

# Concerning guidance

## Thoughts on the idea of a curriculum for guidance

As regular readers will know, we welcome contributions from schools and teachers on issues relating to the work of the NCCA. We received the contribution below from Evelyn McLoughlin, a guidance counsellor in a busy Dublin school. Having recently developed a draft curriculum framework for guidance in post-primary education, we are currently exploring ways in which the framework can provide support for schools in planning and implementing their guidance programmes. Evelyn's reflections on the idea of a curriculum for guidance and the kind of impact it might have on the work of the guidance counsellor are both welcome and timely.

“ Besides the obvious tasks attributed to them, guidance counsellors play a unique role in the school community insofar as their contribution crosses all activities that occur within the school. That said, they are considered neither management nor teaching staff, even though their duties permeate both areas. They have a specific knowledge base and are competent in a range of skills deemed relevant to the position but at times their remit can seem ill defined, un-prescriptive and therefore unclear by nature.

Whilst this *carte blanche* can afford guidance counsellors freedom, opportunity and autonomy in terms of deciding what should be covered in the guidance programme in the school, it also poses some problems. A lack of structure can present the inevitable difficulties of a self-directed workspace. Time management, for example, can be a concern and there is the obvious challenge of taking on too much or not enough and achieving a workable balance in this regard.

The personality of the guidance counsellor, and their individual preferences around what they do, can lead to some inconsistency with regard to guidance provision from school to school. For example, if a counsellor's preference is for personal counselling, then he/she may focus the service predominantly towards that particular need. On the other hand, those guidance counsellors who feel less

comfortable with personal counselling may concentrate their service in the area of vocational guidance and avoid personal counselling almost entirely. Thus, there is opportunity for discrepancies to exist from school to school with regard to the nature, appropriateness and even the quality of the service provided and this too can leave us open to question and scrutiny.

The absence of a definite programme for guidance in the school, and the absence of discussion about and planning for guidance among the whole staff can lead to a perception that the guidance service is a kind of random thing and a 'cushy number' for practitioners. This perception emerges from a lack of knowledge about the role of the guidance counsellor and is a perception for which we as practitioners must take some responsibility. Perhaps we have not been adept at promoting our role within the school in order to demystify what we actually do all day and show how we earn our wage packets!

The lack of any concrete measuring stick with which guidance counsellors can assess their performance is another real difficulty. Unlike the subject teacher, guidance counsellors have no solid evidence with which to assess or gauge progress made. Indeed, it could be argued that the success of a guidance intervention is immeasurable by its very nature. In the school environment where most

teachers are driven by obvious targets and deadlines and are motivated by tangible evidence and feedback, the guidance counsellor can be at a loss to know what impact his/her service is having, if any. Working in this type of vacuum has the potential to be somewhat soul destroying in the long term.

The guidance counsellor has a pivotal position in the school community. The role is a multi-faceted one and in addition to their finely honed counselling skills, developed and nurtured in the training of guidance counsellors and integral to their work, it is fair to say that guidance practitioners perform a multiplicity of tasks on a day-to-day basis in the fulfilment of their duties.

There are many arguments that support the need for some structure in guidance provision in tandem with guidance planning at local level. The issues mentioned above might be effectively addressed with the introduction of a curriculum framework that offers us some points of reference upon which to build our programme. It will surely add consistency, transparency and clarity in terms of what is taught as well as a little 'guidance' all round.

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