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**Towards better choices and improved practice: A study of the influences on students'  
course and college choices in Ireland**

**Submitted by**

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**B.Comm., H.Dip.E., Dip.C.G., M.B.A.**

**in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education (EdD)**

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to Trish who has supported me throughout my Doctoral studies in the University of Glasgow. This dissertation would not have been possible without her patience and understanding.

## **Abstract**

The concern at the heart of this research is that students are not always able to make informed decisions in relation to course and college choices in the transition from school as evidenced by both the drop-out rates and numbers of students expressing dissatisfaction with their choice of college or course. This study was motivated by a personal and professional need to understand the influences that are brought to bear on the decision-making process for these young people so that I might be able to help them make more informed decisions as part of my practice as a career guidance counsellor. Central to this study were semi-structured interviews with three groups: five students in the midst of the decision-making process; five students returning from college at Christmas, and five teachers closely involved in advising and helping the students, comprising careers advisors, subject teachers and a year head. During the interviews, aspects of the students' lives, their experiences, their perceptions of education and how each of these impinged on their choices, unfolded through the 'stories' they share. A consideration of historical and policy particularities impacting on the development of education, including the provision of career guidance, advice and information in Ireland sets the scene here for the analysis and discussions of these narratives. The term stories or narratives are not used as they would be in an ethnographic study, where the stories of the participants are used to describe the culture of a group in a detailed and complex manner (Punch 2009). This research project is quite specific and the term stories or narratives are used in relation to the students' experiences of the decision-making process as told by the students themselves. The resulting dissertation thus blends career guidance theory, research and policy in the area and an interpretation of the realities as experienced by the students and from the perspectives of the teachers who have responsibilities for helping the students decide on their next pathway.

A grounded theory methodology is used to interpret data from the interviews and a questionnaire was used to inform the questions asked as part of the interview process. Career guidance, advice and information is often seen as a matching process supporting the criticism frequently levelled at 'trait and factor' approaches that they are an over simplification of a complex process. This study explains the importance of influences such as the family, peers, socio-economic factors, school and geographical location.

The research methodology highlights the different ways in which students experience the decision-making process. A constructivist approach is taken to interpret individual realities for students as they make choices in the transition from school. A social constructivist approach to practice is proposed where career advisors and students actively participate together to make more informed choices.

From an interpretation of the findings from this study, analysis of professional knowledge in relation to career guidance, and reflections on my own practice, implications and recommendations for a different modified provision of career guidance, advice and information are presented.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

**IGC** Institute of Guidance Counsellors

**DES** Department of Education and Skills

**CAO** Central Application Office

**UCAS** University Central Applications Service

**UCD** University College Dublin

**HEA** Higher Education Authority

**EdD** Doctorate in Education

**OECD** Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

**IMF** International Monetary Fund

**EU** European Union

**ESRI** Economic, Social Research Initiative

**GDP** Gross Domestic Product

**IBEC** Irish Business Employers Conference

**TWA** Theory of Work Adjustment

**IQ** Intelligence Quotient

**DOTS Theory** Decision learning, Opportunity awareness, Transitional learning, Self-awareness

**SCCT** Social Cognitive Career Theory

**CLD** Career Learning and Development

**LD** Life Designing

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**Author's Declaration**

**I declare that this dissertation is my own work and has not been published in support of any other degree or qualification.**

**Joseph Gallagher**

## **Chapter 1 Introducing the study**

This dissertation explores how young people engage in the decision- making process in the transition from school. A particular focus is on the choices made in relation to courses and colleges at third level.

The motivation behind this study is threefold: to address my concern that not all students are in a position to make informed choices, to explore how young people engage in the decision-making process and a personal commitment to improving as a career guidance counsellor.

In the recent report ‘From Leaving Certificate to leaving school’ (Smyth et al. 2011) the authors note that a large body of research in Ireland and internationally has focused on the factors which influence young people’s post school decisions with Bourdieu (1986) emphasising differential access to cultural and social resources while Erikson (1996) emphasises the cost-benefit elements of decision-making. Semple (2002) focuses on informal networks of career support (parents, family, neighbours etc.). Research in Ireland has highlighted the complex interaction of school experience, family background and student aspirations in influencing the decisions made regarding courses and colleges (McCoy, S., D. Byrne, P.J. O’Connell, E. Kelly and C. Doherty (2010).

In my role as a career guidance counsellor an inequality is very evident when I meet students and has been an important contributory factor to my concern that students are not always making the most informed choices. A central aspect of this research is to understand and explain how choices are made. By analysing the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of decision making by students, career guidance, advice and information can be customised to alleviate some of the social and cultural deficits a student might have.

This chapter contextualises the study by first explaining the ‘concern’ that not all students are able to make informed choices appropriate to their needs and second, addressing issues of positionality including my educational and professional experiences to date in order to orientate my own personal and professional concerns which frame the research. The context of the provision of career guidance, advice and information is explained to highlight particularities for Ireland.

The aim of the study and the methodology are explained together with how the findings of the study offer an opportunity for an improvement in the provision of career guidance, advice

and information in second level schools in Ireland. I wanted to ascertain the views of students and teachers and so the approach is interpretive where analysis, interpretations and recommendations are based on what the participants, students and teachers, are saying in the narratives told about their experiences of the decision-making process.

### **1.1 The provision of career guidance, advice and information in Ireland**

Secondary education in Ireland is non-selective and comprehensive in character, that is, all second level schools follow the same curriculum in the chosen subjects, students are ostensibly treated equally and the majority are eligible to apply for entry to third level education. Students generally study seven subjects at either higher or ordinary level for the Leaving Certificate examination which is the terminal examination at secondary level. Points are then awarded for the grades achieved in the best six subjects (appendix C).

Selection to third level colleges is almost exclusively through a points based system. The system operates by giving a points score to each grade achieved in the Leaving Certificate examination. This selection criteria based on points was first use in the early seventies as demand for places began to outstrip supply. When the number of applicants for a course in a third level institution in Ireland exceeds the number of places available (this is the norm) on that course the places are allocated on the basis of the Leaving Certificate examination results, that is, applicants' points.

The points system in Ireland is certainly transparent and efficient. A government report, The Commission on the Points System (Ireland 1999) argued that alternatives could be seen as potentially biased, unreliable, inefficient or unfair. In addition, submissions to the report supporting the points system argue, that all students are treated equally using the same criteria. An important aspect of this research is to demonstrate that a selection mechanism which treats all students in precisely the same way fails to take account of the fact that some students have less favourable socio-economic circumstances than others resulting in an increased likelihood of those particular students making less informed choices.

On a practical level there are two areas of concern regarding the points system. First, that teaching and learning can become overly focused with gaining as many points as possible rather than fostering a love of the subject and second that students have a tendency to 'rank' courses according to the number of points required to get into the course (Martin, 1999: The Commission on the Points System). My hope is that through this research my practice as a

careers advisor would give greater priority to particular needs, abilities, interests and personal circumstances of students rather than how many points they need or are likely to get.

With respect to the provision of career guidance in Ireland up to 2012, career guidance counsellors were *ex-quota*, that is, outside the normal teacher allocation. However, since 2012, due to budgetary cutbacks, career guidance is provided within the normal teacher allocation. In 2013, The Institute of Guidance Counsellors in Ireland (IGC) conducted a survey, the results of which indicate that there has been a reduction of 60 per cent in counselling and 40 per cent in one-to-one career guidance in schools. This survey was repeated during the school year 2015-2016 and has reported similar findings (IGC 2014).

The budgetary decision runs contrary to several recent reports which have advocated increased rather than reduced guidance provision. In 2009 a Department of Education Inspectorate (DES 2009) concluded that 15/16 year olds should receive more career guidance and that in fact some schools were not using their full allocation of guidance hours. This view is supported by Smyth and McCoy (2011, p.181) who reported that where students expressed positive perceptions about careers advice in school, they were critical of the limited time available for individual career discussions:

Students were particularly disappointed with the lack of time given to career guidance counselling at school. Many felt that their guidance counsellors were overburdened combining their teaching work and their role as a guidance counsellor.

It is within this unfolding situation that I will address my ‘concern’ that students are not always making the most informed decisions at the point of transition from secondary school to post-school options. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that the Leaving Certificate examination has become high stakes examination. It must therefore by necessity have the trust of everyone involved which inevitably leads to very well defined syllabi that can be examined in a consistent and transparent manner. There is evidence that a high stakes terminal examination may give unfair advantage to students who have the resources and support to take advantage of such a ‘winner takes all’ system (The Commission on the Points’ System 2000).

In my role as a career guidance counsellor I find that my students are not always in a position to make informed decisions about course and college choices. Entry into third level is



generally high in Ireland and among young adults (those aged 25-34), 41.6 per cent of these have attained third level degrees. This figure is the second highest in the European Union (EU) after Cyprus and substantially ahead of the EU average of 29.1 per cent (Central Statistics Office Ireland 2007). The two main systems through which Irish students apply to college are the Universal College Admissions Service (UCAS) and the Central Applications Office (CAO). The UCAS service is for applicants to UK colleges whereas the CAO service is for applications to Republic of Ireland colleges. A recent article *A parent's guide to UCAS applications* in *The Guardian* newspaper, (30 September 2013) notes that according to UCAS there are 37,000 courses in 300 institutions from which to choose. In Ireland, through the CAO system, there are 1375 courses in 45 institutions (CAO 2015). Choosing degree and other third level courses from that number of options is no mean task. In the same article in *The Guardian* (30 September 2013) the authors cite Michael Porter, science admissions tutor at the University of Bradford, who says 'Deciding which course is right for you is one of the most difficult and important choices you will ever have to make'. He concludes that 'this can be a life-changing choice, so it is not a good idea simply to go with what your teacher, friends or family suggest'.

Research shows that attrition is highest in the first two years of university (Yorke and Longden 2008; Mannan 2007), and a study carried out by University College, Dublin (UCD Redmond et al. 2011), found that of all the students in the college who withdrew 69 per cent did so in the first year. This would seem to indicate a lack of preparedness among students making the transition from second level to third level. There is also a consensus in the literature that there is never a single reason for a student deciding to withdraw but rather what Georg (2009) describes as a 'bundle of influences'. That said, however, when looking at the top reasons for students withdrawing from their course, a UCD study in Ireland (Blaney and Mulkeen 2008), and two influential UK studies (Yorke and Longden 2008; Davies and Elias 2003), report that the top reasons were remarkably consistent, that is, the 'wrong choice of programme' (Blaney and Mulkeen 2008), and 'wrong choice of programme and institution' (Davies and Elias 2003). Also in relation to attrition, two reports from the United States are interesting. The first, *The College Report: Preferences and Prospects* (ACT 2013), noted that only one out of three high school students chose a college major that fits their strengths and preferences and second, that 37 per cent of a group of recent college graduates say that they wish they 'had been more careful when selecting a major or chosen a different major' (Charley et al. Rutgers University 2012).

In a recent study by the Higher Education Authority in Ireland, (HEA 2010), a significant finding was that drop-out rates from first year third level courses ranged from 10 per cent to 26 per cent with an average of 15 per cent across all institutions. In addition, an on-line country wide survey of third level students in first year in Ireland carried out by Campus.ie (2014) has found that 44 per cent of students would take a different course of study if they could go through the system again. Also a recent study into student engagement in third level colleges in Ireland reported that 23 per cent of final year students indicated that they would probably or definitely not go to the same college if they could go back through the whole system again and in the same study 45 percent of all students had at least considered dropping out (Higher Education Authority 2015).

In 2011, University College, Dublin (Redmond et al. 2011) commissioned a report into the reasons why students exit from the first year of their degree and the college. It sampled sixty-five students who withdrew from their programme across a range of disciplines. Some of the more salient findings were: most respondents were unsure what courses they wanted to do; the main sources of information about course and college choices were family, friends, open-days and career guidance; the majority of respondents saw themselves as having very little understanding of university life on entry. Additionally, over half of the students in general degrees, Arts and Science, said that the Leaving Certificate and the points required did not reflect the academic standard and workload required.

All sixty-five respondents in the UCD survey (Redmond et al. 2011), said that in ‘hindsight their chosen programme was not the right one for them and considered they had made the best decision in the circumstances’, (p.8). It would seem that this phenomenon is an international one and not specific to the particular context of this research. I found that my initial concern coming from my practice, resonated strongly with the literature; specifically literature pertaining to the decision-making process.

## **1.2 Overall aim of the study**

While much has been written on the influences on students' decision-making, especially family and peers (ESRI, Smyth et al. 2011, Small and McClean 2002, Semple 2002), the overall aim of this study is to contribute to an improvement in practice by analysing the narratives of students and teachers in relation to the decision-making process as students move from second to third level. An enhanced understanding and critical analysis of how decisions are made, particularly the influences on decisions, is a prerequisite to offering prescriptive recommendations for future education policy and professional practice. In this regard, it is hoped that this study will contribute positively to the development of my practice as a career guidance counsellor.

As a practising career guidance counsellor, I have first-hand experience of students making choices. It has been a concern of mine for a long time that not all students are in a position to make the most appropriate choice to their needs. I suggest that it is incumbent upon career guidance counsellors to strive to understand how decisions are made by individual students.

Given the aim of the study, I take an interpretive position using a constructivist approach; employing a grounded theory methodology to gather, analyse and interpret the views of the participants as they experience the process of choosing courses and colleges as part of the transition from school. The methods adopted are a questionnaire to ninety-six students and a series of semi-structured interviews with three sets of five participants: five students in the midst of the decision-making process; five staff members engaged with young people as they make their decisions and five students returning from college at Christmas. In order to meet the overall aim of the study, the engagement in conversation is to listen to the narratives of the lived experiences of decision-making.

## **1.3 The research questions**

The context of careers education within which I work, has had expectations imposed upon it around consumer choice and the marketisation of education; where inequality in educational achievement is justified by neoliberal ideologies of meritocracy and personal responsibilities (Kennedy and Power 2010). Findings from other studies (Smyth and Banks 2012; Higher Education Authority 2010; Smyth, E., Banks, J. and Calvert, E. 2011) also suggested that there are students who do not have the social and economic means to successfully take part in

such a system and that careers guidance, advice and information is influenced by ideological considerations.

While traditional ‘trait and factor’ approaches to careers education, where individuals are matched to careers on a ‘best -fit’ basis, has up to recently served students well. A move towards more constructivist approaches should now be considered (Savickas 1992; 1997). The constructivist view has been adopted in the field of counselling for several years in narrative approaches, where meeting with students on a one to one basis has been found to be the most effective method for addressing the individual needs of students. The literature however indicates it is only comparatively recently that the influence of constructivism has begun to be felt in careers guidance and advice (McMahon and Patton 2000) While a constructivist approach represent progress one of the aims of the research is to discover through the literature and the findings whether the social constructivist approach to practice is possible within my own context.

Early approaches from Parsons in the early 20th century to Holland’s typology in the 1970s were part of the traditional concept of ‘a job for life’ and that individuals’ aptitudes and interests could be matched to the needs of the economy (Rodger 1952; Holland 1973). More recent literature however points to a changing world and the changing requirements of careers advice. Savickas (2008) has questioned the capacity of the ‘trait and factor’ approaches to adequately meet the complex needs of people living in a complex world, while McMahon and Patton (2000) suggest that although traditional approaches have served career guidance well ‘it now finds itself being much maligned and at the same time commonly used’ (p26).

There are several paradigms of practice which have relevance for the ways in which career guidance advice and information might be provided for in Ireland. In particular Life Designing (Savickas et al. 2009), a Career Learning Approach (Bassot 2012) and Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development. There have also been a number of studies in relation to the complexity of the decision-making process (Smyth et al. 2011; University College Dublin 2011), attrition rates in third level institutions (University College Dublin 2011), general levels of dissatisfaction among young people with their choices (Campus.ie 2014), and other studies in relation to how choices are made (Semple, Howieson and Paris 2002). These studies indicate that the choices being made are part of a complex mix of variables, personal and social and that students (and staff) experience the decision-making process in different

ways. Particularly useful in the formation of the research questions was a study of a group of young people in the west of Scotland (Semple et al. 2002). This found that both formal sources of careers support (career guidance in school) and informal networks of careers support (parents, friends and family) were used by young people. The informal networks were the most influential for the majority of students. Studies in Ireland (McCoy et al. 2010 and Smyth and Banks 2011) also conclude that there are many influences, formal and informal, on the final choices that students make. This study seeks to build on these earlier studies by illuminating the complexities of the reality for those involved in the career decision-making process

The research questions emerged from my practice. However I wanted to find out whether they stand up to a review of the literature in the area of careers education. By and large the questions stood the test of the literature with the only modification being an inclusion of ideology as part of the first research question. This modification is explained as part of the policy review in chapter 2 and the links between the research questions and the literature is outlined in chapter 3.

The research questions emerging from a combination of my practice and these earlier studies which guide this thesis are as follows:

1. What paradigms of practice inform career guidance, advice and information delivery in Ireland, and how are these paradigms informed by ideology?
2. How do career guidance, advice and information impact on young people's decision-making in the transition from school?
3. Can a social constructivist approach to career guidance, advice and information offer opportunities for improved practice?
4. How can the findings from this research inform career guidance practice in Ireland?

## **1.4 Methodology**

Given the aim of the study and the research questions, I take an interpretive position using a constructivist approach employing a grounded theory methodology to gather, analyse and interpret the views of the participants as they experience the process of choosing courses and colleges as part of the transition from school. The methods adopted are a questionnaire to ninety-six students and a series of semi-structured interviews with three sets of five participants; five students in the midst of the decision-making process; five staff members

engage with young people as they make their decisions, and five students returning from college at Christmas. In order to meet the overall aim of the study, the engagement in conversation is to listen to the narratives of the lived experiences of decision-making.

My interpretation of the data generated by the research methods is subjective, value-laden and influenced by my own experience as a career guidance counsellor. An interpretivist paradigm recognises the central role of the researcher, their values and assumptions (Guba and Lincoln 1994). I am aware however of the limitations of such a subjective approach and while not fully understanding the realities for the students, I am satisfied that a better understanding of the influences on decisions will contribute to an improvement in practice. I am looking to create the kind of knowledge, based on reality, of how students experience the decision-making process as opposed to knowledge based on received wisdom, the media or the ‘most sensible’ way to do things

### **1.5 Positionality**

Research is a ‘process’ not just a product (England, 1994, p82). If England’s statement is true then an accompanying argument might be made that research is an ongoing process and does not stop when findings are presented. For research to be valuable from the perspective of process over product the value must be beyond a sense of completion (Bourke 2014). I envisage my research

as part of a reflection: on the development of research questions; on data collection; on findings, and on implications for practice as a career guidance counsellor. My reflections on this project have led me to consider the interaction between myself and the participants who were willing to share their time, thoughts, and experiences with me. Within positionality theory ‘it is acknowledged that people have multiple overlapping identities; people thus make meaning from various aspects of their identity’ (Kezar 2002, p96).

In addition Bourke (2014) argues that:

The nature of qualitative research sets the researcher as the data collection instrument and so it is reasonable to expect that the researcher’s beliefs, socio-economic status and educational background are important variables that may affect the research process, p2.

This is relevant for my research as it is my interpretation of the data that guides conclusions and implications for practice. With regard to the specific area of this research I can be seen

as an insider as I share a common bond with the participants as I am involved in the decision-making process in my role as a career guidance counsellor. However, I can be seen as an outsider as I did not research in my own school and with respect to staff, they are or were members of The Institute of Guidance Counsellors in Ireland (IGC) and are not staff members in my own school. Finally, in relation to teacher as researcher a recent study exploring teacher beliefs and classroom practices (Farrell and Ives 2015) indicate that teacher beliefs provide a strong basis for classroom actions. Consequently during this research I acknowledge the need to reflect on beliefs in classroom practices because they exist in a symbiotic relationship in which they both shape each other and they are shaped by each other (Walsh 2006).

The emergence of this project and why I am interested in how course and college decisions are made by young people originated in my personal experience of such decisions. My decision to study science in University College, Dublin was based primarily on advice from teachers as opposed to my own research. The choice of course was not as informed as it might have been and consequently turned out to be the wrong choice. Eventually I chose the course, a Bachelor of Commerce degree for which I had an aptitude and interest but not without losing a year and before much reflection on what degree to pursue.

