella, 2008), tend not to fit into the traditional White-Irish 'WHISCS' category.

## School guidance

Students attend post-primary school in Ireland between the age of 12/13 years and 18/19 years. To support all students to make decisions about their progression options, post-primary schools in Ireland are required, by law, to 'use their available resources: to ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices...' (Government of Ireland, 1998). Here, guidance is defined by the Department of Education and Science (DES, 2005) as:

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.

Within this context, the author defines 'guidance needs' in this study as the individual learning experiences, assistance, and supports needed to help the young person to make effective decisions about their own personal/social development and their career and education choices.

Guidance counsellors (hereafter GC) in post-primary schools are required to hold a postgraduate qualification in guidance counselling in addition to a teaching qualification. The Whole School Guidance Framework (NCGE, 2017) outlines the role of the GC within the whole school guidance programme to support the students' personal, social, educational and career development, and to facilitate their wellbeing, career and education decision-making and life choices. Within this guidance programme, the student also has a responsibility to engage with the guidance activities and the GC in the development of the guidance counselling relationship (Maughan et al., 2016). Hence, as guidance is a process that involves the delivery of and participation in a range of activities and engaged interactions between the GC and the student, the outcomes of guidance for any young person will depend on both the inputs from the GC and the informed and active involvement of that young person.

National and professional body guidelines (DES, 2016; Maughan et al., 2016) outline the general competence development of GCs, noting a requirement for an awareness and understanding of cultural differences and multicultural values. Nevertheless, neither of these guidelines includes details of the multicultural or intercultural competencies required for GCs in schools.

## Focus of the study

Given the increasing social diversity and the lack of guidance research in this area in Ireland, this study aimed to address two key questions:

- I. What are the guidance needs (i.e., personal/social, careers and educational) of post-primary students from immigrant backgrounds in the Republic of Ireland?

2. What are the intercultural training and competences required of GCs in schools to meet those guidance needs?

## Literature review

Smyth et al. (2009) identify 'newcomer students' as a specific group of the school student population, for whom both parents originate from outside of Ireland and who require additional academic, language, and social supports in schools. Although guidance counsellors were included within this study, there is a notable dearth of guidance research in Ireland focusing specifically on the future careers, education, and life plans of Young People of Immigrant Backgrounds (YPIB<sup>1</sup>) in post-primary school. Nor is there data available from the Department of Education's schools' inspection reports on the delivery of guidance to immigrant students in schools (DE, 2023c). Moreover, there has been no research in Ireland focusing on the competence of GCs in post-primary schools to offer 'appropriate guidance' to YPIBs. By contrast, international research includes many studies on areas of multicultural guidance counselling, (Byars-Winston & Fouad, 2006), the development of multicultural competences (Collins & Arthur, 2010), the migration effects on families (Kumar, 2019), and career guidance for refugees (Campion, 2018).

### Career guidance

Historically, career guidance provision in schools in Ireland has been based on Holland's theory of vocational choice (Holland, 1959) and 'self-directed search' matching model (PAR, 2023). However, theories such as Super's (1980) life-stage development model, and the social cognitive approach where the GC assists clients in evaluating their self-efficacy, beliefs, and outcome expectations, impacting their career choices and aspirations (Brown & Lent, 1996), suggest that there are multiple factors influencing an individual's career trajectory and that their interests and aptitudes alone are not sufficient to ensure that they will automatically access their chosen career. Furthermore, these theories recognise that the GC has a role to support the client or young person to explore any external or societal issues influencing or affecting their career decisions and planning.

More recently, the role of career guidance in promoting social justice has been emphasised internationally, with guidance reframed as an interaction that identifies and challenges injustices while supporting individuals and groups to learn more about work, leisure and learning and to plan for their futures (Hooley et al., 2018). This social justice approach recognises that the individual's life-story is impacted by both internal and external factors which can limit their life and career options and choices and that guidance supports the individuals' agency in making their own decisions, taking account of the intersectionality of clients' personal, biographical and societal factors (Vehviläinen & Souto, 2021). In addition, Souto and Sotkasiira (2022) highlighted the essential role of intersectional and anti-racist career guidance embedded within guidance practice and the importance of challenging policies that inform guidance provision.