Consequently, in my practice as a career guidance counsellor I feel an empathy with students grappling with their choices and am keen to ensure that they are in a position to make choices which are as informed as possible. Career guidance is an area I have always been interested in and I took up the position of career guidance counsellor in my school in 2001.

In 2010 I embarked on the EdD programme from the University of Glasgow, this research and dissertation being the culmination of that programme. As well as satisfying a yearning for academic enquiry the EdD programme has given me a chance to critically reflect upon my practice as a career guidance counsellor. This work has been shaped and informed by my learning throughout the EdD programme. Themes in my reading and research emerged through the four taught modules which have influenced, prompted my thoughts and ultimately led to my decisions. Firstly, module one, Critical Reflection in Professional Learning and Development has prompted reflections on my professional practice and what it means to be a professional teacher. A starting point for my own critical reflection was Hargreaves (2000) where he examines the changing position of professional educators in a school setting. Notwithstanding Moon's (1999) opinion that reflection is a difficult notion to

define there are a number of contributions that I have considered when searching for ways to critically reflect on my practice. Dewey (1933) argues that reflection involves not simply a sequence of ideas but rather it is thinking that has a consequence. I have considered theoretical perspectives so that I have a practical methodology for engaging in critical reflection notably Brookfield (1995) while Kemmis and Smyth (2008) have informed my thinking on the notion of praxis<sup>1</sup>, what praxis means and in what ways a deeper understanding of praxis inform and guide practice as a career guidance counsellor, especially the extent to which institutions like schools enable, constrain or disable praxis. Module Two, Education Policy was a crucial learning experience for me as policy with respect to the provision of guidance has been and continues to be extensive, both in Ireland and from organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union (EU). In Module Three Educational Futures re-conceptualising schooling envisaged a preferred future and prompted questions such as the extent to which career guidance, advice and information can contribute to such a preferred future. An important part of such a preferred future would be the involvement and contribution of the students. Finally, in reading around module Four, Ethics and Education, contributions from Bourdieu (1986), Reay (2001), and Sullivan (2001), helped to focus ways in which this research could address inequalities in the provision of career guidance, advice and information. I am mindful of the views of Lester (2004, p.765) who argues that the attraction of an EdD programme is that it is ‘founded on a process of thoughtful action leading to advances in practice rather than a process of research leading to advances in knowledge’.

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<sup>1</sup> Praxis is an action, decision or a way of doing things that is morally committed (Kemmis and Smith 2008). Praxis is what people do, when taking into account all the circumstances and consequences that confront them at a particular moment, they take the broadest view of what is the best thing to do.



## **1.6 Outline of chapters**

Theories of globalisation and neoliberalism permeate discourse of career guidance, advice and information and so, prior to moving to develop a deeper understanding of the individual lives of young people it is necessary to understand the social, political and economic landscape in which careers advice operates. Chapter 2 therefore is a critical analysis of the historical, socio-economic and political environment. An emphasis is put on how a neoliberal view of education contextualises the provision of career guidance, advice and information where I set out for the reader the socio-political and historical context of this study. Reference is made to key texts and educational policy in the Irish context and linkage is made to European texts and policy documents. The reasons for highlighting European policy documents and their influence on Irish policy-making are explained in this chapter. Reference is made to the way in which the review of policy has had an important impact on the formulation of the research questions. The detail of guidance policy texts is not a focus, in preference to a broader analysis of trends, currents of thought and their ideological drivers and the impact of a neoliberal agenda on education in general and careers education is explored. Chapter 3 is a critical evaluation and exploration of academic literature on career guidance, advice and information. Reference is made to literature around the development from ‘trait and factor’ approaches in use throughout much of the twentieth century to literature on a more constructivist approach that has developed in the late twentieth and the early years of the twenty first century (Betz, Fitzgerald and Hill 1989; Savickas 1997). In both chapters 2 and 3, specific reference is made to how policy considerations and review of literature on careers education has influenced and modified the research questions. In chapter 3, I also highlight the findings on studies into how decisions are made and again how these studies have had a direct impact on the formulation of the research questions.

The following chapter, Methodology and Method, explains the theoretical lens used for this study. Essentially this research is interpretive as it is the views of the students and teachers that I wish to understand. Chapter 4 expounds that an interpretive approach is used because I want to understand how the participants experience the decision-making process. I outline the ways in which the methods used, an initial questionnaire but mainly a series of semi-structured interviews are determined by the research questions. The chapter explains how the data was gathered, analysed and interpreted. A grounded theory approach to data analysis ensures that themes and any consequent theoretical perspective on careers education in

Ireland is based on the data emergent from the narratives of the participants. In this chapter the methods used to gather data, a questionnaire to a year group (96) and three sets of semi-structured interviews are explained. Emphasis is made here that while my interpretation of the narratives can be said to be constructivist, any recommendations for a modified approach to career guidance, advice and information is social constructivist<sup>2</sup>.

Chapter 5 is a presentation of the findings of the interviews conducted with staff and students. The findings from the study are presented thematically. How the participants experienced the decision-making process is presented using the themes of multiple influences and whole school supports. The consequences of how decisions are made are then presented using the themes: inconsistencies in support; insecurities felt by the students; and whether the decisions are rational. Direct quotations from the data are used to illustrate how the themes emerged using a version of a constructivist grounded theory.

The overall purpose of Chapter 6 is twofold. Firstly, to discuss the findings from the data in the context of the research questions and the relevant academic literature; Secondly to move on from this discussion to propose a different modified approach to practice based on a social constructivist view of career guidance advice and information. Chapter 7 is a reflexive view of the research. I reflect on my own practice and what conclusions and implications can be drawn from this study. I also reflect on the contribution to professional knowledge in relation to careers education considering issues of generalisability and transferability of the conclusions and implications of the study. Finally, limitations of the study and the scope and direction of possible future studies in the area are addressed.

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<sup>2</sup> Analysis of the narratives is constructivist as I am interpreting what is being said, whereas a modified approach to practice can be said to be a social constructivist approach as the emphasis is on the collaborative nature of learning and the importance of the cultural and social contexts where decisions are made in the transition from school.

## **Chapter 2 A critical review of policy impacting on the provision of career guidance, advice and information in Ireland**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter and the next chapter, a review of academic literature, highlight the ways in which notions of a liberal education advocated in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century have been refashioned by a neoliberal ideology. A liberal education is broadly defined as an education for its own sake and personal enrichment, with the teaching of values (Harrison 1954). An important aspect of a liberal education of particular relevance to careers education is the notion of autonomy where it is legitimate and in each person's interest to acquire the capacity to choose and sustain the most desirable way of life subject to the requirement to respect the rights of others to do the same (Harrison 1954).

This policy review explains how neoliberal thinking has replaced a liberal view of education, a neoliberal view within which policy formulation and implementation in regards to careers education in Ireland has developed. Since the 1960s and especially with Ireland accession to the common market (now the EU) in 1973, a neoliberal agenda has become the dominant discourse in relation to education policy formulation and implementation, including policy relating to careers education. As part of a neoliberal view careers education has had expectations imposed upon it around consumer choice and marketisation of education where inequality in educational achievement is justified by neoliberal ideologies of meritocracy and personal responsibilities (Kennedy and Power 2010). Career guidance has had to operate within ideas of human capital, supplying students for a knowledge economy and the notion of the ideal citizen as a guide for an ideological position and a set of values (Olssen et al. 2004).

The overall impact on careers education is that first, career guidance counsellors feel under pressure to advise students in ways that privilege certain courses and pathways that contribute to a neoliberal view of the economy, business, mathematics, engineering, and computer science (IGC 2006). Second, students often don't feel free to make the choices they want due to pressures, both from themselves and from outside influences. Students report that they feel pressure to choose courses and colleges that are more 'valued' by society and this is especially true in a competitive, points-based system currently in operation in Ireland.

This chapter demonstrates that striving for efficiency in education is part of a neoliberal agenda that still permeates policy formation at the start of the twenty-first century. The argument that I advance as part of a critical review of policy impacting on careers education is centre right ideologies champion a meritocratic, winner-takes-all system which underpins the decision-making process in Ireland. An important purpose of this policy review is to locate this research within a changing paradigm for career guidance within a neoliberal view of education to a different focus where individual needs and realities for the students, is the focus. This chapter contextualises the study from a historical perspective and the ways in which educational policy has been refashioned by a neoliberal ideology and finally a critical review of the impact of policy, both in Ireland and internationally, on the provision of career guidance and information.

## **2.2 A contextualisation of career guidance provision in Ireland**

In order to contextualise the provision of career guidance in Ireland I first outline a historical perspective that impacts on education policy and secondly outline what neoliberalism means for education. Finally Chapter 2 outlines how the prevailing neoliberal approach is still evident in policy relating to career guidance provision in Ireland today.

### **2.2.1 Historical context**

Irish history has many dimensions but the narrative that stands out is the one of conquest and colonisation. Like many countries, Ireland has experienced a tumultuous history of invasion, assimilation and rebellion (O Morain, McAuliffe, Conroy, Johnson and Michel 2012). In the Irish narrative independence was lost with the arrival of the Normans in 1169 and regained, following the 1916 Easter Rising and the 1922 War of Independence. For the next fifty years the Republic of Ireland was largely an isolated, Catholic and agricultural democracy characterised by poverty and emigration (Curtis 2002). The make-up of the country began to change in the 1960s when a programme of free trade and industrialisation triggered the beginnings of a modern industrial society.

Education in Ireland in the post-reformation era was very much affected by the political and religious policies of the neighbouring colonial power as schools were seen as an *instrumenta regni* to foster English language and culture (Coolahan 1981). With the relaxation of the Penal Laws in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Catholic religious orders stepped in to fill a gap by founding secondary schools without public endowment. The position of the Catholic Church

as the main provider of education was further cemented after independence when the new government (post 1922) declared that they had no ideological objection to funding privately run denominational secondary schools. Furthermore the Constitution of Ireland, 1937 was formally to recognise the role of the state as subsidiary to ‘private and corporate initiative’ (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937). Education was dominated by conservatism as the dominant ideology in Ireland right up to the 1960s where a consistent theme revolved around society as a hierarchical and moral community held together by shared beliefs. Thus by 1960 the pupils in secondary schools represented only about sixteen percent of those enrolled in primary schools (Coolahan 1981). Up until the 1960s there was little concern about structural or administrative reform in education. The social aspects of education were neglected and education, as distinct from the re-establishment of Irish language and culture, was not a prioritised feature of government policy. This ‘understandable but regrettable’ (Coolahan 1981, p.74) situation meant that the career guidance, advice and information that did exist was seen as part of the process of ensuring the middle classes were able to use education as a stepping stone into the professions.

In the early 1960s a major policy decision was made by the Irish government to undertake the building of post-primary schools of a new type termed ‘comprehensive schools’. They were to be co-educational schools open to all classes and levels of abilities. Important for this context is that these schools would benefit from a ‘psychological guidance service’, the first serious attempt at career guidance provision. A major policy change occurred in 1966 when the Minister of Education, Donagh O Malley, announced that ‘free post-primary education’ would be available nationwide from the academic year 1967/1968 onwards (speech by Donagh O Malley, Minister of Education 10/9/1966) . This meant an increase in the numbers attending secondary schools and this period saw the introduction of guidance teachers in Irish post-primary schools to help students through counselling and vocational guidance. By 1979 about fifty percent of post-primary schools had full-time guidance provision (Coolahan 1981).

In the early years the Department of Education saw guidance in its broadest terms and did not envisage a specialist in the areas of guidance and counselling, rather a whole school approach to guidance was proposed, very much along the lines of today’s thinking. In fact it is interesting to compare the view in the 1960s with the guidelines for second level schools on the implications of section 9(c) of the Education Act 1998, relating to students’ access to ‘appropriate guidance’ (Cassells 2016). Significantly in the 1960s the Department of

Education also felt that there should be a close link with the Department of Labour who were charged with the provision of careers literature for schools and the Department of Labour thus had a considerable role to play in the information that schools received on careers and courses. In relation to the provision of career guidance in Ireland the thinking has historically emphasised the links between education and employment (Institute of Guidance Counsellors 2012). An important breakthrough for guidance and counselling came in 1972 when the Department of Education made provision for vocational, educational and personal guidance in all level schools. This was the start of the *ex-quota* system where schools could employ a guidance counsellor outside of their normal teacher allocation (Institute of Guidance Counsellors 2012).

### **2.2.2 Neoliberalism and career guidance, advice and information**

Education policy formation and implementation only came into its own in Ireland for the historical reasons outlined above in the 1960s and 1970s and was driven by the growth of welfare-liberalism and the notion of social democracy. In more recent times education policy in Ireland has been refashioned by the rise of neoliberal thinking. The second part of the contextualisation of the provision of career guidance, advice and information in Ireland sets out the impact of a neoliberal hegemony evident in the Irish education system, a system which career guidance, advice and information has very definite expectations imposed upon it. A definition of neoliberalism that I have found useful is:

Neoliberalism is a philosophy in which the existence and operation of a market are valued in themselves, separately from any previous relationship with the production of goods and services...and where the operation of a market or market-like structure is seen as an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human actions and substituting for all previous ethical beliefs (Treanor 2005)

From the 1960s onwards Ireland was a pioneer of neoliberalism in the sense that the indigenous capitalist class was historically weak and was forced to find ways of attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to provide employment. The FDI companies that located in Ireland benefitted enormously in terms of grants, light-touch regulation and one of the lowest corporation tax rates in Western Europe (formerly ten percent and now twelve and a half percent). Ireland thereafter became an effective tax haven with the key selling point of an absolutely minimum level of regulation and oversight (McCabe 2010, p.11). Under neoliberalism individuals are required to make educational choices (for example where they

send their children to school) in competitive education markets ‘as the basis of evaluations of their costs and benefits and of their perceived probabilities of more or less successful outcomes’ (Breen and Goldthorp 1997, p.275 cited in Kivirauma, Rinne and Seppänen 2003). In addition O’ Sullivan (2005, p.112) holds that a ‘mercantile paradigm’ evident in the Irish education system asserts that ‘what education is for is a matter for consumers of the system, such as pupils, parents, civic leaders and business interests to decide’. This review vindicates Tormey (2007 pp183-186), in claiming that Ireland did not need to participate in neoliberal education reforms such as those that took place in the UK for instance, because we already had a system that both permitted and was based on neoliberal notions of ‘consumer choice’.

It is often suggested that Ireland has successfully resisted a neoliberal educational reforms of other countries characterised by the marketisation of education yet there is much evidence on the ground that Ireland has always had a system characterised by a fully functioning education ‘market’. For instance, Dunne (2002 p.86) describes the Irish education system as being underpinned by business values whereby students and their parents are defined as consumers.

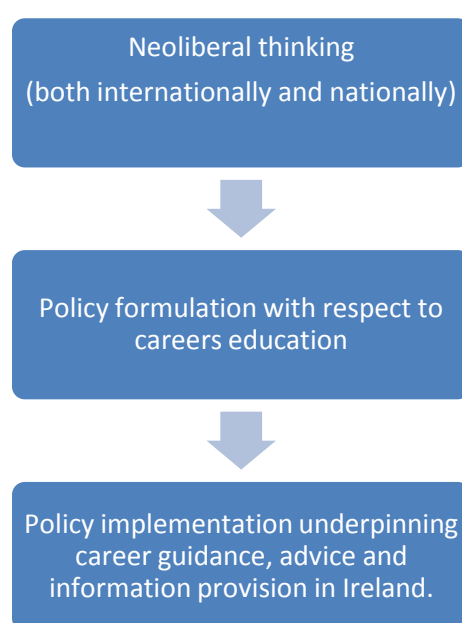
The provision of career guidance, advice and information is a constituent part of the underlying neoliberal philosophy where inequality in educational achievement is ‘justified’ by the ideology of meritocracy and personal responsibility (Kennedy and Power 2010). Such issues have been identified in research into how choices are made in the transition from school (Smyth, ESRI 2011) which has documented that in Ireland students from upper socio-economic groups in comparison from those from lower groups, do disproportionately well in their choices in the transition from school.

ESRI (McCoy et al. 2014; Smyth et al. 2011) studies have found that the provision of career guidance, advice and information in Ireland facilitates a system that ensures that those who enter the education system from advantaged positions are perfectly positioned to increase their advantage at every level including the decision-making process. This has profound implications for career guidance provision as a mechanism for achieving social inclusion (Power et al. 2013). Career guidance practice is still influenced today by neoliberal notions of human capital, supplying students for a knowledge economy and the notion of the ideal citizen as a guide for an ideological position and set of values. Olsen et al. (2004 pp71-72), talk about the ascendancy of a market liberal discourse in the 1980s and 1990s as the policy discourses of education are replaced by discourses of business and economics, and which

have always underpinned discussions about educational policy in Ireland (Coolahan 1981). Inevitably this shift has implications for careers education and is reflected in the substantive and procedural policy preferences favoured by organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation (OECD) that have had and still do have a major influence on policy making in Ireland.

### **2.3 Neoliberalism, the OECD and career guidance provision**

A critical review of developments in professional knowledge which challenge the traditional ways of providing career guidance, advice and information is now outlined. A changing landscape that includes lifelong learning, changing structures in the workplace, transferrable skills, inclusion and equality of access for all is challenging careers education to respond. In this section a critical view of where these ideas emanate from is taken. Neoliberal thinking impacts on the process of policy formulation with respect to careers education which then has consequences for practice, as shown in Figure 2.1.



**Figure 2.1 The process of policy initiation, formulation and implementation in relation to careers education in Ireland (adapted from Bowe, Ball and Gold 1992)**

For historical reasons, European bodies such as the OECD and the European Council have perhaps a greater influence on educational policy in Ireland than in other countries and it is the tenet of my analysis that the OECD and the Council of the European Union have strong



neoliberal influences in their policy formulation. In *Career Guidance and Public Policy – Bridging the Gap* (OECD 2004) the introduction to the policy text says that the OECD shall promote ‘the highest sustainable economic growth’, and among the various expectations of a career guidance service is that it should ‘improve the efficiency of education systems and the labour market’ (OECD 2004) and also that a key goal of any career guidance service is to improve the match between labour market supply and demand. The OECD has criticised career guidance in Ireland that it is too divorced from the labour market and too focused on short-term decision making. Finally, a key recommendation from this policy text is that the OECD advocates ‘co-ordination between the departments of employment and education so that career guidance can assess the future needs of employment’ (OECD 2004). There are a number of revealing conclusions from the above policy; firstly that the expectation of a career guidance service is that it should improve the ‘efficiency’ of education systems and the labour market. Secondly, a key goal of any career guidance service is to improve the labour market supply and demand and also that career guidance should have a role in assessing the future needs of employment.

In May 2004 the general secretariat of the Council of the European Union produced a draft resolution on *Strengthening Policies, Systems and Practices in the field of Guidance throughout life in Europe*. In this policy document the Council note that ‘the transition to a knowledge-based economy and society creates new challenges for policy-makers in the area of human resource development and guidance’ (Council of Europe 2004). They further note that the emergence of a knowledge-based economy requires an ‘intensive focus on guidance policy’ and the council also reaffirmed, as a priority, the ‘importance of refocusing guidance provision in order to develop lifelong learning and management skills’ (Council of Europe 2004). It would seem reasonable to suggest that both the OECD and the Council of Europe have a strong thread of neoliberal thinking running through their policy documents in envisaging guidance being a major player in the process of satisfying the supply side needs of a knowledge economy.

One of the consequences of neoliberalism in education policy has been the conceptual recasting of education in terms of capital, including human capital. Human capital was developed by members of the Chicago school, especially in the 1960s. Broadly speaking, human capital can be viewed like any other form of capital and consequently education and training are the most important investments in human capital. In the last fifty years or so human capital theory has become an important aspect of education policy in Ireland

(Coolahan 1981). This can be seen as part of the rise of individualism, a commitment to the notion of individuality, rationality and self-interest that are at the core of neoliberal economic thinking. Human capital theory and its consequences pose many challenges for career guidance counsellors, as practice is more and more becoming a process of addressing the needs of the 'clients' who have very definite expectations of what the career guidance service should provide them with.