The 'Systems Theory Framework' (STF) approach to career development and career counselling (McMahon & Patton, 1995) provides an overarching or 'metatheoretical

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1 The young people participating in the focus groups and interviews agreed to the use of this term (YPIB) as they were not a homogenous group and other collective phrases did not adequately describe their individual differences.

framework' where any number of career theories could inform guidance practice (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Maintaining the individual as the core focus, the STF approach supports the client to construct their own understanding of career and to examine and describe the various '*Systems of Influence*', which can be personal, contextual, and dynamic in nature, impacting their career development and choices (Patton & McMahon, 1999). These intrapersonal influences (gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, personality, identity, aptitudes, interests and values), and context specific organisational and environmental-societal influences (family, peers, education and work experiences, socio-economic status, geographical location, political and global environments), can change over time (Arthur & McMahon, 2005) and can be perceived as either positive or negative by the individual, thus potentially impacting in different ways on their career decision making.

Adopting the STF approach provides a framework for the guidance counsellors to reflect on, challenge and develop a clear understanding of their own systems of influence, including their cultural influences and career choices and how these may affect their guidance practice (McMahon & Patton, 2021). Addressing the interactivity of the guidance process, the development of the '*therapeutic relationship*' between the GC and the client develops when their two 'systems' maintain their individuality but are open to dialogue to create career decisions (Patton & McMahon, 1999). Here, the GC supports the individual to consider their guidance needs and explore their own '*social and environmental contexts*' in a process of '*life-career meaning-making*' when constructing his/her own career and life plans (Patton and McMahon, 2017, p. 13). Therefore, the GC would require an understanding of the range of personal, social, educational and careers guidance needs of the young person, as each contributes to and influences the young person's education and career decisions and cannot be considered as unconnected or isolated concerns. However, this proposed therapeutic system suggests that the GC and client/young person have experiences of, and are encircled within, similar organisational or environmental-societal influences.

### Guidance needs of young people of immigrant backgrounds

Young people of immigrant backgrounds include those second-generation individuals for whom one or more parents are first-generation immigrants or born outside of Ireland (Machowska-Kosiack & Barry, 2022) and those who themselves are immigrants, who may have moved to Ireland at such a young age that they do not remember living in their country of birth. Rumbaut (2004) suggests that a life-stage approach to immigration classifications allows for better understanding of the experiences of these young people, which includes their personal memories of immigration, experiences of trauma and post-migration adjustments (Bemak and Chung, 2017). Studies carried out in Ireland (McClure, 2021; Devine, 2009; Bryan, 2009) indicate that the experiences of minority children and adolescents growing up and attending school in Ireland are similar to those in other majority white countries, in noting their ethnic differences to their peers and experiencing racism.

Children as young as 11 or 12 years old, born in Ireland to Nigerian parents, identifying as African *and* Irish, reported experiences of racism from peers and teachers within school and in their communities, and are acutely aware of their national identity and how they are viewed by white people in their communities (McClure, 2021). Further studies identified that students of ethnic minority backgrounds in Irish schools experienced racism and

discrimination from teachers and other students who determined that they did not 'look *Irish*' (Ní Dhuinn & Keane, 2023) and identified concerns about identity and belonging, managing different family, cultural and community relationships and value systems, and experiences of racial discrimination (Walsh, 2017). In addition, a key report from Dublin City University (DCU) and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) highlights that young people have identified that discrimination, misrepresentation and racism is a 'normal feature' of their everyday experience, in broader society, online and within institutional structures such as schools and workplaces (Machowska-Kosiack & Barry, 2022). The report also details how young people describe their 'hybridised identities' (ibid), as they belong to several cultures and regularly face questions about their 'Irishness' while managing and navigating the challenges of cultural differences within intergenerational relationships within their families.

Many YPIB attend school through the medium of English which is not their first language which may impact their academic performance (UNESCO, 2008), their psychological and sociocultural development (Vedder, 2005), and on their mental health (Frabutt, 2006). Furthermore, in completing psychometric assessment through English, their test scores may reflect their English language proficiency rather than their actual ability (DE, 2023b), thus impacting their school subject choices and education progression options. When choosing their career options, the beliefs, values, and expectations of immigrant parents can influence the students' subject choices and career aspirations (Kewalramani & Phillipson, 2020), and their career choices may be affected by a greater risk of discrimination in recruitment and the workplace than White-Irish individuals (McGinnity et al, 2018).

Guidance in schools in Ireland includes the separate but interlinked areas of personal and social development, educational and career advice (DES, 2005) and is delivered through classroom group-based learning activities, and 1-to-1 guidance counselling (i.e. the therapeutic relationship advocated by Patton and McMahon, 1999), therefore the author considered that the STF provides a relevant theoretical perspective within which to frame this research as it allows for reflection on the variety of possible influences, delivery and experiences of guidance provision for both the GCs and YPIBs.