Lifelong learning like globalisation has become a hegemonic discourse (Fairclough 2006), where the prevailing discourse of lifelong learning has been intrinsically linked to the dominant discourse of globalisation. Indeed Walker (2009) argues that the assumptions underpinning the purposes of lifelong learning are inextricably coupled with strong globalisation. Walker explains that lifelong learning started perhaps in the 1970s with the Faure report, (1972), where 'lifelong education' was put forward as a way to cope with the modernisation process, economic uncertainty and technological change and advancements. This notion was reinforced in documents such as 'Rethinking Human Capital' (OECD 2002) where a lifelong learner in the context of global neoliberal capitalism is one who can improve his/her firm's and country's productivity and one who has 'better decision making skills, and awareness of opportunities'. The OECD has been important in influencing national policy trends in many countries including Ireland ever since the late 1980s. The OECD has achieved hegemony (Rubenson 2008).

Walker (2009) argues that underlying the OECD's promotion of inclusion in, for and through lifelong learning is the notion of an 'active citizen' who establishes their worth through learning and ultimately competence. Walker also states that while the OECD does not strictly set policy, it helps steer policy in its member countries of which Ireland is one, 'having assumed the role of semi-autonomist and even dispassionate educational think-tank' (Walker 2009, p.335). From the point of view of the OECD 'a worthy citizen is constructed as having a moral imperative to engage in learning to help their country grow in terms of GDP to prevent the need for a broad social welfare system and to avert widespread social exclusion' (OECD 2004, p.336). Ideas such as lifelong learning and the active citizen challenge career guidance provision as an important constituent part of advising and supporting students so that they are equipped with transferrable skills better suited to a globalised changing world.

Matheson and Matheson (1996, p219) stated that 'mobility and short term contracts have become the order of the day with the concomitant need to constantly update knowledge and

skills' and that 'job security has become an effective myth for most of those who can actually get work'. Rather than uncritically accepting such notions of neoliberalism, Matheson and Matheson (1996, p220) pose a number of pertinent questions for those who decide to assume that lifelong learning and preparing students for lifelong learning is an unquestioned good thing. They make the point that 'it is self-evident that each of us continues to learn throughout the length of our lives' and that lifelong learning at the very least has to concern itself with purposeful learning. They believe that while lifelong learning has all the trappings of what might be termed a 'good idea' and it is 'bedecked with hurrah words and emotive terms' (Matheson and Matheson 1996, p.230), unfortunately, like many 'good ideas' before it, it has not been properly thought through. Matheson and Matheson ask questions such as: Should the individual choose to be educated or must education be foisted on him/her by whatever means? Is lifelong education just an attitude of mind, both on an individual and societal basis? If lifelong learning and the 'learning society' become reality, then who is to decide who does the learning?

Drawing on the ideas of Bourdieu (1986), Walker (2009) helps to problematise the OECD's idea of inclusive liberal ideology and discourse with regards to how lifelong learning and citizenship are interwoven and conceptualised. In my own context there are students who simply do not have the social and cultural capital to actively engage in such an inclusive liberal society, a society where the individual is free to choose and free to advance their career and lifestyle. The question remains however, as to what separates the good citizen from the excluded non-participant. It is incumbent on careers education practitioners to ascertain how this plays out in respect of the decision-making process and to establish what can career guidance, advice and information do together with what the student can do to improve the situation. We are told that the missing key ingredients in 'non-participants' are 'motivation and personal characteristics' (OECD 2002, p.122) and Walker (2009, p119) refers to a number of attributes that the OECD believes 'non-participants' ostensibly lack, such as 'the capacity to develop, manage and deploy one's own competencies'. Finally, the OECD believes that non-participating individuals are 'not interested' (OECD 2002, p.28) and that 'they are not aware of their need' (OECD 2005, p.30). An important aspect of this research is to explore whether the OECD's view is a true and fair representation of a number of students engaged in the decision-making process.

Drawing upon Field (2008) I have attempted to explain that while much of the arguments made by the OECD may be true with regard to lifelong learning and education in general,

there are particular social, cultural and economic reasons for these attitudes. Field (2008, p1) explains that social capital is, at heart, a most straight forward concept:

Its central thesis can be summed up in two words: relationships matter. By making connections with one another and keeping them going over time people are able to work together to achieve things they either could not achieve by themselves, or could only achieve with great difficulty.

Although the term social capital was used earlier its contemporary significance derives from the 1980s and 1990s. Field (2008) concerns himself with the debate that has emerged in the latter years of the twentieth century around the views of three seminal figures: Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam. Field (2008) explains that in brief, Bourdieu shares with Marxism a concern with questions of unequal access to resources and the maintenance of privilege and power; Coleman focuses on the idea of individuals acting rationally in pursuit of their own interests, and Putnam has concentrated and developed the idea of association and community as a basis of social interaction.

Finally, I have used the arguments put forward by Coffield (1999), who advances reasons to reject the powerful consensus which has been developed over the last thirty years to the effect that 'lifelong learning is a wonder drug or magic bullet which on its own will solve a wide range of educational, social and political ills' (p.479). Coffield (1999) also argues that the consensus of lifelong learning has been based on a few central tenets: a nation's competitiveness depends upon the skills of its people; economic forces flowing from globalisation and advances in technology are inevitable; education needs to be modernised and become more responsive to the needs of employers; the responsibility is passed to individuals to ensure continued employability and the model for schools should be based in the world of business.

Coffield (1999) levels a range of criticisms against the consensus of lifelong learning as a simplified version of Human Capital Theory after Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964). The Human Capital Theory consensus has enjoyed the support of policy makers such as the OECD, government, business, economists and educationalists in Ireland since the 1960s and is still the main driver of education policy today. Education in Ireland including careers education has been re-fashioned by the continued rise of a neoliberal economic orthodoxy with an emphasis on economic growth, efficiency and the benefits of the free market system. Influential organisations such as the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) and

individual political leaders regularly make comments that clearly indicate how they see the role of education. For example, ‘the core skills of investigation and problem-solving are important skills required by industry and it is important that they are developed at second level’ (Tony Donoghue, IBEC Head of Education Policy, January 2012). Also, ‘a dynamic liberal economy like ours demands flexibility and inequality in some respects to function’, and it is such inequality ‘which provides incentives’ (Michael McDowell, leader of Progressive Democratic Party 2004). McDowell (2004) further explained that inequality was not necessarily a bad thing in so far as it encouraged people to do better themselves by comparing themselves with others.

A critical approach to the apparent accepted consensus will essentially form the basis of a different way of approaching the provision of career guidance advice and information. The next chapter in this dissertation explores the development of a social constructivist approach to my practice as a career guidance counsellor. I have found Coffield’s (1999) range of criticisms of lifelong learning as an element of Human Capital Theory a useful lens through which to evaluate the role of career guidance in the process of preparing students for third level education. A situation where certain careers are privileged over others, creating credential inflation where third level education is taken as a given, means that ‘a discourse of social justice and social cohesion’ (Coffield 1999, p485) has been side-lined.

## **2.4 A review of policy of particular relevance to career guidance**

The seminal piece of legislation that informs the provision of career guidance education in Ireland is the Education Act 1998. The section of the act most relevant to career guidance is section 9 (c) that states that schools shall use its available resources to ‘ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career decisions’ (Education Act 1998 sect.9 (c)). It is important to be aware that in the face of budgetary cutbacks in the guidance provision to schools, attempts at incorporating new approaches to career guidance and advice while fulfilling section (c) have been vernacularized or re-contextualised (Ball 1998). The temptation, understandably, is to stay with or revert to the ‘tried and trusted’ methods when one is under pressure in terms of time and resources. A modified approach to practice incorporating social constructivist principles is therefore a challenge for career guidance professionals.

In Ireland the Department of Education and Science (DES) and the National Council for Guidance in Education (NCGE) have both issued policy guidelines as to what ‘appropriate guidance’ (Education Act 1998, 9(c)) actually means in practice. It is notable that many of the imperatives and emphases of the OECD and the Council of Europe policy documents are evident in the ‘guidelines’. For instance, the DES guidelines propose that guidance provision should be ‘to enable each pupil to gain maximum benefit from the education system’ (DES Guidelines 2005). It also states that a major function of career guidance should be ‘to increase both the individual and social returns to education’ (DES Guidelines 2005). The use of the language of economics and business is clear and deliberate. Along similar lines the NCGE has proposed that career guidance should have as a priority the process of preparing students for ‘the world of work’ (2005). It would seem that what Hargreaves refers to as ‘the marketization of education’ (Hargreaves 2000, p.168) is now well established in respect of guidance provision in Ireland. For practicing career guidance professionals it is useful to have a broad perspective on the origins of policy that affects practice, that is considering the question ‘how is education policy made’ (Trowler 2003, p.96). In other words, what agendas and priorities are being promoted in what Stephen Ball refers to as ‘the heat and noise of reform’ (Ball 1998, p.125)?

Olssen et al. (2004, p.3) talk about elucidating an approach to the critical reading of education policy, that is a way of ‘understanding, conceptualising and analysing education policy’. In other words, what the policy is about, why it is important for practicing teachers and what it means in terms of practice. Policy analysis in Ireland needs to be seen within the context of education in Ireland and career guidance in particular being refashioned by the rise of neoliberal economic orthodoxy, neoliberalisation being a political ideology originating in the 1960s that blends liberal political views with an emphasis on economic growth. Gordon (2011) refers to neoliberalism as being committed to institutionalising the game of enterprise as a generalised principle for the organisation of society as a whole.

Contemporary education reform, including the trends of marketization and commercialisation, but also a new emphasis on the involvement of a wider range of stakeholders, students, parents, economy and society, has resulted in a period of significant change for career guidance in Ireland. Whitty (2006) argues that we need to reflect on the appropriateness of existing notions of teacher professionalism to the context in which teachers work. As a result of the rise in a neoliberal economic orthodoxy, central prescription and performativity demands have become global trends, especially from organisations such

as the OECD over the past thirty years. This trend in education became coupled with an intellectual critique of public sector management on the part of neoliberals and public choice theorists. This has resulted in new public management techniques and a call for public sector providers to be subjected to greater accountability, through marketization and surveillance by the state. This economic orthodoxy of the market has been generalised through a range of target and performance indicators and associated league tables. Although justifiable as a means of providing information to 'client' stakeholders, students, parents and society in general, they also enable government to scrutinise and direct schools and teachers (Whitty 2002). Many of these target and performance providers influence the priorities of 'clients'- students and parents. These developments have obvious implications for teachers and teacher professionalism. Certainly there seems to have been a growing acceptance for the state to take a much more assertive role in specifying what teachers are expected to achieve, rather than leaving it to the professional judgement of teachers.

A great deal of recent policy discourse on education has blamed the teaching profession for poor education standards and at the same time there are on-going attempts to make teachers more responsive to the demands of an ever-increasing number of stakeholders (Whitty 2002). Whitty also argues that one of the greatest challenges for the teaching profession in the twenty-first century is to take possession of the teaching profession and if there is to be a process of re-professionalisation, then teachers themselves should be fully committed and instrumental in any changes. Hargreaves (2000, p151) talks about a process of de-professionalisation and that teachers should strive to 'successfully defend themselves against de-professionalisation'. This will require not only that teachers counter the discourses of derision that have helped create and sustain a loss of public faith in, and regard for teachers in their work, but teachers must value and defend the profession of teaching.

With the rise of a neoliberal economic orthodoxy in the 1980s and 1990s, the teaching profession came to be regarded as 'ill-adapted to be either agents of the state or entrepreneurial service providers in a marketised civil society' (Whitty 2002, p66). For teachers this has involved a much clearer specification of what they are expected to achieve, rather than leaving to professional judgement and experience. Adams and Tulasiewicz (1995) have argued that this is part of a process of turning teachers into technicians, rather than 'reflective professionals' while Sullivan (2001) has referred to the development of a low-trust hierarchical system rather than a high-trust collegial one.

In relation to the modern professional working in education there are two competing ideas - accountability and autonomy. In the context of career guidance in Ireland, within a changing socio-political, economic and cultural context, the trend of accountability is one of the most pertinacious developments in recent years (Webb, 2002). The 'Whole School Evaluation' process in Irish schools, of which career guidance is a key component, is one element of this drive to introduce, on the grounds of transparency, a 'ticking the box' system of evaluation and monitoring. Ball (1990) has consistently argued that teachers are seen as obstacles to the marketization of education. One of the greatest challenges facing the teaching profession at the moment is to ensure that teachers have an input into this seemingly unstoppable development in the interest of the many stakeholders in education, namely students, teachers, parents and society in general. A process that Hargreaves (2000) argues is one which autonomy, in the form of judgement in the classroom, is being replaced by targets, standards, monitoring and accountability.

The OECD, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), who are all deeply involved in the Irish Economy, have stressed the significance of education and training for up-skilling and increasing competencies of workers. In addition, the need for change in education 'is now everywhere cast largely in economic terms, and particularly in relation of a workforce and competition with other countries' (Levin 2001, p.7). The challenge for career guidance is to accept the inevitability of these changes and to ensure that continuous professional development addresses both the needs of society and the professionalism of career guidance counsellors.

## **2.5. Policy and the Research Questions**

As I have mentioned in the introduction the research questions came initially from my practice. Having worked through academic and policy literature the only change was to amend research question one to include ideology. This policy review explains how neoliberal thinking has replaced a liberal view of education. A neoliberal view within which policy formulation and implementation in regard to career education has developed, where since the 1960s, a neoliberal agenda has become the dominant discourse in relation to education policy including careers education.

With respect to the research questions the context of careers education within which I work has had expectations imposed upon it around consumer choice and marketisation of education



where inequality in educational achievement is justified by neoliberal ideologies of meritocracy and personal responsibilities (Kennedy and Power 2010).

As part of the initial concern that is the driving force of this research it is also my belief that there are students who simply do not have the social and financial means to actively engage and take advantage of a system rooted in such a neoliberal view of education. A critical review of policy with respect to careers education indicated an ideology and in particular a neoliberal ideology has had an important influence on the way career guidance, advice and information education is delivered in Ireland. Therefore, the first research question - *what paradigms of practice informs career guidance advice and delivery in Ireland?* has been modified to include *how are these paradigms of practice informed by ideology?*

Studies by the ESRI in Ireland (Smyth et al. 2011, McCoy et al. 2014) have found that the provision of career guidance facilitates a system which ensures that those who enter the education system from advantaged positions are perfectly positioned to increase their advantage at every level including the decision-making process. The addition of a second part to research question one relating to ideology insures and opportunity to consider how ideology informs the provision of careers guidance in Ireland.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

The overall purpose of a focus on historical and current policy in relation to education in general and the provision of career guidance, advice and information is to contextualise how such advice and information is provided in the early years of twenty-first century Ireland. This chapter has detailed how educational policy, nationally and internationally, has been driven by a neoliberal economic orthodoxy and the needs of business and a 'knowledge economy', neoliberal notions of life-long learning and the 'active citizen' as central elements of education policy in Ireland. Striving for efficiency in education is part of a neoliberal approach promoted by the OECD, where government policy in relation to education in Ireland is a willing partner. An important conclusion for careers education drawn from the analysis of the way educational policy is driven by a neoliberal agenda is that a competitive, winner-takes-all system is inevitable and that not all students for various social, economic and cultural reasons can be successful in such a system. This chapter is a lead into a review of professional knowledge in the area of careers education, how career guidance, advice and information is currently provided for and theory around a different modified approach to

practice that takes into account how individual students experience different realities when making post school choices.

## **Chapter 3 A critical review of theory in relation to career guidance, advice and information**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The intention of this chapter of the dissertation is to explain and evaluate the literature on career guidance advice and information. Academics in the field of careers education have been developing theories and intervention strategies for over a hundred years. Rather than a descriptive history of the literature, the approach here is to highlight how the literature on careers education was part of a modernist view of careers education where the economic environment was stable and where education was similar to buying any product, a one off event rather than a continuous process (Bauman 2003). A critical evaluation of ‘trait and factor’ approaches necessarily needs to address reasons why they have been, and still are an enduring aspect of career guidance advice and information provision in Ireland. The argument made here is that ‘trait and factor’ approaches have survived partly because of their practical use, but mainly because ‘trait and factor’ approaches are suitable for a neoliberal view of education in much the same way as policy formulation and implementation is predicated on a neoliberal view.

Beginning with Parsons’ ‘trait and factor’ approach (1909) career guidance has evolved to become a mature discipline with a strong theoretical and empirical base in the twenty first century with the potential to become a more ‘global’ discipline. In an age of economic globalisation all students are affected by a similar array of concerns in relation to subject and course choices in their transition from secondary schooling. This chapter critically reviews the literature in relation to careers education from ‘trait and factor’, ‘best-fit’ approaches to developmental theories of careers education which move towards a more constructivist approach. In this respect this literature review is not exhaustive but highlights theoretical perspectives that have informed the provision of ‘appropriate guidance’ (Education Act 1998, 9(c)) in schools within Ireland.

To remain relevant and useful in the twenty first century the career guidance profession is again reinventing its theories and techniques, this time to concentrate on self-construction within an information society (Savickas 2008). A critical review of literature on career guidance, advice and information explores how perspectives were always a response to and embedded in the prevailing view of education in particular and political economy in general at particular times in history. In the preceding chapter I have proposed that this ‘prevailing

view' is part of a neoliberal discourse evident in Ireland in the latter years of the twentieth century and still relevant in the early years of the twenty-first. A proposed modified approach to practice needs to move away from an approach predicated on a neoliberal view of the purpose of careers advice to a more constructivist view where the needs of the individual are privileged over the needs of the economy.

This chapter has the following structure. First, a review of the earliest literature on career guidance interventions, based on a modernist view of education, is used to explain the reasons why this approach to careers guidance advice and education is still used by career guidance counsellors today. The second part of the review explores literature relating to a more individual approach to career guidance and concentrates on how individuals make choices as part of a post-modern view of education. Literature relating to constructivist models for career guidance, for instance Life Designing approaches (Savickas, M., Laura, N., Rossier, J., Dauwalder, J. P., Duarte, M. E., Guichard, J., Soresi, S., Van Esbroeck, R. and Van Vianen, A., 2009) is then analysed, and finally, social constructivist approaches are introduced, specifically a Career Learning Development model (Bassot 2012) and Vygotsky's idea of the zone of proximal development (1978). Section 3.7 is an explanation of how a critical review of the literature on careers education has influenced the formulation of the research questions for this study. Section 3.8 describes the process, whereby I came to decide on a social constructivist approach as a lens for the research, including approaches I considered but decided not to use.

### **3.2 First approaches to career guidance**

In the early years of the twentieth century theory in relation to career guidance interventions was very much embedded in the modernist tradition. Parsons (1909) is regarded as the founder of the vocational guidance movement. Parsons developed the talent-matching approach, which was later developed into the 'trait and factor' approach (Betz et al. 1989). At the centre of Parsons' theory is the concept of matching and he was strongly influenced by psychometric devices for finding the 'right' job for a particular person. In the early years of the twentieth century human abilities were seen as largely fixed and immutable. The belief was that the priority must be the individual's need to find a job and that career guidance was the process of 'matching' the student's abilities with the skills needed to do the job

successfully. This process was predicated, within a modernist view of the economy, on a number of assumptions: first, supposedly accurate measuring of supposedly static abilities such as mathematical or linguistic measurements or enterprising. Second, a narrow type of job analysis which sought to isolate the skills required for the job and a logical imposition of the results of one onto the other. The idea of a 'good-fit' was very much to the fore and this notion was a reasonable response to the prevailing view of the economy for much of the twentieth century, when the jobs market was relatively stable. However as we shall see later in this chapter, a changing view of society and the economy have led to a different set of expectations for careers advice. The idea of a 'good-fit' still manifests itself in much careers advice and guidance today though it is not without criticism. Broadly speaking, matching assumes a degree of stability with the economy, however the reality is that an ever changing economy has ever changing needs and both students and career guidance professionals must be prepared to change and adapt to these circumstances (Leung 2008). In terms of the choices process and decision-making process for young people, this was viewed as essentially rational, devoid of emotion and as a one-off event. Basically a 'good-fit' solution was delivered to students by careers advisors as a result of the matching process. Other than doing psychometric tests there was very little input from the students and very little consideration of influences on the choices and the social environment within which the choices were made (McMahon and Patton 2000).