## Methods

The STF provides an overarching approach to consider the theories and influences at play in guidance provision. As GCs support individuals through complex transition periods (NGF, 2007), an interpretive and constructivist approach to this process allows for consideration and understanding of these complex and multiple perspectives. The research aimed to understand and interpret research participants' own experiences and perspectives of guidance (Bryman 2016) and to understand and construct theories to explain these experiences through interpretations and analysis of the data gathered. To this end, a mixed methods research approach was employed, where the quantitative and qualitative data gathered were compared or merged to locate the findings. This research was conducted online during the national COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

Guidance counsellors were contacted via their professional body, a national guidance agency and via social media platforms. YPIBs were contacted via NGOs supporting immigrants, student groups, and various social media platforms. Questionnaires, focus

groups and 1-to-1 interviews were conducted with participants from both group cohorts. Questionnaires distributed online to guidance counsellors and to young people included key statistical demographic variables informed by the census (CSO, 2017). The questionnaire for the GCs was developed by the author, based on concepts drawn from various validated scales (Gamst et al., 2004; O'Brien et al., 1997) and academic frameworks in the sector (Collins & Arthur, 2007; 2010; NCDA, 2009). It also focused on their employment role, number of years since qualification, years of professional experience working with YPIBs and any training completed on multicultural or intercultural topics. The questionnaire for the YPIB was developed by the author to reflect on their experience of guidance in post-primary school and on the personal, family, and cultural circumstances and influences on their career and education choices and planning. The questionnaire also addressed personal experiences of acculturation, identity, and adaptation, general adolescent development, issues of speaking English as a second language, parental influences and their experiences of issues relating to ethnicity and employment in Ireland (Joseph, 2018).

Tables 1 and 2 below outline the numbers in both cohort groups of questionnaires completed and participants in the focus groups and 1-to-1 interviews.

**Table 1. Completed Questionnaires**

Cohort Group	Questionnaires returned	Questionnaires eligible for analysis
Guidance Counsellors	121	97
Young People of Immigrant Backgrounds	42	23

**Table 2. Focus groups and interviews**

Cohort	Number of participants	Individual interviews
Guidance Counsellors Group A	4	3
Guidance Counsellors Group B	3	
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>
Young People of Immigrant Backgrounds Group C	4	6
Young People of Immigrant Backgrounds Group D	2*	
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>

*\*The third individual due to attend absented themselves too late in the process to invite additional participants.*

Responses from guidance counsellors not employed in post-primary schools and young people who had not completed post-primary schools in Ireland were not included in the data analysis.



The focus groups and 1-to-1 research interviews (which lasted 2 hours and 1.5 hours respectively) with each cohort group were conducted separately online. Participation was possible from a wider geographical range than would have been possible if they had been held in person at a centralised venue. Participants attended the focus groups and/or interviews from their own personal, comfortable, private spaces (Halliday et al., 2021), and several commented on the 'relaxed' atmosphere of the groups and interviews.

## Ethics

Ethical approval was sought and granted through the Ethics Committee within the University (SSESW Ref: 053\_2021). To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were applied for all participants. GCs reported on their current guidance practice, and YPIB referred to their recalled experiences of guidance. Schools were not identified for either cohort group, as the research did not aim to connect the participant cohort groups in any way. All participants provided their consent to participate and/or withdraw from the study as appropriate.

## Analysis

The author, as sole researcher, completed and reflected repeatedly on the notes and transcriptions of all the focus groups and interviews and reviewed all of the questionnaires' responses to ensure familiarity with all of the data gathered. Ensuring the accurate transcription of all participants' actual words and '*pronunciations, non-verbals and irregular grammar*' (Oliver et al., 2005) was particularly important for this cohort of young people, for whom English is not their first language.

The guidance process relies on the relationship built between the GC and the student, along with access to and provision of factual and impartial information, and the delivery of teaching and learning activities which support the development of personal and career decision-making skills (NCGE, 2017). Therefore, describing and measuring the number and type of guidance activities (i.e., quantitative data) must be balanced with understanding the interpretations of those involved within that interaction and relationship (i.e., qualitative data).

Using the Braun and Clarke's (2006) method, the researcher generated initial codes for the qualitative data gathered and identified, reviewed and defined the themes arising from the data. Further coding of the qualitative data in NVIVO reinforced the researchers' initial identification of the themes emerging in the study.

For both groups, the quantitative statistical data gathered via the online programme, provided an overview of the demographic information for each cohort. This includes activities of GCs' guidance practice and factors impacting that guidance provision and an overall description of the young people's reported experience of guidance provision and related issues.

## Limitations

The limitations of this research are reflected in the small sample sizes of participants from both groups. However, there was consensus on issues across the survey responses and from those engaged in the focus groups and 1-to-1 interviews in both cohorts.

The sample of YPIB was drawn from those who were notified of the research through NGOs, students' unions, etc., and does not reflect the number of YPIB currently attending

post-primary schools. Given that the YPIB in this study were from different backgrounds, it would not be appropriate to generalise their experience to the entire population nationally of YPIB. Nevertheless, this small sample of young people referred to similar experiences of their friends and family members throughout.

The YPIB were reflecting, with hindsight, on their experiences of school at a time when there may have been less focused attention by national agencies and school management on issues of racial equality, diversity, and inclusion in schools. Yet their remembered experiences were reflected by the guidance counsellors in detailing their current practice and guidance delivery in schools.

## Findings

The research findings reflect the data gathered from the combination of online questionnaires, focus groups and 1-to-1 interviews for both cohort groups.

YPIB were asked to think back to their general experience of post-primary school, their experience of career guidance, their engagement with the GC and to reflect upon the influences on their careers or education planning for after post-primary school. The young people who participated identified their or their family backgrounds as African, Arabic, Asian, East-Asian and Polish. A quote from one respondent summarises the comments from most of the participants, *'My nationality is Irish, but I am also Congolese by birth'* (Young Person 'B').

**Table 3. Young people of immigrant background – demographics**

Variable	Category	n
Nationality (n = 23)	Irish	14
	Dual nationality	3
	Other nationality	3
	Other EU	3
Ethnicity (n = 23)	Black-Irish	7
	Black	5
	White	5
	Irish	2
	African	2
	Asian	2
	Other	0
Religion (n = 22)	No religion	7
	Other Christian	5
	Presbyterian/Baptist	4
	Catholic	3
	Islam	2
	Hindu	1
	Other	0
First language in home (n = 23)	English	12
	Other and/or English	13



Guidance counsellors were asked, to reflect on their guidance practice, their awareness of issues facing YPIB, and on their own experience of providing guidance to this cohort of young people. Results indicate that GCs who completed the questionnaires are mostly Irish, white, (i.e., reflecting the majority population (CSO, 2022) and female and Catholic.

Five core themes arise from the data.

1. Systemic issues in wider society and schools
2. Students' experience of guidance in school
3. Students' guidance needs and guidance counsellors' awareness of these needs
4. Guidance practice and delivery of service
5. Future competence development for guidance counsellors

### Systemic issues in wider society and schools

There was consensus from all the young people participating in the research that living in a multicultural society impacts them daily on a personal level in a range of ways, including: growing up within two cultures; speaking different languages; feelings of being stereotyped; feelings of isolation and rejection that one does not fit completely into either Irish culture or the culture of their birth country, summarised by one survey respondent, '*... being a hybrid kid can be tough sometimes... [it's like] ...no man's land*' (Young Person 'B')

Participants in Focus Group C reflected on their collective experience of racism, describing how they use their '*customer service voice*' when in public situations, to deflect any possible negative interactions and prevent being called the '*angry Black lady*' (Deborah) or '*rude Asian person*' (Yenwei).

Both YPIBs and GCs reported that the policies placing young immigrant students into their relevant school class-year based on age and English language proficiency (which differs in every school) and attendance at EAL (English as Additional Language) classes can impact on subsequent subject choices and future career options available. As an example, one young woman Lela explained how she '*wasn't allowed to do like higher level English, even though I excelled at all the subjects already*' despite the fact that Lela reported that she '*could go sit in the science class in higher level and pass it.*'

GCs reported their awareness and understanding of multicultural issues as that of difference from the majority, i.e., different language, different religion, and different cultures to the majority Irish population. The majority of GCs also described their awareness of the multitude of intersectional issues facing young people and their parents. However, they reported limited knowledge of different cultural norms and as a result they learned about other cultures directly through working and interacting with students and their parents. Aoife said, '*we've something like 24 nationalities in the school and every day is a learning curve*'.

The majority of GCs are aware of the influence of their own cultural values on their guidance practice. Orla (GC, 1-1 interview) described how she provided a young student of immigrant background, who was dealing with an unplanned pregnancy, with contact and referral information for all the relevant agencies,

So that's how I was, you know, like for me, I was delighted I didn't step back because I'm a Roman Catholic. I just step back in case the bias came out, but it was the best thing to do for her, if that makes sense.