Within the same philosophical tradition, in 1952, Rodger published his 'Seven point plan' which consists of seven attributes: physical characteristics, attainments, general intelligence, specialised aptitudes, interests, dispositions and circumstances. Application of Rodger's plan (1952) to career guidance involves first, an evaluation of a career against these attributes and second assessment of the student to see how 'good a fit' he or she might be against the seven criteria. Similarly Holland (1973) has developed an occupational classification system that categorises personalities and environments into six types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional. Students, as a result of an extensive questionnaire can be assessed as to how well they fit into one or more of the classifications and consequently the type of career with the 'best-fit' for their personality.

There is no doubt that 'best-fit' approaches to career guidance have been enormously influential (Leung 2008). Holland's personality types are intuitively appealing and are easily shared with students (although he says little on how one develops these personalities). These approaches provide career guidance professionals with a clear rationale and framework for

practice. In subsequent developments and refinements of his theory Holland (1985) places more emphasis on the interaction of the young person with their environment, albeit fairly limited. Holland also elaborated his typology throughout the 1990s to include life goals, values, self-beliefs and problem-solving styles. He addressed the developmental nature of personality types over the life-span of the individual and not just a moment in time (Holland 1994). Despite the narrow focus of the overall approach it is likely that ‘matching’ techniques will continue to inform practice. However a subtle but important shift is that these approaches might now be seen as a starting point for guidance interventions rather than an end in themselves.

A more recent approach within this broad family is that of the ‘Theory of Work Adjustment (TWA) (Dawis and Lofquist 1984). The theory of work adjustment is essentially an approach that attempts to match people with their environment in terms of skills and abilities. It is a two way relationship as the needs of the environment are also focused upon. The belief is that career guidance, advice and information should facilitate a process whereby the person looks for work environments and work organisations that would match the needs and requirements of the individual. TWA predicts that a ‘good match’ will ensure tenure and success in a particular career environment. A major attraction of TWA is that a battery of measures has been developed to measure the various variables associated with the theory including satisfaction, needs, values, skills and abilities, (Dawis 2005). Again like other psychometric tests (Rogers 1961, Holland 1994) TWA is easily delivered, administered and explained in a classroom setting.

An evaluation of the matching approaches necessarily needs to mention why they have been enduring for so long. Indeed the significant continuing influence of the approach is acknowledged by Savickas (1997, p.150) who recognises that Parsons’ paradigm, the ‘trait and factor’ approach ‘for guiding occupational choice remains to this day the most widely used approach to career counselling’. Similarly Krumboltz (1994, p.14) agreed when he declared that current career guidance and advice is ‘still governed by the three-part theory outlined by Frank Parsons’. A three part theory finds the attributes of the individual, the needs of certain occupations and then tries to match individuals to careers. From a longitudinal study into effective guidance it seems careers advisors in England are still heavily reliant on this approach (Bimrose, Barnes, Hughes and Orton 2004; Bimrose and Barnes 2006). In Ireland a similar study by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI

2011) has found that aptitude tests and career interest inventories are mainstays of careers advice.

There are reasons why career intervention practice based on psychometric tests in the matching process are still ‘the most widely used approach to career counselling’ (Savickas 1997). Firstly, this approach is intuitively appealing in a classroom setting where budgetary cutbacks have limited the one-to-one careers meeting in favour of classroom based careers advice. Secondly, with the universal use of information technology in the classroom students are now able to complete psychometric tests online which are marked electronically and reports on suitable courses, colleges and careers are produced (IGC 2014). On a more philosophical note psychometric testing fits in very well with a neoliberal view of education where individuals can be matched to certain privileged careers, particularly careers that are given prominence within a neoliberal view of the economy. There is a view that there is ‘a world-wide crisis in education’ (Nussbaum 2010, p1) and that if current trends continue education will end up producing ‘generations of useful machines’ rather than students capable of thinking for themselves. Nussbaum refers to countries all over the world being ‘thirsty for economic gain, nations and their systems of education are heedlessly discarding forms of learning that are crucial to the health of democracy’ (Nussbaum 2010, p1).

The ‘trait and factor’ approaches can be said to be very much of their time, that is a modernist view of political economy in general and education in particular. Modernists generally believed in a stable inherent self that can be objectively known, and since individuals are thought to have a stable essential nature I.Q. tests and other similar objective tests could be used to discover students’ innate intelligence, aptitudes, interests and personalities. As outlined in Chapter 2 this view is still prevalent in a neoliberal take on the purpose of education which includes human capital and the supply side needs of a knowledge economy and by giving students mastery over decision-making teachers can enhance students’ self-esteem and provide them with the necessary tools to make ‘good’ decisions. The ‘trait and factor’ approaches to career guidance, advice and information were a constituent part of a modernist, industrialised economy where jobs were very much allocated and aspired to along traditional and class lines. These approaches did also however address the immediate needs of the students as most did want a job and a job that they were suited to and also there were jobs available. The notion that an individual could change jobs and have a career progression was not really considered and so one’s ‘best-fit’ was seen as something permanent. However, in defence of these approaches individuals are not left to their own devices, a criticism that

might be levelled at constructivist approaches. Parallel developments such as the increasing complexity of the choices process in what Bauman (2003) called ‘fluid times’, a situation where there is either no work or different types of work requiring a broader range of skills and where more and more students are left to construct their own realities to navigate their own way through the decision making process means that a process of co-construction (at best) and self-determination is becoming the norm in career guidance practice.

Two particular aspects of a neoliberal view of education, reproduction of capitalist values and the ‘hidden curriculum’ have been criticised. The main role of education in a capitalist society is the reproduction of an efficient and obedient workforce. This is achieved through schools transmitting the ideology that capitalism is just and reasonable (schools encourage competition amongst pupils) and training future workers to become submissive to authority through, punctuality, attendance, rules, uniforms and accepting ‘doing what you are told’(Althusser 1971). In the previous chapter I have explained the influence of such an agenda on education and consequently career guidance, advice and information in Ireland.

The second particular aspect of a neoliberal approach to education is the notion of a ‘hidden curriculum’ which has had an underlying but important influence on the ways in which careers advice was provided to students. Most notably in the way that certain professional careers are privileged over others like apprenticeships and where schools still legitimise the myth that everyone has an equal chance. A ‘hidden curriculum’ is where in addition to the didactic curriculum students experience an ‘unwritten curriculum’ (Kentli 2009). The ‘hidden curriculum’ is defined as those norms, values and beliefs embedded in and transmitted to students through the underlying rules that structure the routines and social relationships in school and classroom (Giroux 1983). This is the ‘hidden curriculum’ that includes values and intergroup relations that enable students’ socialisation process. Marxists like Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that the ‘hidden curriculum’ is just another instrument or tool to prepare students for the workplace, what they called ‘the long shadow of work’. Bowles and Gintis (1976) conclude that schools cannot be seen as an agency for social mobility but as reproducing the existing class structure, sending a silent but powerful message to students with regard to their intellectual ability, personal traits and the appropriate occupational choice and this takes place through the ‘hidden curriculum’. In relation to career guidance, advice and information Apple (1982) points to the concept of hegemony shaping the school in many respects so that students encounter particular norms and culture and again Apple (2004) later also identifies that the ‘hidden curriculum’ corresponds to the ideological



needs of capital. It is as a response to these consequences of a neoliberal agenda in terms of educational policy affecting careers education that I now turn to an approach to careers education that emphasises the individual needs of the students rather than the needs of the economy.

### **3.3 Individual approaches to career guidance**

In an era where there is a knowledge based economy as opposed to a skills based economy and where new patterns of work are the norm, an approach to careers education that emphasises individual realities is now needed (Watts 1999). While most theorists, including those this review turns to, acknowledge the important contribution of Parsons, Rodger and Holland and the theory of work adjustment to career guidance, the prevailing view is that career guidance is first, more complex than matching individuals with careers at a given point in their lives and second that the 'best-fit' approach was often used as an instrument of the 'hidden curriculum'. This approach had very little to do with understanding the choices process and it assumed that all students, once matched, were in the same position to choose and that a degree of rationality was generally assumed. Earlier Krumboltz (1994, p14) agreed when he acknowledged that current career guidance and advice is 'still governed by the three-part theory outlined by Parsons'.

However the traditional matching approach has come under pressure in the latter years of the twentieth century and moving into the twenty first century as it assumes a degree of stability and the notion of 'a job for life', both of which are becoming less relevant. Kellner (1983) points to the continuing viability of Marxian perspectives today that are bound up with the continuing expansion of capitalism in a global economy and the growing importance of the economy in every domain of life. Marxism has historically presented critical perspectives on capitalism and the ways that economic imperatives shape institutions like schooling. For instance in the research undertaken by Bowles and Gintis (1976) they conclude that there is a close relationship between the interactions in the classroom to those in the workplace. They believe that the education system provides capitalists with a workforce which has features (personality, attitudes and values) that are most useful to them. Bowles and Gintis (1976) also reject the view that capitalist societies are open and meritocratic. They state that class background is still the most important factor influencing levels of attainment in schools and subsequent entry to third level education.

It is within these observations about the provision of career guidance, advice and information as part of schooling that I now turn to theory attempting to understand the process of decision-making by young people in their transition from school, as a prerequisite for exploring literature on a constructivist approach to career guidance advice and information.

### **3.3.1 Developmental Theory**

The developmental approaches have been an influential framework for careers education. The general principles underlying these approaches are that individual development is a continuous process which is largely irreversible and these processes can be divided into discrete stages. Progress through the stages results in increasing ability to make informed choices. The writers most closely associated with this theory are Ginzberg (1951) and Super (1957) with Super's (1980) 'life-career rainbow' being a significant advance in thinking. Developmental theory emphasises the importance of different roles that individuals assume at different stages of their lives, for example the secondary school years in this context being the most relevant. More recent versions of Super's (1990 and 1994) theory (concede the importance of personal realities and the importance of contextual influences.

With regard to practice, the developmental approach is useful to an extent. It is useful to note that vocational decisions including course or college choice are not taken in a once-off manner as might have been the approach in the 'matching' theories. It is also useful to note in the context of this research that career guidance, advice and information is received usually at a particular stage, that is the realistic stage seventeen years of age onwards (Ginzberg 1951) and the exploration stage fourteen to twenty four (Super 1957). However the main contribution of developmental theory is the challenge of ensuring that young people are equipped with transferable skills that can be developed and carried with them.

### **3.3.2 The Social learning**

Social Learning Theory of Career Decision-Making was designed to address the question of: 'Why people enter particular educational programs or occupations and why they may change educational programs or occupations' (Mitchell and Krumboltz 1996, p.237). The key concept of social learning is individual learning and a focus on teaching career decision-making strategies. For career guidance counsellors the emphasis is on a teaching support role, helping students make more informed decisions. The earliest version of the theory (Krumboltz, Mitchell and Jones 1976) identified four categories of factors that influence the

decision-making process: an emphasis on inherited qualities such as race, sex and physical characteristics; an emphasis on environmental conditions; recognition of the importance of individual learning experiences, and particular skills an individual might have. The proposal from Social Learning Theory is that the reality of decision-making for an individual is a complex interaction of these four sets of factors. As a result the young people form views, beliefs and generalisations of the world around them. This view of the world as constructed by young people has a significant impact on how they approach the decision-making process. Mitchell and Krumboltz (1996) suggest that career guidance practitioners should assist individuals to explore new activities to look at things in a different way and to encourage a discerning view of the influences on their decisions.

### **3.3.3 Opportunity and choice**

In response to ‘trait and factor’ theory, ‘matching’ theory and Super’s life stages where decisions were made with and by individuals by looking at their characteristics and the needs of employment, careers literature moved to incorporate environmental and social variables. Roberts (1968) developed an ‘opportunity structure model’ which proposed that apart from a small number of privileged individuals the general population is constrained in their choice of careers or courses by social variables outside of their control, gender, ethnicity and social class.

Selection to third level education in Ireland is through a points based system and as a result there is a significant cohort of students who, while achieving a reasonable level of education are excluded entry to university. Roberts (1968) has suggested the determinants of occupational choice include the home, the environment, school, peer groups and job opportunities. Ultimately the purpose of this research is to find out the extent of the influence of the determinants mentioned above has on the choices made by young people. It has been argued by Daws (1997) for instance, that Roberts’ views are somewhat gloomy and fatalistic. However Roberts’ (1968) ‘opportunity structure model’ was the beginning of career education recognising that even if students were ‘matched’ it was not automatic that they would be able to avail of a full range of choices based on this ‘match’.

### **3.3.4 The Theory of Circumscription and Compromise**

In keeping with the theme that vocation choices and educational choices are a complex mixture of social and individual variables Gottfredson (1996) developed her theory of

circumscription and compromise to explain why individuals' vocational expectations, even when they are very young, vary by gender, race and social class. Gottfredson viewed vocational choice first as a social phenomenon and only second as a psychological phenomenon. Gottfredson (1996) is similar to Super and Ginzberg in that her approach is developmental. She argues however, that vocational aspirations can be viewed as the product of accessibility (choices that are deemed to be realistic) and compatibility ('best-fit' choices). She explains that circumscription is the process by which young people narrow the range of acceptable and realistic alternatives in terms of career aspirations. With respect to the context of this research her stage 3 (ages 9-13) and stage 4 (ages 14 and older) are particularly relevant. Gottfredson suggests that ages 9-13 entail an orientation to social valuation or sensitivity to prestige and status coming from their peers or the society in which they live. Even at this stage, she argues, children eliminate occupations that they envisage as hard to attain. In stage 4 Gottfredson explains that young people begin to clarify interests, values and abilities. 'Acceptable' alternatives are explored within the circumscription that has already taken place. Stage 4 is focused on identifying which of the 'acceptable' alternatives are most preferred and this is also when compromise begins to take place. An important part of this research is to detail these influences impinging on the decision-making process by researching the views of students. In order to help the students make a more informed decision it would be useful to be aware of the finding of Bowles and Gilles (1976) and to have an understanding of the circumscription that has already taken place and the extent of compromise as an element of the decision-making process.

### **3.3.5 Community Interaction and 'DOTS' Theory**

This is a highly influential framework for the provision of career guidance developed in the 1970s (Law and Watts 1977). The theory brings together many elements of the frameworks outlined above. The 'DOTS' model comprises: decision learning; opportunity awareness; transition learning, and self-awareness. It has been and continues to be highly influential in informing the provision of career guidance, advice and information. By opportunity awareness the authors mean help which is given to students to experience and gain some understanding of the world of work and the range of opportunities which exist within it, including demands and rewards. By self-awareness (Law and Watts 1977) refer to the help given to students to develop their own sense of self as unique individuals. Decision learning is about helping students understand the decision-making process, how to make informed decisions and introducing students to the ways in which ultimately the responsibility for

decisions are theirs. Finally, transition learning relates to leaving home, going to college, how college is different from school and how work life is also different from school life. This aspect also requires helping students to acquire and develop communication skills, interpersonal skills and budgeting skills. 'DOTS' theory (Law and Watts 1977) is still highly influential in designing careers education programmes in Ireland and in programmes of whole school guidance such as the Social, Personal and Health Programme in secondary schools in Ireland.

Subsequently Law (1981, p218) developed his Community Interaction Theory which proposes that career decisions are the product of:

A plurality of interpersonal transactions conducted in local settings and on the basis of interaction within and between groups of which the individual is a member- the community

Law (1981, p218) argues that the evidence of how career decisions are made give significance to:

The personal exchanges which occur between individuals and the people with whom they are in community contact-notably family, neighbourhood, peer group, ethnic group and teachers at school

Law talks about a number of sources of community which influence how decisions are made, specifically: expectations from an individual's family; varied messages which individuals receive about their suitability for particular careers; support in relation to the reinforcement of a young person's aspirations and ambitions; modelling, which refers to the process by which people, especially parents, influence by example (quite often favouring their own careers) and finally information from various sources within the community in which the young person lives.

In 1996 Law extended his theory to include additional propositions relating to the important role and influence of innate abilities, ambition and personal feelings in relation to career choice. The findings from this study concur with Law's theory and are a clear demonstration of why 'DOTS' and Community Interaction is still an important framework for the provision of career guidance, advice and information.

The contribution of 'DOTS' and Community Interaction in relation to how choices are made is still influential on the provision of career guidance, advice and information (McMahon and Patton 2000). The continuing influence of these approaches can be accounted for by their practical appeal. The matching, 'best-fit' paradigm inherent in this approach is intuitively appealing as it provides career counsellors with a clear rationale and framework for practice where the career guidance counsellor is positioned as the 'expert' and careers education can take place within a traditional modernist view of education. Also measureable outcomes and the underlying philosophy fit in well with the neoliberal view that the goal of career guidance is to cater for the supply needs of the labour market (McMahon and Patton 2000).

However, critiques of literature on career guidance and the way choices are made are now focusing on social aspects of individual realities of the decision making process. This has led to neglect of context, little emphasis on social considerations and lack of appreciation of labour market changes. For instance we are reminded by Mitchell and Krumboltz (1996) how occupational environments are becoming more fluid where insecurity, flexibility and changing work patterns are the norm. They conclude that 'trying to place an evolving person into the changing work environment is like trying to hit a butterfly with a boomerang' (Mitchell and Krumboltz 1996, p.263).

### **3.4 Careers education as part of post-modern education**

Peters (2009) believes that there is always the temptation to think that the point which we occupy historically is a period of transformation and unprecedented change. Yet he argues that there are some very powerful forces at work re-shaping our society, our normative orientations, our subjectivities and our institutions including our schools. These forces have been encapsulated in handy slogans such as 'post-modernity' and 'globalisation' and are often conceptualised in metaphors such as the 'information society' or the 'knowledge economy'. Educational institutions like other parts of society and economy face the challenge inherent in the new methods of communication and development of information technology which affects a shift from 'knowledge' to 'information' and from teaching to learning and substituting technology based learning systems for the traditional forms of teaching in the classroom. Peters (2009) writes about some of the main trends and pressures facing education and specifically careers education. These include: demand for highly skilled technically competent workforce; changing structures of work, for example, casualisation, feminisation;

changing nature of advanced economies to knowledge based industries and increasing multicultural and international nature of societies and educational institutions.

Of particular relevance to careers education are three developments, the vocationalisation of education through partnerships with business and the promotion of an enterprise culture, individualisation and customisation of programmes for learners and the need for lifelong learning and 'second chance' education. Peters (2009, p6) believes that considered together 'the whole is both uncertain and unpredictable' and that 'there is an emerging understanding of the way in which education is now central to economic (post) modernisation and the key to competing successfully within the global economy'.

What then is post-modernity with respect to education and how might this impact on the way career guidance, advice and information is delivered in our schools? Before addressing this question it is useful to note that Usher and Edwards (1994) explain that education does not fit easily into the post-modern moment because education theory and practice is founded in the modernist tradition. They believe that education is very much the 'dutiful child' of the Enlightenment and as such tends to uncritically accept a set of assumptions deriving from Enlightenment thought. Indeed Usher and Edwards (1994) believe that it is possible to see education as the vehicle by which the Enlightenment ideals of critical reason, humanistic individual freedom and benevolent progress are substantiated and realised. Along the same lines Lyotard (1992) argues that the project of modernity is deeply intertwined with education, modernity's belief being that progress in all areas will emancipate 'the whole of humanity from ignorance, poverty, backwardness, despotism...thanks to education in particular it will also produce enlightened citizens, masters of their own destiny' (Lyotard 1992, p.97). A modernist view of education might be summarised as an authoritative transmittance of unbiased knowledge, where students are trained in universal values, that is education is 'value-neutral' and there is 'value clarification' where rationality and progress are assumed and promoted. It is also assumed that there is a stable inherent self that can be objectively known and where 'objective' tests can establish I.Q., personality and interests. Careers advice aims to help students 'master' the decision-making process. A post-modern view on the other hand assumes biased facilitators and 'co-construction' of knowledge. A post-modernist view believes that all cultures have equally important 'realities', that education should help students construct diverse and personally useful values- useful, not true or right-and that self-esteem is an important aspect of the decision making process for young people in the transfer from school to tertiary education.

### **3.5 A move towards a constructivist view of career guidance**

The work of Mitchell and Krumboltz (1990, 1996) has been developed by ideas relating to a constructivist approach to career guidance, advice and information. Constructivism can be seen as a reaction to the status quo based on ‘matching’ models of career education. The ‘matching’ view, the main stay of careers advice for the best part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been criticised on a number of grounds. First, that ‘matching’ theory is no longer considered theoretically robust in that less space is now given to notions of being able to observe and measure fixed reality. Second, that ‘matching’ puts too much emphasis on the expertise of the guidance counsellor and in a way denies the voice of the young person. Finally, there is a widespread view that there is today far less conformity and certainties that the ‘matching model’ makes allowance for, and so these models as outlined in this review are now being questioned. Approaches to career guidance, advice and information that have been adopted as part of a neoliberal view are under threat in what Bauman (2003, p19) refers to as ‘our liquid modern times’.