## Students' experience of guidance in school

Young people report that they are often faced with personal, social, and systemic experiences, both within school and across wider society, which negatively impact them and which stem from their immigrant backgrounds. Yet, it was very clear they were either not aware that they could discuss personal issues, or they were not willing to discuss such issues with the GC. There was little evidence to show an awareness of the scope of personal/social, careers and education guidance supports available for the young people within the whole school guidance programme.

Whilst psychometric tests for guidance (i.e., aptitudes and interest tests) required completion through English, none of the respondents who completed these tests (n=13) felt that completing the tests was difficult. However, a majority (n=10) of those respondents felt that the results did not accurately reflect their aptitudes and abilities.

YPIB reported (n=20), that there were no career guidance classes arranged in their schools for smaller groups of students who speak other languages at home and only two noted that the GC in their school provided smaller group guidance sessions for students interested in the same career options.

## Students' guidance needs and guidance counsellors' awareness of these needs

Reflecting students' experiences listed above, 85 % of GCs reported that they issued the same psychometric assessments to *all* students, but less than half (47%), reported that they consciously considered cultural norms and language skills when choosing the appropriate psychometric assessments for students of immigrant backgrounds.

The data indicates a range of personal and intersectional issues affecting young people of immigrant backgrounds in school. These issues have influenced their education and careers aspirations and planning and include concerns about factors such as parental influence, pressure to succeed, religion and culture, issues of race, ethnicity, racism, and personal development and identity. YPIB report that the intersectionality of personal development and identity formation is inextricably linked to their experiences of racism in schools and the expectations placed on them by wider society. The young people participating in the focus groups and interviews noted that it was only upon reflection after leaving school, that they had identified past experiences as bullying, harmful and racist. Jessica (YP, 1-1 interview) explained how her experiences of discrimination influenced her decision to not attend Transition Year (i.e., 4th year) so that she could leave school as soon as possible.

GCs state that they are aware of the intersectionality of concerns and that issues cannot always be separated. For example, career plans may be informed by personal issues and family situations, which in turn will inform the students' subject choices in school. Several of the GCs suggested that the expectations of parents and families for the students can often be '*wholly unrealistic*' (GC #59). In addition, GCs report that there is often little acknowledgment from parents of students' mental health issues which require the support of the guidance counselling.

White GCs participating in the focus groups and interviews did not report the issue of race or ethnicity being discussed often during guidance counselling sessions, except at times where girls were considering careers deemed unsuitable by their parents.

## Guidance practice and delivery of service

YPIBs reported various, but inconsistent, experiences of guidance activities, which depended on their school's facilities and their geographical location. Only 13 respondents indicated they had attended career guidance classes. The majority of young people reported that there were no career guidance classes arranged in their schools for smaller groups of students who speak other languages at home. The majority of the young people felt that they were 'treated the same' as their classmates, but that this was not appropriate,

They didn't know what to do with me. They treated me the same, but the problem was that the overall system doesn't see me the same. Therefore, by ignoring my difference they were actually not helping' (YP- 'B').

Notably, the young people reported that they generally view the GCs as White, Catholic women who have little understanding of their (i.e., the students') immigrant background experiences. Only 1 respondent indicated that the 1-to-1 guidance session with the guidance counsellor helped them to make career / education decisions, and the majority indicated that they never discussed personal issues with the guidance counsellor.

GCs reported that their practice is dependent on the time (i.e., school hours) allocated to them within the whole school guidance plan and that they need more dedicated and allocated time for YPIBs. Moreover, GCs who are employed on a part-time basis or as subject teachers also noted serious concerns about the delivery of their service to all students irrespective of the students' background,

if I'm rushed, it doesn't matter if you're Black, White, Asian, Irish. You know, my service to you as a GC won't be as strong. So, it's- it's not really a cultural or multicultural issue for me. It's more a case of just in my context of where I'm at in the school...' Con, (Focus Group B).

Sixty-six per cent of guidance counsellors stated that they provided the same information and guidance to YPIB as that of students from indigenous Irish backgrounds. In addition, only 37% reported that they provide translated information and guidance materials for students (and their parents) for whom English is not their first language.

More than half of GCs (55%) reported that they encourage students to discuss issues of race and/or ethnic identity and how this may or may not affect their career and education choices during class. Nevertheless, the data does not indicate that extra or targeted guidance classes are delivered to address these students' differing needs.

GCs report their fears and concerns about causing offence to students and their families, as well as their awareness of racism and systemic barriers to progression for these students. Despite these concerns, there is little evidence of the allocation of additional resources or a targeted approach to whole-school guidance activities to meet the specific guidance needs of YPIB and their families. One survey respondent succinctly expressed the genuine concerns of most GCs that they have a, '*lack of knowledge, understanding and fear of getting it wrong...*' (GC #4).

## Future competence development for GCs

GCs report that it is not clear where or how they as practitioners should access appropriate support and information specific to the needs of YPIB. The majority of GCs in schools who responded (66%) have not completed any training in multicultural or intercultural guidance counselling skills, and many reported that their experience working with YPIB reflects the local population demographics and school enrolment numbers.

The key message from the YPIBs was that each student is different and comes with varying situations of family, cultural heritage, or religious beliefs. There was consensus that GCs should have better cultural awareness, understanding of different religions and the impact of racism on the students' future education and career choices.

Irrespective of current practice or previous training, 99% of the guidance counsellors who responded reported that they would welcome and benefit from further training / CPD in multicultural/intercultural issues for guidance counselling. Indeed, some GCs noted that participating in this research had helped them to begin to reflect on and review their own guidance practice with YPIBs.

We see all students as individuals and must tailor our approach and information accordingly but I now realise that I could be missing a lot, not picking up on things due to my ignorance or lack of knowledge' (GC #10)

## Discussion

To date, school guidance provision in Ireland has reflected the traditional 'matching' approach (Holland, 1959) to career development, where students complete 'interest' and 'aptitude' tests to inform their education and training choices for further and higher education (Careersportal, 2023). This research suggests that the guidance needs of YPIB listed briefly above cannot be addressed through this matching process alone and that the delivery of appropriate guidance to this cohort of young people cannot be seen as a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, where all students in the classroom are treated the same out of a sense of fear of being accused of being racist.

The Systems Theory Framework (STF) approach provides a lens through which it is possible to understand the influences which inform both GCs and YPIBs. The guidance needs of the YPIB can be explored through reflection on the various influences relevant to their situation. The impact of these influences on the GC's personal lives and professional practice can also be explored. The guidance outcome for any student emerges from the interaction between the GC and the YPIB and is shaped by how they interact with guidance activities and processes (Maughan et al., 2016). Hence, where guidance is an interactive process, i.e., a 'working alliance' (Collins & Arthur, 2010) or 'therapeutic relationship' (Patton & McMahon, 1999) the interactions and experience of both parties are inextricably linked.

The demographic information gathered highlights core quantifiable differences between the two groups, informing these interactions. GCs report in the main to be White, Female and Catholic, a very small number of whom speak second language in their homes. By contrast, YPIB are a group of heterogeneous individuals, from a variety of minority groups,

immigrant or Irish-born, with diverse familial and personal circumstances, cultures, and religions. Many of these young people view GCs as representatives of the majority White Irish population from who they have previously experienced discrimination. They would like the GCs to have a better understanding of the experiences of individuals with immigrant backgrounds. For these YPIB, the term 'multicultural' does not epitomise an abstract societal or community ideal but symbolises their everyday lived and personal experiences, which can be both positive and negative, including within schools. Whilst Guidance Counsellors report that they are aware of the issues facing the young people, the majority have limited personal or professional experience of such matters. Notably, both the YPIB and GCs reported that training for the guidance counsellors in this area would be beneficial to address this limited experience.

### Identifying the guidance process gap

Patton & McMahon (1999) propose that within the Systems Theory Framework, the 'therapeutic system', or congruent guidance relationship (Maughan et al., 2016), develops when the GC and client meet to explore the career plans and decisions of the client. However, this 'therapeutic system' as described presupposes that the GC and YPIB have similar experiences of and are similarly impacted by the wider environmental-societal, organisational, and individual systems and influences within which the guidance is provided.

This study finds that the interactions or 'working alliance' between the YPIBs and the GC do not yet occur within the sphere of this 'therapeutic system' or 'congruent relationship.' These data point to a fundamental mismatch in the development of a 'working alliance' or guidance relationship between these two separate individuals, as cross-cultural issues arise where the guidance counsellor and the young person do not share similar experiences of the environmental-societal, organisational and individual systems of influence.

Here, both individuals are bound by their own influences, experiences, and expectations, which can in turn create barriers to engagement in the guidance process. These barriers include a range of intersectional issues arising which include, but are not limited to the following: the lack of guidance resources (DE, 2023a) and school guidance activities; the GCs' lack of formal training (DES, 2016), or lack of knowledge and understanding of cultures, racism, religions etc; the YPIBs' ethnic /family/cultural/ religious background; the YPIBs' experiences of racism and discrimination from and mistrust of the 'majority' white population (Ní Dhuinn & Keane, 2023), including school staff, and the young persons' lack of understanding of the GCs' role.