New theories signal a rejection of scientific, positivist approaches to career education replacing them with paradigms embracing more holistic and child centred models that need to be capable of change. This process is well under way and the challenge for career guidance professionals is to incorporate new methods where appropriate into the traditional views of how guidance should be delivered. Many of the newer approaches are based on the notions of self-efficacy. Bandura (1991) defines perceived self-efficacy as people’s belief about their capabilities to produce required levels of performance. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave. Self-efficacy also addresses the question that many young people have namely, ‘Am I capable of doing this’? A strong sense of efficacy enhances human accomplishment and personal well-being. Young people with high levels of self-efficacy approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than threats to be avoided. Career guidance teachers often recall how students with low self-efficacy can have low aspirations low levels of commitment are aware personal deficiencies and obstacles and give up quickly. There is hope however as in most circumstances self-efficacy is increased by success in various experiences and by seeing the outcomes of success by others, at home for instance. The majority of people can have success at something and these experiences can build up self-efficacy and expectations as they face other challenges.



A significant trend in career theory development is towards those characterised by a post-modern approach (Collin and Watts 1996; Savickas 1993). Savickas (1993, p205) discusses the general move away from positivism towards 'a multiple perspective discourse' emphasising the key differences between the modern and the post-modern era. Career theories are thus being developed which focus on meaning and realities of 'how' 'when' and 'where' choices are made and move towards 'co-construction or social construction of meaning' (Savickas 1993 p.213.).

New approaches to career guidance have rejected the notion that career practitioners are the experts handing 'best-fit' careers advice and information Savickas (1993, p211) argues that career guidance is 'creating a space where those involved can speak and act for themselves'. Constructivist and life-designing approaches include affirmation of diversity, the importance of context and culture, and the importance of giving a voice to the student. Career guidance practitioners do well to take seriously their share of responsibility in nurturing the self-efficacy beliefs of their students for it is clear that their beliefs can have beneficial or destructive influences on the choices they make (Savickas 1993). In addition Bandura (1997) has argued that beliefs of personal competence contribute the key factor of human agency, the ability to act intentionally and exercise a measure of control over ones environment and social structures.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent 2005) is anchored in Bandura's self-efficacy, which proposed a mutually influencing relationship between people and the environment. Social Cognitive Career Theory offers three interlocking process models of career development: the development of particular areas of career interest; how individuals make career choices, and educational and career performance. The Social Cognitive Career Theory model views the development of career goals and choices as functions of the interaction among self-efficacy outcome expectations and intent over time. Choices relating to careers and college courses are an unfolding process in which the student and his/her environment mutually influence each other. It is within this tradition that I now address a constructivist approach to career guidance and advice as a way of ensuring students are able to make more informed choices with regard to careers, colleges or courses.

Three main aspects of constructivism that in many ways are a response to 'matching' and 'best-fit', approaches to career guidance and advice are: meaning making, the belief that individuals construct their own reality and their own view of themselves; agency, the idea of

evolving and supporting individuals to make their own decisions has less emphasis on a right answer and more emphasis on the students answer, and holism, the idea that careers advice and career choices should not be seen in isolation. Savickas, Laura, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Van Esbroeck and Van Vianen (2009, p239) argue that at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century ‘a new social arrangement of work poses a series of questions and challenges to scholars who aim to help people with their working lives’. The life-designing model of career intervention (Savickas et al. 2009) endorses five presuppositions about people and their careers; contextual, dynamic processes, non-linear progression, multiple perspectives and personal patterns.

From these five presuppositions Savickas et al. (2009) have put forward a contextualised model of career guidance. This model is essentially based on the epistemology of social constructionism, particularly recognising the fact that an individual’s knowledge of careers and of their own identity is the product of social interaction. Meaning is a co-construct and presupposes that the career guidance professional makes a significant attempt through narrative to understand how reality has been constructed for the individual. The framework is undoubtedly ambitious, structured to be lifelong, holistic, contextual and preventive.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century loyal and dedicated workers could aspire to a job for life and there were pre-determined career paths. Savickas et al. (2009) argue however at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are new arrangements and expectations around careers. Propelled both by the globalisation process and rapidly moving information technologies today’s occupational prospects seem far less definable and predictable. The challenge for education including careers education is to contribute to the preparation of students who can develop skills and competencies that differ substantially from those of the recent past. Students need to be educated to a level where they are able to embrace flexibility rather than stability, be adaptable to change and be prepared to create and take new opportunities. It is generally accepted that career theories and vocational guidance must be reformulated to fit this post-modern economy, an economy where even within a positivist view of careers individual factors such as those proposed by Holland’s typology (1973) seem to be far less fixed than heretofore. It is also accepted among career guidance professionals that 21<sup>st</sup> century practices and theories ‘should approach careers advice as individuals scripts’ (Savickas et al. 2009, p.240) as there are so many influences on subject, course and college choices that advice given should by definition be based on individual needs . Savickas et al. (2009) believe that much of the extant theory on careers education such as Super (1957) and Holland (1973) is

based more on societal needs and less on individual needs. Hence theoretical models need to emphasise flexibility, adaptability and lifelong learning. Career guidance needs to place the individual at the centre of a continually changing and influential social context. Savickas et al. (2009) contend then, that careers practitioners should try to construct contextualised models in collaboration with their students. A new approach to career guidance advice proposed that student's self-concept, self-efficacy and confidence may be altered by new experiences, better advice and by observing the behaviour of others. Student's interests and self-efficacy are never completely fixed and the self is continuously reconstituted. Moreover the feeling now within current literature is that future career guidance advice should take a dynamic approach that encourages students' imaginative thinking as 'the exploration of possible selves' (Oyserman, Bybee and Terry 2006).

The Life Design intervention model (Savickas et al. 2009) proposes guidelines as we move from 'matching', 'best fit', (Holland 1973), defined stages, (Super 1990), to a more contextualised personalised model of career guidance advice. This model proposes an approach where career guidance counsellors try to ascertain a student's core transferable skills and social competencies, where there is a recognition of the fluid nature of careers in today's economy and a change from 'how to do' as opposed to 'what to do'.

Savickas et al. (2009, p243) claim to have crafted a 'contextualised model based on the epistemology of social constructionism' and their life designing model proposes that career guidance advice can no longer confine itself to intervention at the transition from primary to secondary, subject choice and the transition from secondary to third level. Career guidance should be open to employing 'early preventive alliances and collaborations' (Savickas et al. 2009, p.244).

An important contribution for this research and the context, on which it is based, is the work of Bassot and Reid (2010). They have written a critical reflection on life-designing as a paradigm for career construction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Significantly they state that 'it seems clear that new frameworks, approaches and models are needed to respond to the changing nature of work and career in a globalised world' (Bassot and Reid 2010) and propose that the life-designing framework is a framework for rethinking the epistemology of career. They argue that this will be lost on guidance professionals, school management and policy makers unless the purpose of life designing is unpacked in language that makes sense to the intended users. It is with this in mind that this research project will take into account the socio-

economic and cultural context within which a life-designing framework might be useful. However Bassot and Reid (2010) believe that the title life-designing is problematic in that designing suggests a degree of control over decisions that probably is not there. There are many factors that might influence the level of control over decisions that we have to make, for instance cultural, economic, social and structures in terms of rules and resources. Structural concerns, rules and resources are important factors which need to be factored into any application of the life-designing approach and so the question needs to be asked, is life-designing achievable within each particular social context and within each individual's particular context? It is probable that life-designing is not all or nothing and that it can be used as a framework rather than a tool to inform career guidance in the years to come.

Career guidance counsellors need to act as change agents as guidance has become a discipline of change, rather than professionals that deal mainly with diagnosis or with more or less accurate predictions. The profession needs to be proactive in its response to the changing needs of students. Modern careers theories include a constructivist approach which is relevant for this research and this context. A constructivist approach as opposed to an instructivist approach is one which I think is worth exploring. How guidance professionals help young people to become collaborative, curious, independent, innovative and resourceful in their approach to their choices processes? While recognising that a more post-modern approach is now needed as the economy changes career guidance professionals need to be aware that a post-modern constructivist approach puts much more onus on the students, even within a co-constructivist environment. We need to be aware of limitations on their choices, culturally, socially and economically and also does this uncertainty lead to increased levels of stress and anxiety for students? A constructivist approach in general is positive but careers advisors also need to be aware that at a time of increasing complexity in terms of decision-making process for young people, there is less opportunity to engage with students (Smyth and McCoy: ESRI 2011). There is a strong argument that career guidance, advice and information now more than ever needs to engage with students and that hopefully co-construction is not a euphemism for letting the students fend for themselves.

### **3.6 A social constructivist model for career guidance**

Constructionism and social constructivism are two similar learning theories which share a large number of underlying assumptions. For both approaches learning is perceived as an active, not a passive process where knowledge is constructed not acquired and each person

has a different interpretation and construction of knowledge process, based on past experiences, influences and cultural factors (University College, Dublin 2014). For Social Constructivism emphasis is on the collaborative nature of learning and the importance of cultural and social context where cognitive functions are believed to originate in and are explained as products of social interactions (UCD 2014). The shared epistemological basis for these two perspectives is interpretivism where knowledge is believed to be acquired through involvement with content instead of imitation or repetition (Kroll and LaBoskey 1996).

In response to a move towards social constructivist approaches to career guidance, advice and information, Bassot (2012) presents a model for Career Learning and Development (CLD). In this review chapter I have discussed how up until quite recently matching ‘best-fit’ models were the basis for careers advice. CLD asserts that in a rapidly changing world it is no longer possible for individuals to be matched to a career by an outsider as their environment is no longer predictable (Bassot 2006; Bassot 2009; Barnes et al. 2010)

As Bassot, Barnes and Chant (2014) explain, CLD is an approach that is built on social constructivist principles. They write:

‘Knowledge about career is not simply acquired by some kind of Osmosis; people are not ‘empty vessels’ that can be ‘filled up’ with careers information on the assumption that they can be advised or guided into making good decisions’ (p.5).

A CLD model asserts that an individual’s knowledge and learning about career decisions is based on collaboration between a number of people, including career guidance counsellors, parents and wider family and peers. Bassot et al (2014) argue that a CLD model sits within a social constructivist approach as each student’s reality of career and course choice is a co-construction with a number of people. Therefore for a modified approach to practice as proposed in this dissertation, this would mean a co-construction of reality between the careers advisor and the student.

In contrast to the positivist paradigm on which careers advice in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was essentially based, a CLD model of career knowledge is not absolute but is rooted in social interaction. Individual realities of the decision-making process, in this case, are different for individual students. With respect to a modified approach to practice as proposed as part of this dissertation, career guidance, advice and information can provide young people with ‘a

safe and secure environment where they can practise their skills and build their knowledge in relation to career' (Bassot et al. 2014, p.5).

A social constructivist approach to career guidance looks to a co-construction of knowledge to help the student in the decision-making process based on the student's personal experiences. In this sense there is no absolute knowledge and so the epistemological basis for this perspective is interpretivism where knowledge is acquired through the involvement of both student and teacher. The student is facilitated to construct their own meaning by building on their previous knowledge and experiences. Teaching styles based on this approach mark a conscious decision to move from traditional objective models to a more student-centred approach that is a move from 'traditional objectivist models, didactic, memory-orientated transmission models' (Cannella and Reiff 1994).

Dewey (1933; 1938) is often cited as the philosophical founder of this approach. Bruner (1990) and Piaget (1972) are considered the chief theorists among the cognitive constructivists while Vygotsky (1978) is a major theorist among the social constructivists. Vygotsky (1978) rejected the assumption made by Piaget (1972) that it was possible to separate learning from its social context. However, by the 1980s the research by Dewey and Vygotsky had blended into a broader approach to constructivism with a basic tenet being that student learn by doing (situated learning) rather than observing and that students bring prior knowledge and experiences into a learning situation.

Vygotsky's theories (1978) are relevant to a social constructivist approach to career guidance in my particular context. The theories stress the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of knowledge as Vygotsky believes that the community plays a central role in the process of 'making meaning'. Two main principles of Vygotsky's work relevant to my context are, the 'More Knowledgeable Other' (MKO) and the 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD). The MKO is self-explanatory as it refers to 'someone who has a better understanding or a higher ability than the learner with respect to a particular task, process or concept' (Galloway, 2001). Vygotsky (1978, p86) defines the ZPD as the distance between the 'actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers'. Vygotsky believed that when a student is at the ZPD for a particular task providing the appropriate assistance or guidance (scaffolding) will give the student a sufficient 'boost' to achieve the task. Learning takes place within the ZPD and

students can with the help of career guidance advice make more informed choices than they could do on their own.

In relation to social constructivist approaches there are criticisms. Social constructivism is accused of being anti-realist in denying that knowledge is a direct perception of reality (Craib 1997). This criticism of social constructivism now recognising an objective reality is both widespread and common. There is an increasing tendency with qualitative research to adopt a relativist position, where all perceptions are legitimate realities which leads to questions about the usefulness of the findings generated from studies using a social constructivist methodology (Hammersley 1992). This is the source of tension between realism that recognises an objective reality and relativism. Realism and relativism represent two polarised perspectives on a continuum between objective reality at one end and multiple realities at the other (Hammersley 1992). Both positions are problematic for this research project as adopting a realist position ignores different realities for students and adopting a relativist position ignores the realities of points for entry to college, subject requirements, subject choices and deadlines for applications. In terms of ontology and epistemology social constructivism makes no ontological claims confining itself to the social construction of knowledge therefore confining itself to making epistemological claims only (Andrews 2012).

### **3.7 Literature and the research questions**

This review of literature has outlined how ‘trait and factor’ approaches have survived, partly because of their practical use, but also as explained in Chapter 2 ‘trait and factor’ approaches have been utilised as part of a neoliberal view of careers education. This review of literature indicates that social constructivist approaches to career guidance, advice and information can address some of the deficiencies in traditional approaches based on a one-size-fits-all system designed to find the best match between individuals and careers. The research questions therefore ask; what paradigms of practice inform career guidance provision? How are these paradigms informed by ideology? How does career guidance impact on young people? And, based on reading of the literature and on the findings from studies on the decision making process, can a social constructivist approach offer opportunities for improved practice?

Chapter 3 reviews constructivist approaches, specifically Life Designing (Savickas et al. , 2009), a Career Learning Development (Bassot 2012) and Vygotsky’s idea of the Zone of Proximal Development and it is this review that has contributed to formulations of research

questions around specific social constructivist approaches as opposed to other approaches. While this chapter acknowledges the important contributions of different points of view, I have concurred with the prevailing view that career guidance is more complex than matching individuals at a given point in their lives, and so a focus on the needs of individuals is needed.

Chapter 3 also reviews findings from studies on how decisions are made. Early literature around the decision making process highlights Social Learning (Krumboltz et al. 1976), and Roberts (1968) whose “Opportunity Structure Model” proposed that apart from a few privileged individuals, choices are constrained by opportunity. Gottfredson (1996) developed her theory of circumscription and compromise to explain why individuals’ expectations vary by, gender, race and social class. These studies have also contributed to the formulation of research questions as they suggest that any proposal for improved practice should be based on an understanding of individual student experiences. An important distinction here is that the term “individual” does not mean the students are able to make choices by concentrating solely on their own needs, but that choices are made as part of a complex mix of variables, personal and social and that each student’s experiences these variables in their own individual way. As Law (1981) argues, career decisions are a product of:

A plurality of interpersonal transactions conducted in local settings and on the basis of interaction within and between groups of which the individual is a member – the community (p218).

A number of studies in relation to how students come to make choices indicate that perhaps a more constructivist approach might be appropriate. The findings from these studies have also informed the formulation of the research questions. Specifically, how do career guidance, advice and information impact on young people in the transition from school and whether a social constructivist to careers advice offers opportunities for improved practice? A study of a group of young people in the west of Scotland (Semple, Howieson and Paris 2002) to explore the informal networks of careers advice and support has prompted me to ask questions of my own practice. This study (Semple et al. 2002) found that both formal sources of careers support (career guidance in schools) and the informal network of career support (parents, family, friends) were used by young people. The informal network however was the most influential on the vast majority of students in Semple’s study. The informal networks of careers supports impacted on the young people in the study through: planned, explicit



interventions; implicit assumptions and unplanned influences. An interesting finding from this study in relation to my own research is that some young people experienced more effective support from these informal networks than others. Some families better understood the education system, better understood the choices to be made and had more social contacts to call upon. Another important finding from Semple's study for my research, specifically the research questions, is that formal networks of career support did not generally take account of or work closely with informal networks as part of young people's transitions and that parents and families were largely unaware of the supports likely to be available to young people in school.

Research in Ireland has also shown that the complex interaction of school experience, family background and student aspiration influences the choices made in the transition from school. The findings from this study (McCoy et al. 2010) indicate that support from schools is often targeted at students from more middle-class backgrounds as the result of a focus on "going to college" especially university level courses. In addition a study by Smyth et al. (2011), in Ireland, finds that students from lower socio-economics backgrounds rely more on supports from schools than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds. This ESRI report points to evidence that inequality coming into school is exacerbated by support systems in school, specifically in the provision of career guidance, advice and information. With respect to the research questions as a driver for my study, I am therefore interested to find out on what basis and what paradigms of practice is career guidance delivered in my own context?

The research questions have also been influenced by the findings from a 2012 study by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). In this ESRI study the authors Smyth and Banks (2012) examined the key influences that shaped young people's choices. The authors find that decisions about higher education choices are found to reflect three sets of processes: individual habitus; the institutional habitus, with respect to career guidance and young people's own agency, that is, the extent to which the young people themselves consciously research and evaluate different options. Smyth and Banks (2012) indicate that students experience the decision making process in different ways. The purpose of the research questions in my study is to focus on an understanding of the different realities for individual students. The research questions, as explained, come originally from my practice and the essential meaning did not change as a result of testing them in the literature; other than amending research questions one to include a question on ideology.

### **3.8 A theoretical framework**

In this section I explain the processes and considerations in which I engaged while selecting theoretical frameworks for my study, and how I reached the conclusion that social constructivism was the framework which I wanted to use. This section also provides a consideration of the theories which I chose not to include. Semple's work (2002) on the influence of informal networks, especially parents is useful here, as are Archer's ideas (1984, 2003) on structure and agency. A study by Smyth and Banks in Ireland (2012) on young people's agency and institutional habitus offers further insights. This section has the following structure: First, explanation of how and why this study adopts an inductive approach; second, an outline of other theoretical perspectives I considered but decided not to use; third an explanation of why I consider social constructivism to be an appropriate framework for my research and finally why I have also felt the need to draw on other theoretical perspectives.

There are other perspectives that I have considered as a meaningful and useful framework for my research. Three such perspectives are worthy of mention: post modernism, a Foucauldian perspective and research that emphasises a sociological perspective.

As explained in section 3.4., a modernist view of education might be summarised as an authoritative transmittance of unbiased knowledge Lyotard (1992). It is also assumed that there is a stable inherent self that can be objectively known and where objective tests can establish I.Q., personality and interests. Lyotard (1992) argues that the project of modernity is deeply intertwined with education. A postmodern view, on the other hand, has resonance for my research as the data is more based on subjectivity with respect to the decision-making process and choices made. Postmodernism is not just an attack on positivism, emphasising instead, multiplicity, ambiguity, ambivalence and fragmentation (Gray 2013). This fits in well with my own experience as a careers teacher of students making choices as well as with the literature on how choices are made and resonates with the formulation and tone of the research questions. I was however reluctant to use postmodernism as a framework as I feel that there is an obdurate reality in education, including career guidance, advice and information, and the structures within which decisions are made. While students do experience the decision making process in different ways choices are made within a system consisting of school structures, exams and a points- based system of entry.