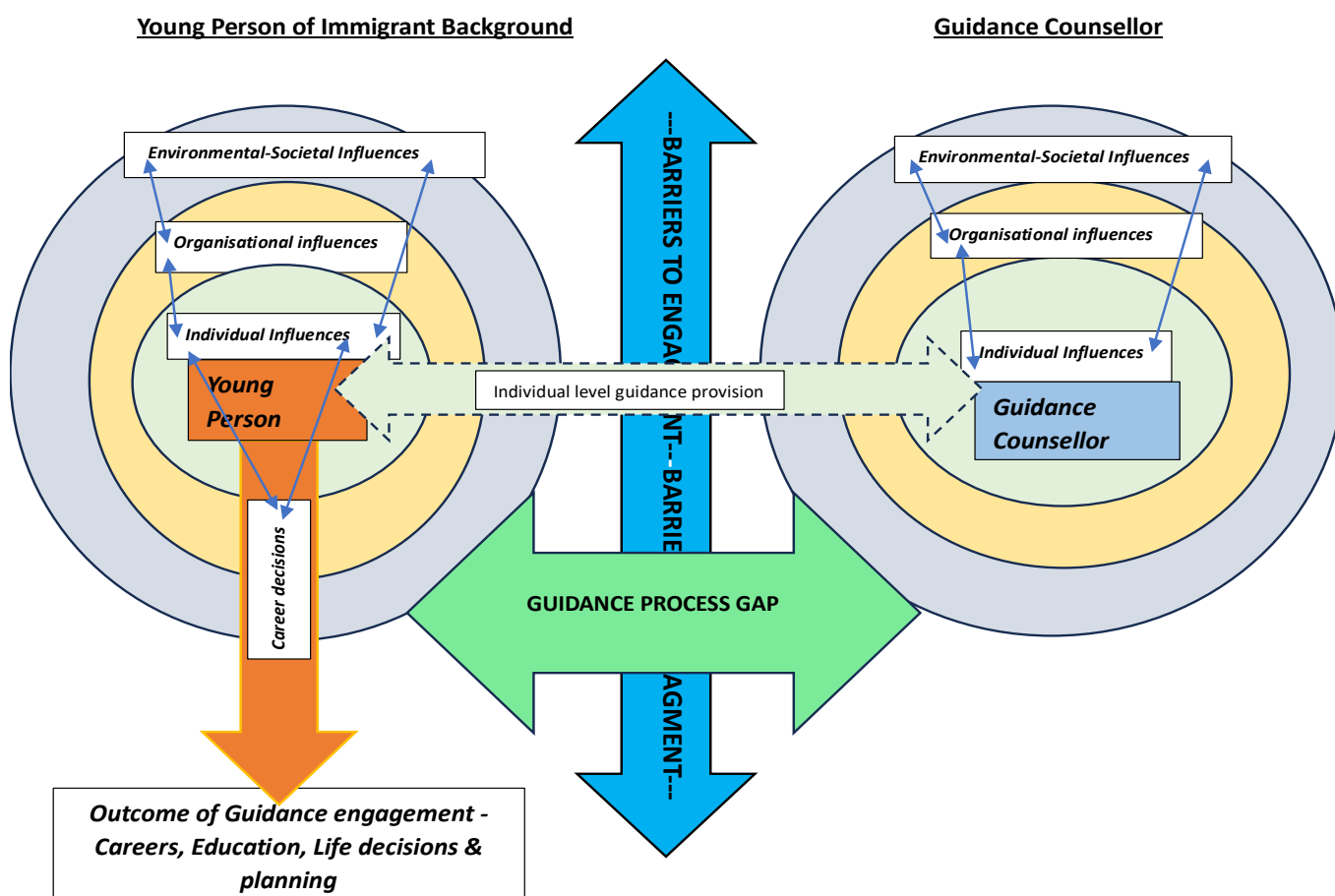
Finally, barriers to progression due to systemic national and local school policies affect both the opportunities available to the YPIB and the GCs' practice. As a result, these barriers to engagement serve to prevent the development of the necessary congruent guidance relationship for both individuals, thus creating a gap in the guidance process. 'The Guidance Process Gap', proposed by the author based on the findings of this research (McKenzie, 2025), is adapted from Patton and McMahon's (1999) therapeutic system. This research finds that, in the main, the GC and YPIB do not share similar experiences of organisational or environmental-societal influences. In most cases, the YPIB do not see their experience of guidance in schools as having any impact on their careers, education, or life choices. Also, although 1-to-1 guidance was being provided, this was not well-known nor available to all YPIB participating in the research. Due to the disconnect in the guidance process,

the YPIB reports that they are making their education and career decisions based on their own personal influences, rather than as a result of engaging with guidance activities or the guidance counsellor in their schools.