A Foucauldian perspective also has interesting things to say for my research. Deacon (2006) in an overview of Foucault's view on education argues that he seeks to show not what education is but how it operates in concrete and historical frameworks in the sense of the actual processes, techniques and effects which come into play when some individuals teach or are taught by others. Deacon (2006) argues that Foucault asks questions of education: what kinds of power relations govern the process? What bodies of knowledge are called into being? Which different institutions are involved? What forms do the interactions take? And, what effects do they have? These are indeed interesting and pertinent questions for the provision of careers advice in schools. Foucault's questions are an important part of my considerations on positionality and are also an important part of the formulation and development of the research questions which ask what paradigms of practice govern career guidance in Ireland and how is this influenced by ideology? The research questions also ask about the effects, positive and negative, on the ways in which careers advice is provided for.

Another sociological perspective is an important lens for most topics in education and so I have considered this for my research, specifically the writing of Bourdieu. Ideas such as cultural reproduction, cultural capital and habitus have been influential in educational research. The theory of cultural reproduction is concerned with the link between original class membership and ultimate class membership and how this is mediated by education. Sullivan (2002) explains that cultural reproduction and success in the education system are facilitated by the possession of cultural capital and of higher class habitus and that lower-class students do not in general possess these traits, so the failure of most these students is inevitable. Sullivan states that cultural capital consists of familiarity with the dominant culture in a society and especially the ability to understand "educated" language. The education system assumes the possession of cultural capital and this makes it very difficult for lower class pupils to succeed. Also central to Bourdieu's theory is the notion of habitus which, like cultural capital, is transmitted in the home. However whereas cultural capital consists of possession of legitimate knowledge habitus is a set of attitudes and values and the dominant habitus is a set of attitudes and values held by the dominant class. Bourdieu (1974) argues that the dominant habitus includes a positive attitude towards education. While both cultural capital and cultural reproduction are elements of an inequality that I have experienced in my practice with regard to decision-making, I have not experienced a positive attitude to education being exclusive to one particular group more than another. In my own context, I have found that class inequalities in relation to educational attainment are less to do

with habitus and more to do with cultural capital deficiencies. In this, I would concur with Sullivan (2002) who talks about the “messiness” of the concept of habitus.

There are elements of both a postmodern perspective and a sociological perspective that are worthy of serious consideration with regard to a theoretical framework for this research. In a post-modern perspective the ways in which a student experiences the decision making process is unique to them and ultimate decisions and consequences are subjectively based. A sociological lens is also important as studies such as Smyth and Banks (2011) indicate that key influences include not alone the young person’s view and approach to education and type and quality of school supports but also social capital available to students especially the supports from home. I feel that on balance, however a social constructivist framework is the most useful. The main aim for my research is that through a better understanding of how students experience the decision-making process an improved modified practice might be proposed. While both postmodernism and Bourdieu’s sociological perspective help to understand the phenomenon of how decisions are made ultimately the best way to understand the phenomenon is to ascertain the views of the participants. This is facilitated methodologically by a constructivist approach where interpretation and ultimate understanding is derived from the data. The key principles of constructivism are that learners build personal interpretations of the world based on experience that is embedded in the learning context in which it is used. Learning which is viewed through a constructivist lens focuses on learners’ prior knowledge and how they construct their understanding based on their context or learning culture (Vygotsky 1978). Further, such social learning theories advocate that students master new learning approaches through interacting with others (Doise 1996) as knowledge and understanding develop in relationship to the social context (Fickel 2002). For this study, a social constructivist approach proposes that through the use of language and social interchange (between career guidance counsellor and students, among students and with the involvement of parents) individual knowledge (understanding) can be expressed, discussed and developed. Vygotsky (1978), a key theorist among the social constructivists, emphasised the role of language and culture and how we perceive the world and claimed that they provide frameworks through which we experience, communicate, and understand reality. The reality that this research seeks to understand is the reality of the decision-making process for students.

A deficiency in this approach is that my interpretation of how students experience the decision-making process is based on what they tell me in the interviews. While this is fine,

and it is the views of the students themselves I want to ascertain, I do want a full understanding of how these decisions are made. In addition, interpretations of the data are constructivist in that they are my interpretations of what is being said and finally, in relation to the decision-making process, there are obdurate realities, influences, structural issues within and outside of school and the application process for third level education in Ireland. To get a richer meaning of not only how the decision-making process plays out for individual students but also the context within which the decisions are made, I came to draw on three other perspectives. My understanding of what is going on when students are making college and course choices is informed by: informal networks of career supports (Semple et al. 2002); ideas around structure and agency (Archer 1984, 2003); and in Ireland, a study on how young people's agency and institutional habitus impacts on how choices are made (Smyth and Banks, 2012).

The findings from Semple's study on a group of young people in the west of Scotland have been a useful lens for understanding how young people make decisions. Semple (2002) found that young people's informal networks of support, mainly from parents, has a greater impact on decision-making than formal career support and advice from school. Semple also found that both formal and informal networks were used by students and some young people had more effective support from informal networks than others. Furthermore, formal networks of career support did not generally take account of or work closely with informal networks when advising students and parents were often not aware of the supports available in school.

I draw on Archer's ideas to understand how career guidance, advice and information provision and other supports in school might constrain or enable individual students. I have also drawn on Archer's later idea (2003) that structure can be material (timetables, subject choices) economic, cultural (norms, traditions, ideologies), or a combination of more than one of these. Archer's ideas have influenced the formulation of the research questions and are also used to better understand the reality of the decision-making process. In the social sciences, there is a standing debate over the primacy of structure or agency in shaping human behaviour. Structure is the recurrent patterned arrangements which influence or limit the choices available, whereas agency is the capacity of an individual to act independently or to make their own free choices (Archer 1984). While recognising the inter-dependence of structure and agency Archer argues that they operate on different time scales. At any moment, existing structures constrain and enable agents whose actions produce intended and sometimes unintended changes to the structure which then become the new structure.

A study in Ireland (Smyth and Banks 2012) asks two relevant questions for my study:

“To what extent can we assume that different groups of young people have equal access to the information needed to assess the different options open to them?” and “What role do schools play in this process?”

Smyth and Banks’ paper examines the key influences that shape young people’s choices and as such I have drawn on their findings and conclusions when trying to understand the decision-making process as part of this study. In their paper Smyth and Banks conclude that decisions about whether to go on to higher education are found to reflect three sets of processes: individual habitus, in terms of the young person’s view of and approach to education; the institutional habitus of the school, as reflected by the amount type and quality of guidance and advice provided by the school and agency, whereby the young person actively and consciously engages in a process of seeking out and evaluating information before making a decision.

Smyth and Banks has also proven to be a useful lens for thinking about the reality of the decision making process. They argue that an understanding of how decisions are actually made demands an appreciation of individual contexts for students and that students are very much influenced by informal social networks. Smyth and Banks (2012) explain that expectations for how choices are made are often divided into two frameworks. First, those that emphasise rational choice where students make choices based on a rational assessment of costs and benefits of decisions and where the decision is deemed to be rational. Second, Bourdieu’s idea of social reproduction (1997, 1984) in contrast, focuses on the way in which different economic, cultural and social capitals are processed in different ways by different people resulting in different decisions being made. To understand how the students (and staff) experience the decision-making process I draw on two observations made by Smyth and Banks. Firstly, they argue that notwithstanding the truth and relevance of each of the above, there has been little attention given to the quality of the information used when making decisions. Secondly, that rational choice and social reproduction frameworks can be seen to devote comparatively little time to the impact of school structures and organisation with respect to the provision of career guidance for students. I have still however chosen a social constructivist framework for my research as notwithstanding other approaches I want to understand how decisions are made as expressed by the students.

This section has outlined the processes and considerations in which I engage while selecting the theoretical framework for my research. I have explained why social constructivism provides the best fit for the research and how deficiencies in a social constructivist approach has meant I have also drawn on frameworks that have helped me to understand the decision-making process.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

The purpose of this review is to critically evaluate academic literature in relation to careers education. I have attempted to illustrate that theory in relation to career guidance advice and information was generally a response to, and embedded in, the general political economy of the time. Consequently careers theory has developed in response to the economic and social demands of the time. This chapter has explained the ways in which a critical reading of the literature has been an important factor in the formulation of the research questions and has also made a significant contribution in my choice of a theoretical framework for the research. The theoretical lens I have adopted for this research is a social constructivist post-modern approach to practice.

There is a great deal of overlap between a constructivist and social constructivist approach to career guidance, advice and information. The difference being the emphasis on the learning that has already taken place through social interaction and the value placed on the cultural background of the student, hence the importance placed on the influences that have been brought to bear on the decision-making process. For Vygotsky (1978) culture provides the students with cognitive tools needed for development which includes language, cultural history, social context, economic context and access to information. In a social constructivist approach to career guidance, advice and information the guidance counsellor acts as facilitator for the student and is more ‘the guide on the side’ than the ‘sage on the stage’. This research project is founded on an interpretivist approach and in this sense the data is analysed through a constructivist lens as I am interpreting the views of the students as experienced through their social context. In contrast, the actual process of career guidance, advice and information in my practice as a career guidance counsellor is through a social constructivist lens as the reality relating to the decision-making process is a co-construct between the career guidance counsellor and the student.

This review has illustrated that to remain relevant and useful in the twenty-first century the career guidance profession is again re-inventing its theories and techniques, this time to concentrate on constructivist approaches to career guidance provision where realities for students are a co- construction between the careers advisor and the student. Within this approach I have outlined a move away from ‘trait and factor’ approaches to two particular approaches within a constructivist model for careers guidance Life-Designing (Savickas 2009), and Career Learning Development (Bassot 2012). Both of these approaches are appropriate for my practice as they are rooted in social constructivism which takes into account the ways in which individuals make career decisions throughout their lives in a changing world and the new structures in labour markets and information driven globalised economies. This chapter highlights the problematic nature of the matching, ‘best-fit’ models in favour of a social constructivist approach to career guidance, advice and information, where realities with respect to decision-making are a co-construct between the student and what Vygotsky (1978) refers to as the More Knowledgeable Other. Vygotsky’s principle of ZPD (1978) is a useful tool for the analysis of data as there are many influences on both the decision-making process and the final decisions themselves.

In the next chapter, Paradigms, Methodology and Methods, I outline an interpretivist approach and methodology used to gather, analyse and interpret the views of the participants in the study. A grounded theory methodology facilitates my interpretation of the realities of the decision-making process as articulated by the students and staff in the study.



## **Chapter 4 Paradigms, methodology and methods**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I detail how this qualitative study takes an interpretive position using a constructivist approach employing a grounded theory methodology to gather, analyse and interpret the views of young people and staff as they support the young people during the transition from school. This chapter has the following structure. Section 4.2 outlines my philosophical approach to the research including my understanding of interpretive research, qualitative research, the research process for this study, ethical approval, sampling and planning the research. The next section 4.3 explains and justifies the methods used in the research, including the transcription process. Section 4.4 outlines a move towards a social constructivist approach including constructivist grounded theory used to analyse the data. In section 4.4, how I made sense of the data is demonstrated including the coding technique used and by way of illumination a number of vignettes. In the penultimate section the links between the research questions and the methodology and methods is explained. Finally, I conclude with a reflection on my own practice as a career guidance counsellor.

The importance of critical reflection and praxis for my own practice as a career guidance counsellor are discussed. Specifically, how knowledge of what is ‘going on’ during the decision-making process can contribute to an improvement in practice. In order to meet the aims of the study, as introduced in Chapter 1, the engagement in conversation is to listen to the narratives of the lived experiences and to elicit perceptions, aspirations and concerns, not to prompt in such a way that the students would be ‘steered’ into talking about what I thought they should or topics with which they would feel uncomfortable. Indeed I was reassured that my approach was sound when on quite a few occasions I noted that there were issues and concerns arising that I would not have thought to raise. Therefore this required a strategy sufficiently flexible and reflective to allow an adaptive approach (Layder, 2006) to the questions asked- a methodology where the ‘voice’ of the students was heard. I am happy that my approach to data collection and analysis has ensured that I have heard the salient messages emerging from the conversations with the young people and their teachers. At all times I have been cognisant of the fact that this is a piece of qualitative social research and as such have been aware of the nature of the relationships between the research subject and researcher, teacher and student, teacher and colleagues and attendant issues such as emotion, bias, personal issues and concerns.

Although much useful information can be gleaned from secondary data it is limited in respect of the particular circumstances within which I currently practise. The purpose of this dissertation is to report on an engagement in purposeful conversation with a group of young people and their teachers, specifically the things that can have an influence on their decision-making. This chapter outlines the methodology and the methods used to collect, analyse and present the data emergent from such engagement.

## **4.2 Positioning the research**

### **4.2.1 Philosophical approach**

Much debate abounds around the relationship between contested terms such as paradigms, methodology and methods. In this chapter I would like to explore these terms and their meanings and how each relates to this research.

My philosophical stance on this piece of research is essentially a constructivist/ interpretivist one. In considering the philosophical approach to this study I take as my starting point the subjective/objective dichotomy or continuum about what is possible to know and how we can obtain this knowledge. As stated in the introduction to this chapter the purpose of the research methods used is to assist in ascertaining the views of the participants. The kind of knowledge created in this study is not scientific, experimental verifiable knowledge following positivist criteria, generated and analysed by a detached observer. It is the kind of knowledge constructed by listening to participants' stories, hearing their experiences, noting their concerns and fears and importantly, respecting their points of view.

The interpretation is subjective, constructivist, value-laden and influenced by my own experiences as a career guidance counsellor in a secondary school setting. Interpretivist research also accommodates the inter-subjectivity of the relationship between researcher and participant as a means of building rapport and a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Interpretivist paradigms recognise the central role of the researcher, my values and assumptions (Savin-Badin and Howell-Major 2013). I am aware of the limitations of such a subjective approach and also aware of not ever fully understanding the way other people think. However I am satisfied that at least a better understanding of the influences on the decision-making process can contribute to an improvement in practice. I am looking to create the kind of knowledge that is based on 'real life' as opposed to knowledge based on

received wisdom, the media or the ‘most sensible’ way to do things in relation to how decisions should be made.

In my research I have engaged with conceptual elements of an overall approach to the research, methodology and methods, data collection and analysis and interpretation/reporting (of findings). It would doubtless be comforting to detail a straight forward connection between paradigms and methods and a clear order in which to approach it. However it is an over-simplification to suggest that the research process proceeds in a neat, step lock logical fashion – from the selection of the research question or issue, to paradigm to methodology to methods to the construction and writing of the dissertation. Notwithstanding this observation the intellectual integrity and trustworthiness of my research depends upon accounting for the philosophical basis for the work.

I understand a paradigm to be an underlying way of thinking about research that influences the methodology used which in turn influences the methods used in the research and the analysis of data. I have followed Guba and Lincoln’s proposal that a paradigm can be best thought of as an interpretive framework ‘a basic set of beliefs that guides action, containing the researchers epistemological, ontological and methodological premises’ (2000, p.19). In their chapter, (Guba and Lincoln 1994) for the first edition of *‘The Handbook of Qualitative Research’* they focused on the contention among various research paradigms for legitimacy and intellectual and paradigmatic hegemony. One of the postmodern paradigms they discussed was constructionism which they explained was in contention with received positivist and post positivist paradigms for legitimacy. Lincoln and Guba (2000) later agreed that it would be difficult to miss the moves towards more qualitative, interpretive research. This project is in keeping with this ‘turn’ as its aim is to ascertain and interpret reality as experienced by students, without prejudice as an essential element of an improvement in practice.

#### **4.2.2 Interpretive research**

Mackenzie and Knipe (2006, p. 194) have argued that it is the choice of paradigm ‘that sets down the intent, motivation and expectations for the research’. The intent, motivation and expectations lies in the interpretations of the views of the participants.

An interpretivist constructivist approach to research has the intention of understanding ‘the world of human experience’ (Cohen and Manion 1994, p.36).

Generally the interpretivist / constructivist researcher tends to rely upon the participants' views of the situation being studied and crucially recognises the impact of their own background and experiences. In interpretive/ constructivist research we generally do not start with a theory as in more quantitative approaches rather we generate or inductively develop a theory based on the interpretation of meanings given as responses by the participants. This research project can be understood best as a construction of theory as it is my interpretation of the data that results in an emergent theory or approach to career guidance advice and information.

Corbin and Strauss (2008, p.49) explain that 'interpretations are not exact replications of data but rather the analyst's impressions of data'. They also explain that while interpretation is not an exact science qualitative research 'remains an important endeavour'. Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 49) also suggest that researchers are 'translators of other persons' words and actions'. Researchers are the go-betweens for the participants and the audiences that they want to reach, and so at the heart of this research is an understanding that emergent conclusions and recommendations for practice are based on my interpretation of what the participants are saying in their narratives.

In support of this view Charmaz (2014) believes that an interpretive research 'aims to understand meanings and actions and how people construct them. Thus these theories bring in the subjectivity of the actor and may recognize the subjectivity of the researcher' (Charmaz 2014, p.231). She further argues that interpretive research and any subsequent theory calls for the imaginative understanding of the phenomena to be studied. This type of approach 'assumes emergent, multiple realities; indeterminacy; facts and values as inextricably linked; truth as provisional; and social life as processual' (2014, p.231). I hope that I have incorporated such thinking into my approach to the research. The 'reality' of the choices process that I want to understand is located in the particular positions, perspectives and experiences of the students. An essential part of my research is to construct a reality of how choices are made.

#### **4.2.3 Qualitative research.**

Social research has roots in both sociology and statistics and social researchers originally drew upon a positivist philosophy to guide their work. Positivists see the world in terms of

cause and effect' relationships and believe that by making assumptions (hypotheses) and then by testing them, it will be possible to prove what is true', (Savin-Baden and Howell-Major 2013, p.40). For much of the twentieth century social research remained entrenched in this positivistic paradigm. In time however researchers began to view knowledge in a different way, 'Instead of seeing their responsibility as the quest for 'truth' or 'reality' that could be measured objectively researchers began seeking to understand human knowledge and experience' (Savin-Baden and Howell- Major 2013, p.5).

Positivism claims that scientific methods and experimentation provides us with the clearest possible ideal of knowledge. Where positivism is less successful however is in its application to the study of human behaviour where the complexity and unpredictability of human nature contrasts strikingly with the order and regularity of the natural world. As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) point out 'this point is nowhere more apparent than in the context of classroom and school, where the problems of teaching, learning and human interaction present a positivist researcher with a mammoth challenge' (Cohen et al. 2011, p.7)

This research is interpretivist, using a constructivist approach employing a constructivist grounded theory methodology to gather, analyse and interpret the views of students who are living through and experiencing the choices process. Cohen et al. (2011, p.219) argue that the 'social and educational world is a messy place, full of contradictions, richness, complexity, connectedness, conjunctions and disjunctions'.

Along the same lines Wellington (2000, p.14) has an interesting take on educational research:

It remains a mystery to me why those who work in education should attempt to aspire towards science when scientific methods, processes and codes of conduct at best are unclear and at worst lack the objectivity, certainty, logicity and predictability which are falsely ascribed to them. Surely educational research would do better to aspire to being systematic, credible, verifiable, justifiable, useful, valuable and trustworthy.

The point Wellington is making is an important one because educational research like research in the other social sciences and the humanities is sometimes subjected to criticism from those who favour a quantitative or scientific model of research for being 'too subjective' or for being based too much on feelings or personal responses. I have used Wellington's ideas (2000) as a reference point in order that my research is: Systematic (carefully planned and carried out); credible (realistic and believable); justifiable (a convincing case can be made for

undertaking it); verifiable (based on evidence that can be checked); useful (its findings can be applied in practice); valuable (will enhance current practice) and trustworthy (honest, genuine and based on sound research ethics).

#### **4.2.4 The research process**

Layder (2013) has written about undertaking small-scale research and I have incorporated many of his ideas into my approach to this research. Initially some of the areas for consideration include; how to choose an appropriate topic for small-scale research that can be done within a specific and tight time schedule and can I understand and explore the differences between problems, topics and questions (Layder 2013) in relation to choices being made by students. Also, can the research adequately address such issues as scientific rigour and validity and can an emergent theory make a contribution to the understanding and analysis of the decision-making process as currently understood in Ireland today?

As the career guidance counsellor in my school I am involved in the decision- making process and this personal connection has naturally helped in providing focus and definition to this research project. Layder (2013, p.2) also argues that ‘if you are fascinated with, or gripped by your topic, it is more likely that your enthusiasm will remain high throughout the project’. I believe that this is the case and hope it is evident in my findings, analysis and recommendations.