Based on the reported experiences of the YPIB and GCs, (such as young peoples' experiences of racism in schools, and the GCs fear of being accused of racism), and the reported differences in cultural backgrounds (i.e. most GCs are members of the majority population, whilst YPIB are mostly from minority groups), their own individual systems of influence can create barriers to engagement with guidance, which can in turn impact on the development of a trusting cross-cultural guidance relationship and therefore on the delivery and experience of appropriate guidance, thus creating a gap in the guidance process. The GC can address the *guidance process gap* identified in this research with targeted interventions for YPIB and their parents to tailor the information and guidance provided to their specific needs, thus encouraging participation and active engagement with guidance activities. It is envisaged that such targeted interventions will develop or improve the working alliance or guidance relationship necessary for 1-to-1 guidance counselling, to support the young person to make their education, career, and life choices.

Within Figure 1, the YPIB and GC are separate individuals who have their own experiences of the STF systems of influence.

**Figure 1. Guidance process gap diagram © J McKenzie, 2025, adapted from Patton and McMahon (1999).**





## Implications for guidance policy and practice

This research proposes that adapting the STF approach to guidance provision provides a model for the GC to support the YPIB to consider all the various influences on their career decisions. This research also proposes that the STF approach allows for an understanding of the gap arising in guidance provision due to possible cultural differences between the guidance counsellor and the young person. The findings of this research indicate several implications for guidance policy and guidance practice in post-primary schools in Ireland, for which the following strategies and model of practice are proposed.

Policymakers might consider:

- A review of the allocation of guidance hours needed to address the additional supports required by YPIB and their parents/guardians, and adjusting the school allocation of guidance hours accordingly.
- Development of a whole-school guidance programme of careers and education information sessions and targeted interventions tailored to parents/guardians of immigrant students and/or those availing of classes in English as an additional language (EAL).

Guidance counsellors might consider the following model of practice:

- Accessing and using resources online to develop translated career and education information for some students and their parents/ guardians.
- Offering targeted career and education information sessions for parents/ guardians of YPIB to address their specific concerns.
- Ensuring that the whole school guidance plan provides scheduled group and 1-to-1 guidance counselling sessions targeted to the needs of YPIB. These group and individual sessions would include explanation and use of the STF model, to encourage positive interactive participation in the guidance process and to support the young person to consider their own circumstances, systems of influence and education, career, and life plans.
- Encouraging active involvement of and input from young people of immigrant backgrounds and their parents/guardians, including past pupils, to explore, document and advocate for their guidance needs and inform the future development and delivery of targeted guidance interventions in the school.

Professional bodies and institutions could consider a model of training to include:

- Training in the Systems Theory Framework (STF) Systems of Influence model (ibid) for GCs to utilise in guidance counselling sessions with the young people.
- Initial training and continuous professional development (CPD) for GCs, focusing on issues such as self-awareness of cultural values/biases, examining their own systems of influence, and their worldview of self and client, learning about non-Western career development theories, understanding of dominant (i.e. majority) and non-dominant (i.e. minority) groups, cultural identities, anti-bias and anti-racism.
- Initial training and CPD for GCs focusing on developing skills for confident intercultural and cross-cultural relationship building and guidance provision.

## Conclusion

This research identifies a complex constellation of personal, social, career and educational guidance needs of YPIB, requiring a multifaceted collection of guidance interventions delivered by interculturally competent school guidance counsellors, operating within a more diverse and inclusive society. The author proposes that a guidance process gap arises where the relationship between the guidance counsellor and the young person is impacted by various barriers to engagement, including intercultural issues. The research highlights the need for specialised intercultural competence training for guidance counsellors and the development of a national model of guidance policy and practice, to address the complex guidance needs of young people of immigrant backgrounds in all schools. Further consideration of the guidance process gap and how this approach could be applied will require additional research, development, implementation, review and evaluation with all stakeholders involved, but most importantly, with the young people of immigrant backgrounds, both currently in schools and former school students. Finally, where guidance is provided in any cross-cultural context in schools, this guidance process gap approach, may provide the guidance counsellor with the model to examine their own guidance service and consider the wider guidance needs of the specific groups of young people in their school (for example with Traveller students or students from disadvantaged areas where family history of education and employment is limited).

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