#### **4.2.5 Ethical approval and preparatory work**

The two open study modules in the taught element of the EdD programme in the University of Glasgow gave an opportunity to address an area of interest for this dissertation. Open Study One defined a research proposal and an overall research question whereas Open Studies Two had a twofold purpose first, to review and refine my proposal for the dissertation and second to report on my engagement with a qualitative piece of research work. This consisted of a trial study into the experiences of newly qualified teachers in my school. This was not a mini study in its own right and did not focus significantly on the data itself so much as on the experiences, possibilities and lessons learned from the process of collecting, analysing and interpreting the data.

In consultation with my supervisor we decided that it would not be appropriate to research my own students and so I decided to contact a colleague in a school some twenty miles away. This colleague, who was a career guidance counsellor prior to being the Principal in her

school, was happy to facilitate research in her school. As part of the application for ethical approval to the University of Glasgow Ethical Approval Committee, the following documents were furnished: consent forms to students, to parents and to school principal; Plain Language Statements to students and parents (so that both would be in no doubt as to what the research is about); schedule of interviews and of interview themes and copies of the questionnaire.

Ethical approval for the trial study was granted by the University of Glasgow, Faculty of Education Ethics Committee in April 2013. Ethical approval for the research as part of this dissertation was granted by University of Glasgow Faculty of Education Ethics Committee in February 2014.

#### **4.2.6 Deciding on an appropriate sample**

This research study was carried out by means of a questionnaire to a year group (96 students) and interviews with two groups of students, (five students each) and a group of five members of staff. There are no strict criteria for determining sample sizes although as Patton (2001) points out some practical guidelines including what is useful and credible and what could be done in a small scale research project with the resources available. Patton (2001) further suggests that the validity, meaningfulness and conclusions generated by such a small scale study have more to do with the ‘information richness’ (Patton 2001, p.185) of the participants selected and the analytical capabilities of the researcher than with the sample size. The three groups were chosen deliberately. First, I wanted to understand the reality of the decision-making process for students actually going through the process. Second, I wanted to understand the views of students who had come through the process, what they found useful and what they might now do differently. Some of the answers given in the first set of interviews were useful when considering areas for questions in the second set of interviews. Finally, I also wanted to understand the perspectives of staff in relation to the decision-making process as an important part of the study is that findings would contribute to an improvement in practice. In addition Layder (2013, p.126) makes the point that a sample is not meant to accurately represent all the people within the study parameters. He argues ‘rather, ‘representativeness’ is determined by the problem-relatedness of the units sample, be they observations, people or documents’. I am satisfied that the samples chosen, have given me information rich insights into how students approach the decision making process.

#### **4.2.7 Planning the research**

A constructivist approach sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with the participants (Charmaz 2000; Mitchell and Krumboltz 1996). This research consequently is about studying the how and sometimes the why the participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations, that is, how and why they make the choices that they do. Following Charmaz (2006) a constructivist grounded theory approach means more than merely looking and recording how the students view the choices process. Any theory resulting from my findings will be my interpretation of the views of the participants and my own beliefs, biases and experiences as a career guidance counsellor will inevitably impact on my interpretations of the data. As a career guidance counsellor my own practice is a constituent part of the decision-making process.

The following logistical concerns needed to be addressed. The first group of five interviews took place in the spring of 2014. I telephoned the Principal of the school to arrange times, rooms and a number of interviews to be held on particular days. The choice of which students were to participate in the research was decided upon in consultation with the school principal and the career guidance counsellor. Criteria used for selection of participants were their willingness to participate and whether they were applying to colleges/courses the following year.

The students were timetabled for career guidance and study on Monday afternoons so this was deemed the best day to conduct the interviews which also suited my own timetable. The interviews took place over three Monday afternoons, two students on two afternoons and one on the other afternoon. The interviews were held in the school in the careers classroom to ensure that the students were comfortable in their own environment and in general this was beneficial in putting the students at ease. The interviews were recorded in full agreement with the students and these were used as the basis for transcription and ultimately the organisation and analysis of the data. The questionnaire was given to all the 6<sup>th</sup> year (final year) students on the third Monday afternoon when only one interview was conducted. Through the school principal I arranged to contact and meet the second group of five students at a time when they would be home from college at Christmas. Essentially the same procedure was carried out with these in terms of ethical approval and logistical concerns. Finally, through the professional body the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) I arranged to meet three colleagues involved in career guidance, advice and information and arranged to interview



them after the monthly branch meetings of the IGC. I also arranged, through the principal of the school, to interview the leaving certificate students' year head and a subject teacher who taught the students.

### **4.3 Method**

This section of the chapter explains the rationale and practicalities of the methods used. The reasons for the use of a questionnaire to a whole year group are explained, and second, semi-structured interviews as a method used to gather data is outlined. Finally, the method used to transcribe the data is summarised. In my explanation of the reasons for the methods used, I am aware of the relationship between the research questions and the methods employed in this study. The use of a questionnaire, but mainly semi-structured interviews, to ascertain the views of the participants is justified as it is through my interpretation of the views of the participants that the research questions are addressed.

#### **4.3.1 The questionnaire**

The advantages of using a questionnaire as part of research are well documented. Uses include: gathering straightforward information relating to participants' behaviour; discovering basic attitudes/ opinions of participants and providing data that is easily quantifiable.

The questionnaire in this instance was used to help me focus on the types of questions I might ask in the interview. The students' responses to the questions helped me to focus on what may be asked in the interviews relating to issues or concerns the students deemed important. I did not want to miss any concerns that the students might have in relation to making choices. It is important at this stage to point out that the questionnaire was not used to validate the qualitative data emergent from the interviews and my methodology is not a mixed methodology as such. A questionnaire is useful as it meant first, I was able to identify the types of issues and concerns the students had and second, the questionnaire was a helpful starting point in terms of the types of questions I was able to prepare in advance of the interviews. I am also aware of some of the difficulties around questionnaire design, closed questions, brief answers, leading questions, bias in questions asked and so I was careful only to use the questionnaire data as a starting point for the interviews process and not as a result in itself or as some kind of validation for the qualitative data collection and analysis.

The advantage of starting with a questionnaire is that questionnaires provide a convenient way of collecting information as I was able to quite easily meet with a whole year group, the information is easy to analyse, they are familiar to students and they do not generally make students apprehensive. Also students expect and are used to teachers conducting questionnaires in the normal course of school life (Walonick 1993, Frary 1996). The questions were what the students would know about, family, courses, colleges, school etc., the questions were to the point and peripheral questions about 'something that might just be nice to know' were avoided, as a clear-cut need for every question was established (Frary 1996). The questionnaire was used consciously without quantitative analysis rather the concerns that the students had as a group were summarised to inform the topics for the semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix B).

#### **4.3.2 The interview**

It seems what is required, given my philosophical stance towards the research, is a choice of methods that can accommodate the students in the telling of their stories. Collecting data by means other than face-to-face dialogue would deny the opportunity to get an overall feel for the students' state of mind as they approach this important stage. During the interview I noted facial expressions, hand gestures, body language and overall demeanour that might enhance my understanding of the meaning behind the spoken words (Kvale and Brinkman 2009). Also while some researchers (Creswell J.W. 2005, Krueger, R.A. and Casey, M.A. 2000) have argued for the advantages of focus groups for example in encouraging group participants to interact with each other or encouraging participants to get involved in the research my experience of working with young people in small groups in a classroom situation is that very often discussions tend to be dominated by one or two participants where the views of others are not facilitated. Focus groups also often have the disadvantage of not providing a 'safe' environment for the exchange of private thoughts and feelings. Further, I was also aware of other challenges of focus groups Bryman (2008) for example explains that the data are often difficult to analyse, they can be difficult to organise, the tendency for two or more people to be speaking at the same time, speakers who hog the stage and in group contexts participants may be more prone to expressing culturally expected views than in individual interviews. It is for these reasons I rejected a focus group method in preference for individual interviews.

A semi-structured design gives structure to the interview but also gives flexibility. Rubin and Rubin (1995, p.2) outline what they term 'qualitative philosophy and approach to learning'

and that first, ‘understanding is achieved by encouraging people to describe their worlds in their own terms’ and second ‘interviewing involves a relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee that implies obligations on both sides’ (1995, p.2). Semi-structured interviewing according to Bernard (2006) is best used when you will not more than one chance to interview someone. In all likelihood this research would involve interviewing the students once and so a semi-structured interview design was the most appropriate. In section 4.3.1 I have outlined the reasons why a questionnaire was used to inform the questions asked in such a semi-structured format. The intention was to hear each individual’s story but I was also able to ask questions in relation to concerns that other students in the group had. Finally, Trochim and Donnelly (2006) suggest that interviews ‘are among the most challenging and rewarding forms of measurement. They require a personal sensitivity and adaptability as well as the ability to stay within the bounds of the designed protocol. Trochim explains that each interview is unique, each has its own ebb and flow, its own pace and that inevitably, different levels of rapport will be present.

Relying on my own experience dealing with young people attempts were therefore made to ensure that every interview had common components an opening, establishing rapport, explaining the purpose of the interview, the heart of the interview and finally a wrap up. As the interview is the mainstay of data collection in this study I consulted the literature widely in the area. A number of contributions were significant for this study. Kvale’s seven stages of interviewing (Kvale and Brinkman 2009) has been a very useful guide. The first stage is themising that is, why is the interview being carried out? Essentially the theme of the interview relates to the research question as outlined above, an attempt at establishing realities as experienced by the students. The second stage describes designing the interview and how will the intended knowledge be obtained? Namely, introductory warm up questions, follow-up questions, probing questions, specific questions, clarifying questions and careful use of silences were all considered before and during the interview. Trochim and Donnelly (2006) have also written about the questioning process especially in relation to obtaining ‘adequate responses’ by using probing questions, by not saying anything-the silent probe or overt encouragement, not in the way that implies approval or disapproval of their view, often as simple as an ‘ok’. Trochim and Donnelly (2006) also discuss questions regarding elaboration or clarification in that it was often easier just to ask the student what they meant rather than trying to interpret. As a researcher I was aware that I should not finish off the

students' sentences especially if the participants were starting to touch on an answer that I was expecting.

Kvale's third stage refers to the actual process of interviewing. Both Kvale (2009) and Trochim and Donnelly (2006) are strong advocates of 'taking care' in interviewing. They both stress that the following are important tactics involved with 'taking care': establishing a rapport; treating the interviewee with respect; maintaining eye contact at all times; not having one's head down writing notes and maintaining a body language that conveys to the participant that the interviewer is interested in what is being said. In the context of this research I felt that many of these suggestions were of particular relevance as the students were seventeen or eighteen years old and were being interviewed by someone unfamiliar to them and so nerves were initially present and were to be expected.

Having carried out the interviews the next stage Kvale's fourth stage is transcription that is, converting interviews into text. Trochim and Donnelly (2006) suggest that immediately after the interview the researcher should write notes about how the interview went. Observations might include did the students seem upset about certain questions, were they uncomfortable at any stage, were they hostile and also were there other observations relating to what was being said? These observations may not be apparent in the transcription of the actual words. I have detailed my approach to the transcription process in the next section below.

After transcription the next stage is the analysis. I have outlined how I have used a constructivist grounded theory approach to analyse the data following Charmaz (2006, 2014). Essentially this involved colour coding what was actually said producing categories and finally overall themes emergent from the data. This systematic approach is very important as, from experience, participants will often stray from the questions asked and will often introduce concerns that they might have but which are not relevant to the research question.

Before the final stage of Kvale's seven stages, that is the reporting of the findings and recommendations it is necessary to check the validity, reliability and generalisability of the findings. Validity refers to the truth of statements, reliability refers to whether different questions would produce the same themes or not and generalisability asks how do the findings and recommendations sit with broader research and approaches to career guidance, advice and information.

In conducting the interviews I was at all times aware of protocols when conducting research with students. For instance, I confirmed with the principal that the interview schedule was still suitable as agreed as part of the ethical procedure. On the day of the first interviews I met all the students, the principal and the career guidance teacher together to check that everyone had received the letters of permission, the plain language statements and the themes for the interview and a schedule of interviews was agreed. At this stage I informed the students that they would be recorded using equipment that they would have been familiar with (usually for oral work in languages). The purpose of the interview was explained again to the students and I explained who I was and why I was doing the research.

At the same meeting I asked the students if another group would be willing to be interviewed when they came back from college. Seven students were chosen at random from those willing and informed them that they would be contacted at the end of November 2014 to arrange the interviews. Seven students were chosen in case one or two did not go to third level education as this was the specific area I was interested in researching. Five students were subsequently interviewed during the Christmas holidays. The same ethical approach, as per the Ethical Committee of the University of Glasgow was adopted.

The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) is the professional body to which guidance counsellors in Ireland are affiliated. Through the chair of my local branch of the IGC, I contacted the members to ascertain if they would be willing to be interviewed as part of the research. I was careful to explain that the interview would be quite specific in relation to the decision making process and again I followed the ethical guidelines as per the Ethical Committee of Glasgow University. Over a period of three to four months I was able to arrange a time at the end of branch meetings to conduct the interviews.

I arranged to interview two currently practicing career guidance counsellors and a recently retired career guidance counsellor. The two guidance counsellors who are currently practicing were and are involved in developments in careers education and are prominent in the design and delivery of continuous professional development for career guidance counselling. I felt that both of these careers teachers would have particular insights into the changing nature of career guidance, advice and information provision and the changing needs of the students. I was also interested to hear from a recently retired career guidance counsellor who had a lot of experience in the role of careers advice and information and had opinions on how it has changed over the years. I was also interested in the views of the leaving cert students' year-

head. Year-heads are involved in the education, development and well-being of the students. I was also interested in the views of a subject teacher who taught the students who were taking part in the interviews. Again, a similar approach was taken in contacting these teachers in relation to initial contact, phone-call and then letters, arranging the interview and explanation of the purpose of the interview, the recording, transcription and ultimate publication of findings.

### **4.3.3 Transcription**

During the Open Studies Two module in the EdD I was able to ‘trial’ the process of transcribing interviews. Having had limited experience in transcribing I felt I had to read some of the literature around the process of transcribing. Oliver, Serovich and Mason (2005) suggest that transcription is a powerful act of representation and is a pivotal aspect of any qualitative inquiry. They argue that the transcription phase of research can affect how data are conceptualised. Tilley (2003) concurs with this view and argues the importance of researchers taking seriously the ways in which the person transcribing influences research data. Tilley (2003, p.771) also argues that the ‘degree of research rigour is open to question when accuracy of transcripts is left in doubt’.

To this end I used an essentially naturalist approach to transcription in which every utterance is captured in as much detail as possible. That is, ‘interview noise’ (stutters, ‘ems’, pauses, silences etc.) as well as the literal words of the students. This is opposed to de-naturalism in which grammar is corrected, interview noise is removed and both language and accents are standardised. The two views are valid and transcription can be thought of in terms of a continuum of two dominant modes: naturalism and de-naturalism (Cameron 2001). In naturalistic approaches we privilege participants’ words and avoid *a priori* assumptions, interpretations or understandings of what is being said. This approach is methodologically sound as first, I wanted to create a ‘safe place’ for the students where they could express themselves naturally and second, that I felt comfortable in interpreting what was being said as I am from the same community and am aware of and use many of the same nuances and colloquialisms used in the interviews.

## **4.4 Towards a social constructivist approach**

### **4.4.1 Introduction**

In general we have seen a paradigm can be defined as ‘a set of assumptions about the world and about what constitutes proper techniques and topics for inquiring into that world’ (Punch 2009, p.16). Put simply it is a way of approaching my project, from deciding on a topic, through a paradigm to methodology and method. A more formal definition for paradigm is described by Denzin and Lincoln (1994.):

Set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of ‘the world’, the individual’s place in it and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts.

A paradigm according to Denzin and Lincoln (1994) addresses three fundamental questions; first, the ontological question-what is the form and nature of reality and therefore what is it that can be known about it and what is worth knowing, second, the epistemological question-what is the relationship between the knower and what can be known, where is the knowledge coming from and finally methodology – how can the reality be studied?

These three interrelated questions illustrate the connections between methods and deeper underlying philosophical issues. I will now address the issues of epistemology and ontology as well as ideology and axiology with regard to my research.

### **4.4.2 Epistemology, ontology, ideology and axiology**

Epistemology involves the philosophical view of how we can come to know whereas methodology is the practical side of how we can come to know. Epistemological considerations are crucial for my research, an interpretive research, as how we can come to know is through my interpretation of the views of the participants, that is, the students, parents and teachers. For Guba and Lincoln (1994, p.108) ‘the epistemological question confronting researchers focuses on the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what is known’. Therefore questions that I have asked myself with respect to epistemology will therefore focus on my attitude towards objectivity, subjectivity, the role of the researcher including the capacity and desirability to be objective when analysing data and my attitude towards the research. My answers to these questions have

informed my choice of a constructivist type of grounded theory methodology as I will explain later.

Ontology is focused on what we can know as opposed to how we can know. The emphasis here is on what is reality. Again within my research I have followed Guba and Lincoln (1994, p.108) who argue that ‘the ontological question for researchers focuses on the form and nature of reality and from that, what is there that can be known about it’. I am aware that the realities of the decision-making process for individual students emerging from the research are a construct of my interpretation of the narratives. As such emerging conclusions and recommendations are to be viewed as constructivist.

Ideology in many respects permeates all research and enters tacitly or explicitly all my research decisions made. It has been suggested that ‘qualitative researchers accept the fact that research is ideologically driven. There is no value-free or bias-free design’ (Janesick in Denzin and Lincoln 2000, p.385). Janesick continues by suggesting that researchers ‘own-up’ to their ideological perspectives and so I have in a non-defensive way acknowledged and made explicit at various points in this dissertation my ideological values and imperatives. Simply and concisely put, my ideological values and imperatives relate to ensuring that through making the most informed choices possible all students can be in a position to benefit from all available opportunities equally, where career guidance, advice and information has a key role in promoting justice and equality in schools.

Finally, issues around axiology have formed an important part of my research. Axiology should be ‘a part of the basic foundational philosophical dimensions of paradigm proposal’ Lincoln and Guba (2000, p.169) allowing the issue of ethics to be embedded within, not external to, paradigms. Axiology as a study of ethics investigates concepts of right and good in individual and social conduct. A continuing value debate occurs between scholars who comply with a conventional scientific approach and those who take an interpretivist approach (Arneson 2009). It is argued that in an interpretivist approach it is impossible to be completely free of personal values as research is always biased towards the values of the researcher (Arneson 2009). However, if this is acknowledged, biases can become a strength of the research as I am a researcher in an area which I have a personal interest and a degree of expertise. My expressed aims of helping students make the most informed choices possible is based around an ideology where social justice and equality in schools is paramount.



In interpretive research, researchers recognise that their own background shapes their interpretation and they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretations flow from their personal, cultural and historical experiences. My intent is to make sense of and to interpret the meanings that students have constructed about the world they live in. Thus rather than start with a theory, I hope to generate or inductively develop a theory emergent from the data. Savin-Baden and Howell-Major (2013, p.3) have explained that taking up qualitative research is not straightforward and that it 'requires that a researcher has world views, cultural goals and questions that are sympathetic to and compatible with a qualitative approach'. They therefore follow the guidance of Guba and Lincoln (1994) who talk of a paradigm as being a belief system or worldview that guides the researcher and the research process. My research is also informed by O Donoghue (2007, p.16-17) who, in writing on interpretive research believes that the constructivist/ interpretivist researcher should concentrate on the meanings people bring to situations and behaviour and which they use to understand their world.

#### **4.4.3 A constructivist grounded theory**

I now explain how I have used a version of a constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2000, 2006, 2014) as a means of analysing the data from the interviews. In interpreting what students have said I am aware that reality is different for individuals. There is an obdurate real world (Charmaz 2006), examinations, the points system and the choices process but the elements of this reality are interpreted in different ways by students. Why else would students who experience broadly similar subjects, curriculum, education system and career guidance advice and information, view the choices process as variously opportunity or a major hurdle to be overcome. The following has resonance for my research:

Constructivist grounded theory assumes relativity, acknowledges standpoints and advocates reflexivity. My use of constructivism assumes the existence of an obdurate, real world that may be interpreted in multiple ways (Charmaz, 2008, p.409). Charmaz (2008, p.409) further explains that she does not:

Subscribe to the radical subjectivism assumed by some advocates of constructivism. Consistent with Marx, I assume that people make their worlds but do not make them as they please. Rather, worlds are constructed under particular historical and social conditions that shape our views, actions and collective practices.

In this research I have used a version of grounded theory that ‘assumes relativism of multiple social realities recognises the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and viewed and aims toward an interpretive understanding of the subjects’ meaning’ (Charmaz 2008, p.250). I have been informed by Breckenridge (2012) who explains the differences between constructivist grounded theory and classic grounded theory when she explains that it is essential researchers are clear and consistent in their choice of methodology, following one path rather than engaging in a methodological pick and mix (Breckenridge 2012). She argues that in a constructivist grounded theory the focus is on interpretive understanding of participants’ meanings, that data analysis are constructed in the interaction between viewer and the viewed and that constructivist grounded theory assumes the relativism of social realities. These are all essential elements of my approach to this research.

Mills et al. (2006, p.2) believe that ‘all variations of grounded theory exist on a methodological spiral and reflect their epistemological underpinnings’. Thus the form of grounded theory followed depends on the clarification of the nature of the relationship between researcher and participant and from an ontological perspective an explication of what can be known with respect to the choices process. In this study I have recognised that as a career guidance counsellor I have an ‘interest’ in the views of the participants but, whilst there is a teacher-pupil relationship present the participants are not my own students. In addition the students in their second tranche of interviews have left school and I would argue are free from any inhibitions that might have existed when they were in school. Mills et al. (2006), believe that constructivist grounded theory is positioned at the latter end of this methodological spiral, actively repositioning the researcher as the author of a reconstruction of the experience and meaning. Mills et al. (2006, p.2) argue that consciously subjecting my view of reality ‘to an ontological interrogation in the first instance will illuminate the epistemological and methodological possibilities that are available’. I hope that I have done this.

Thus in seeking a research methodology that would provide an ontological and epistemological fit for my research, I was convinced upon exploration that the concept of constructed grounded theory was appropriate (Charmaz 2000). In choosing constructivist grounded theory I believe that this helped me ‘get sorted, stay involved and finish’ (Charmaz, 2006, p.2). The plan was that using constructivist grounded theory the research would be directed, managed and streamlined.

Grounded theory is a methodology that seeks to construct theory about issues of importance in people's lives (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1998). Data collection in grounded theory is often described as inductive in nature, in that the researcher has no preconceived ideas to prove or disprove. Although I do acknowledge that it is through observation and reading of literature in the area of career guidance advice and information that I have a concern that the best possible, most informed decisions are not being made by students in relation to course and college choices as they leave secondary school. Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.97) have argued that 'it is not possible to be completely free of bias'. It is these aspects that have led me to a constructivist approach to grounded theory and to incorporate extant literature, what Thornberg (2012) calls an 'informed grounded theory'.

#### **4.5 Making sense of the data**

In this constructivist grounded theory approach the data, once collected, has been separated, sorted and synthesised through a process of qualitative coding. Coding is a process of identifying and categorising segments of data, often line by line, and certainly paragraph by paragraph that simultaneously summarises and accounts for each piece of data. The codes were used to select separate and sort pieces of data as a precursor to analysis of their meaning.

The procedure followed was essentially that suggested by Charmaz (2000, 2006, 2014). The first step is called 'initial coding' where I attached labels to pieces of data e.g. 'influence of parents', 'influence of siblings', and 'cost of going to a particular college'. Such labels or codes formed the dual purpose of identifying what is going on in the data as well as pointers as to what areas to explore in subsequent data collection. This is why an initial five interviews were followed by interviews with students who had already made their choices. The 'initial codes' from the first five interviews informed the questions asked in the second five interviews. In addition, preliminary analytical notes and memos were written about the codes, comparison of data and any other pieces of information about the data. Again, these interview questions informed further interview questions as well as feeding into an emergent theory about the choices process.

The process of coding, memos and comparing the pieces of data provide a 'conceptual handle on the studied experience' (Charmaz 2006, p.3). This process then contributes to a grounded

theory grounded in the data collection and analysis. The grounded theory approach gave a method of naming and placing meaning on the data collected.

Following Glaser and Strauss (1967), Glaser (1992), and Corbin and Strauss (2008), the defining components of a grounded theory approach incorporated into this research include: constructing codes and categories by colour coding (for example influences such as family, peers, personal research); employing a process of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967) by comparing incidents or codes that are similar so that conceptually similar incidents can be grouped together and developing a grounded theory by recognising major themes occurring in the data. This process was helped by writing memos to elaborate on findings (Charmaz 2006), and deciding on themes and sub-themes that will be used to analyse and discuss the findings from the data. Theoretical saturation is a process where the researcher is satisfied the data has produced all or the most important categories that input into themes for the analysis of data. A second technical aspect of a constructivist grounded theory is constant comparison that promotes 'a process of maintaining a close connection between data and conceptualisation' (Bryman 2012, p560). I have used memos at all stages of gathering and analysis of the data to compare data that is either consistent with other pieces of data or that does not readily fit into codes already identified and I am satisfied that the samples chosen have produced a robust representation of how students experience the decision-making process.

I found the guidelines offered by Denscombe (2010) particularly useful when constructing a methodology for my research. He defines grounded theory as an approach dedicated to generating theories. It is not, he believes, about either testing theories or providing descriptive accounts of the subject matter. Grounded theory does emphasise the importance of empirical fieldwork and the need 'to link any explanations very closely to what happens in practical situations' (Denscombe 2010, p.107) that is, what the students themselves think about and what concerns they have. Denscombe (2010, p.108) argues that researchers should start out with an 'open mind' and that researchers should approach the topic 'without a rigid set of ideas'. Denscombe (2010, p108) does acknowledge that an 'open mind' is not a 'blank mind' on the subject, relevant with respect to my role as a career guidance counsellor, but that I should 'not approach the analysis of data using pre-ordained ways of seeing things'.

Finally, there are a number of concerns that I will now address that can arise when doing this type of qualitative research: gathering rich data; informed grounded theory (Thornberg 2012); reaching for quality, and rapport with participants.

Gathering rich data is a basis for a strong grounded theory. The constant comparison method and memo taking have allowed me to follow leads as they emerge. This is an advantage of more qualitative research as it can contribute to Geertz' (1973) 'thick' description. Using constructivist grounded theory methods I was able to shape and re-shape my data collection, especially in the second tranche of five interviews. 'A keen eye, open mind, discerning ear' (Charmaz and Mitchell 1996) can be more important than developing any methodological tools.

Charmaz, (2006) argues that we are not scientific observers who can claim neutrality, neither 'observer nor observed come to a scene untouched by the world' (p.15). I do not want to be detached or claim to be detached as I am part of the process of choosing courses and colleges. An important purpose of this research is through generation and analysis of data to have a better understanding of how students approach the choices process. Gathering data as part of a grounded theory methodology guided my approach in that the notion of emerging ideas is a good thing and that I was always open to the possibility that the tenth interview may illuminate the data as much as the first or second interview.

Thornberg (2012, p.243) has proposed what he calls 'Informed Grounded Theory'. Thornberg explains that there is a widespread view that grounded theory research should delay the literature review until the end of the analysis. The argument is that if a researcher explores extant literature in a particular area there is the chance of 'contamination'. Thornberg (2012) presents arguments for using extant literature and he also presents what he calls 'data sensitizing principles' when using literature. Thornberg (2012) is supported by Charmaz (2008, p.402) when she posits that constructivist grounded theorists 'advocate recognizing prior knowledge and theoretical preconceptions and subjecting them to rigorous scrutiny', rather than being a *tabula rasa*. Dey (1993, p.63), refers to 'a difference between an open mind and an empty head'. Thornberg, (2012, p249) argues that:

In contrast to the classic grounded theory tradition, but in accordance with the constructivist grounded theory, an informed grounded theorist sees the advantage of using pre-existing theories and research findings in the substantive field in a sensitive, creative and flexible way instead of seeing them as obstacles and threats.

The research questions are asking first, how is career guidance advice and information provided for in Ireland and how is this influenced by ideology? Second, what impact does career guidance advice and information have on the students? And finally, is there another way? That is, a social constructivist approach that would provide opportunities for improved practice. The coding procedures employed as part of the analysis are a way of ‘making sense’ of the data and a way of understanding what is being said in the interviews. In this section I have outlined the general approach taken as regards analysis of the data, however here I will give a more detailed example of coding procedures employed. I have included excerpts from actual data in appendices D E F and in this section by way of animation and to give the reader a feel for the interviews I include vignettes of three students, one student in school going through the decision-making process and two students returning home from university.

#### Vignettes – The students

The following short pen pictures are used to highlight for the reader the particular ways in which individual students experience the decision-making process. Two of the students, (RS1 (appendix D) and RS4 (appendix E) had completed their secondary education and I made an arrangement to meet them during the return from college at Christmas. The third student S4 (appendix F) was currently studying for her Leaving Cert and was in the process of making choices for the following year.

RS1 is a very capable and able student, who having completed her secondary education is now studying electrical engineering at University College, Dublin. Both her father and her brother are electrical engineers, having studied at University College Dublin. It was clear from the very early stages of the interview that her parents were influential as regards her choices:

My brother went to UCD and he did engineering, and I had a few cousins who also went there..... Dad also did engineering and he said it would be a great career for me.

and also:

My aunt is a nurse and she said she loved it and mum said maybe I should give that a go.

From the interview it seemed that she was very happy with supports from home and this made it easier to make her own decision:

My dad did electrical engineering and so did my brother, both in UCD so I knew a good bit about the course, and that it is a good well paid job because we are comfortable at home.

This student, while happy with her choices expressed frustration within the school:

I really wanted to do engineering but I wasn't able to do Chemistry and Physics because I also wanted to do a language.

However, as her high levels of social capital and personal agency meant she was confident of making the right decision:

I also knew I would do engineering in UCD

Choosing engineering would not have been a typical choice among her friends, and she was aware that girls would be in a minority at university and in her career. Therefore, the decision to study engineering was indicative from the high level of support from home and her self-efficacy.

RS4 was in the same year group as RS1, was equally academically successful and was just as ambitious and determined to do well. However, his reality of decision-making process was different in a number of ways. In this student's case support from home was there, but perhaps not as unconditional and consistent as the previous student:

My father didn't really want me to go to college, but I had a great interest in writing and he knew I was quite good so he kind of gave in eventually.

And later on in the interview:

I thought I was able to choose whatever courses I wanted but this didn't turn out that way..... There are a lot of people to keep happy and a lot of things to think about.

This student explained that although also expressing frustration with formal supports in school:

I used to just sit there in careers class.... bored out of my tree! I had no interest in what was going on most of the time.

He explained how his English teacher was an important influence:

I was always sort of interested in English.... I enjoyed writing, the teacher read and commented on my writing.....he really encouraged me

As a consequence of the environment within which decisions were made, this student seemed to be under an amount of stress about the process:

When I was making the decision I changed my mind about five times..... I put in my final course half an hour before the deadline. Sure I didn't really know if I was doing the right thing

This student was quite different from RS1, and perhaps more typical as he was quite unsure of where to look for help:

I don't think I got a lot of help but I didn't seek.... because I wasn't sure myself..... because I was so indecisive there wasn't much help they could have given me.... That's why I didn't ask.

This student's real interest was in English and the influence of his teacher was an important factor in his final decision, he chose a creative writing course at university in Galway and explained he was very happy with the course. While both students eventually arrived at the "right decision" the process of decision-making was quite different for the two students.

The third student S4 was a current Leaving Cert student in the middle of the choices process. This student has a great love of and ability in music, but had very little idea of what course or where to study after she left school. She was fairly typical in that there seemed to be a number of influences on her choices:

Most of my friends are going to Derry (the local college).... so .... I dunno..... it's hard to decide.

And later:

I really like the sound of Limerick for music.... But maybe it's a bit far.

Also, like the previous students, subject teachers seem to be influential:



I had a chat with my drama teacher who said there were good courses in music and drama in Derry.... And my piano teacher said it was a good course.

Like many students this girl changed her mind quite easily as a result of talking to someone. This is quite typical as very few students are as decisive as the first student here:

Well, there was a substitute music teacher who was there for just a few months and she was studying in the University of Limerick.... She said she loved it..... that's where I'm gonna go!

However, in the end as with a lot of students, the decision about course or college is made with a strong parental input:

I didn't see any point in going to see the careers teacher, as I had decided with my parents what course I was going to do and the college I was going to.

An interesting observation with respect to the research questions in this study is that like the other two students, there seems to be reluctance on the part of the student to seek help from careers advisors and where she did seek advice, formal careers advice and support was not the main influence on decision made.

The 'initial coding' was done after transcription (Section 4.3.3) from the taped interviews. The initial codes highlight the types of experiences of the decision making process as told by the students. I used five different colours to highlight what I interpreted as the elements of the students experiences. For instance, when a student referred to an 'influence' on their decision I highlighted this in red. There were of course different influences and different views, positive and negative, of the value and extent of these influences and so I kept a 'memo' expanding on the initial recognition of 'an influence'. Influences included parents, guardians, siblings, peers and friends, schools and colleges and the extent to which students exercised their own agency. By highlighting influences as an important part of what the students are saying and by taking notes a number of themes emerged from the data, namely, relational, peer, personal agency and schools and colleges. These sub-themes then came together into an overall theme 'multiple influences' (Fig 5.1). I used the same colour coding method to highlight 'school-based supports', (blue) 'differences in experience' (black) 'worries and concerns in relation to transitions' (yellow) and 'issues directly relating to decision making' (green).

In the appendices D E and F there are examples of actual analysed data. On the left hand side of the page are the transcriptions and initial coding of the data and on the right hand side of the page are my observations and notes which struck me as I read through the transcriptions. This procedure was used for all the interviews. In the same way by coding and taking notes the second main theme of ‘whole school supports’ fig 5.1 emerged. A second group of main themes, ‘insecurities’ ‘inconsistencies in levels of supports’ and whether decisions were rational or not also emerged as consequences of the decisions being made (Fig 5.2).

Through this process I was able to see that these initial codes were consistent among the students, in that even though each had their own reality of the decision-making process the themes and sub-themes were common elements of the students’ experiences. The sub -themes as part of the five main themes are illustrated in fig. 5.1 and 5.2. This thematic approach is used as a framework for both understanding how decisions are made and to discuss, in the final part of this dissertation implications and recommendations for a different modified approach.

Conducting the interviews was an enlightening experience which went somewhat better than I expected in that I had been anxious that young people might not engage in conversation and might refuse to participate. This did not happen and they seemed to be actually ‘proud’ that their story was being used as part of a research by someone outside their own school.

In Chapter 3 on academic literature in the area of career guidance, advice and information I have introduced the chapter by explaining how I see literature as informing my research. Informed grounded theory is not about forcing the data into pre-existing concepts and theories emanating from a review of literature nor replacing the tools of constructivist grounded methods, coding, memos and constant comparison.

One of the problems in using adaptive theory (Layder 2006) and informed grounded theory approaches (Thornberg 2012) is that of ‘forcing’ data into pre-conceived notions of what data should be. Forcing data can take place as a result of a review of literature, my own concerns and notions of what happens when students make their choices, questions that I subsequently asked and my interpretations of the responses given. I have been aware that any theory or conclusions should have been actually based in the data generated by the research. Writing memos was very useful in this regard to constantly remind me that while my interpretation is important it is ultimately the views of the participants that are most important.

The aim of the research was to gather sufficient data in order to give a good picture of what is going on, within the parameters of time, cost and logistics. For both Glaser (1998) and Stern (1994) small samples and corresponding limited data do not pose problems because grounded theory methods aim to develop conceptual categories and thus data collection is directed to illuminate properties of a category and relations between categories. The sample in this research is small; two sets of five students and five staff members. However, by following and adapting the constructivist grounded theory methodology I am happy that the data reveals the realities of 'how, when and where' of the decision-making process.

The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to ask the students to describe and reflect upon the choices process in a way that they may not have been asked before. I saw it as my role to 'listen, observe with sensitivity and to encourage' (Charmaz 2006, p.25) and for the students to respond and think about their answers. The plan was always that the students would do most of the talking.

#### **4.6 Methodology, methods and research questions.**

In this section I explain the relationship between the research questions and the methods employed in the study. It may be helpful here to remind the reader of the four research questions which are

1. What paradigms of practice inform career guidance, advice and information delivery in Ireland, and how are these paradigms informed by ideology?
2. How do career guidance, advice and information impact on young people's decision-making in the transition from school?
3. Can a social constructivist approach to career guidance, advice and information offer opportunities for improved practice?
4. How can the findings from this research inform career guidance practice in Ireland?

It appears that student voice is missing in much education research and from dialogue on education policy, according to Cook-Sather (2002), because of the historical lack of trust towards young people and from which there has evolved various power structures and practices 'to keep students under control and in their place as the largely passive recipients of what others determine to be education' (Cook-Slather, 2002, p.4). In this research I want to give voice to the students and staff. The participants' voice is central to this study and by listening to what they say there is the possibility of deeper understanding. These questions are not asked in isolation rather they are asked within the context of how the participants in this study experience the decision-making process and how final choices are made.

In the previous chapter I have outlined a number of studies that highlight the disconnect between the different ways individuals experience the decision-making process and a one-size-fits-all career guidance provision. In section 4.2 of this chapter I introduced Mackenzie and Knipe (2006, p.194) who argue that it is the choice of paradigm 'that sets down the intent, motivation and expectations for the research'. The intent, motivation and expectations for this study lie in the analysis and interpretation of what the participants are saying with regard to their experiences of the decision-making process. The research questions suggest that an interpretivist approach is taken in that any enhanced understanding of how the individuals make choices and any recommendations for improvement in practice is set within the views of those participating in this study. In order to ascertain the views of the participants I have explained why I have chosen first, a questionnaire of all the students in the final year in the school, to help focus on the types of questions and second, why a series of

semi-structured interviews with the students and staff was deemed the best way to ascertain their views . I also outline other methods, focus groups for instance, that were considered and rejected in favour of the semi-structured interviews. The rationale for semi-structured interviews as a method of inquiry is not only based in literature on research methods but also on my own experience as a career guidance counsellor.

Interview as voice is a very different type of interview to my usual one to one guidance interview. A careers guidance interview has a definite and often quite limited agenda, there is an understood procedure and a set of outcomes is pretty much determined. This was not the case in the semi-structured interviews as there was no specific agenda, no definite set of questions or outcomes. Rather the questions asked in the interviews are used as a prompt to get the participants to talk about their own experiences of the choices process and making decisions. While conclusions and recommendations are based on my interpretations of what is being said the interview as a method proved to be the most suitable way for the participants to ‘tell their story’ of how they experienced the various aspects of the decision-making process.

As outlined previously in this chapter a version of Grounded Theory, essentially drawing on the ideas of Charmaz (2000, 2006, and 2014) was used to analyse the data so that the research questions could be addressed. However there are other methodologies that I considered and decided not to use as a framework for analysing the research. Three approaches that I thought were worthy of consideration were ethnographic research, phenomenological methods and participatory research.

Ethnography is the study of social interactions, behaviours and perceptions that occur within groups, organisations or communities (Reeves, Kuper and Hodges 2008). Roots of ethnography as a method of study can be traced back to anthropology where researchers studied groups or communities over long periods by immersing themselves in the studied group’s way of living. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1986) points out the main aim of an ethnographic study is to ‘get inside’ the way a group of people see the world. Hammersley identifies an ethnographic study with a strong emphasis on exploring the nature of a particular social phenomena and a tendency to work primarily with ‘unstructured data’. This study could not be described as an ethnographic study as the research is specifically relating to career guidance and a specific element within career guidance. My research is a snap-shot

of a particular moment, the transition from school and the reality of a particular aspect, the decision-making process, rather than observation over a period of time.

Phenomenological research methods and grounded theory methods have much more in common. They both look at real life situations, they both collect data from participants and use an interpretive approach to data analysis and they both seek to explore individual experiences in the context of the realities of the participants (Holloway and Todres 2010).

Phenomenological research involves trying to understand the essence of a phenomenon by examining the view of the people who had the experience of the phenomena. This methodology often involves in-depth interviews with the same subject several times to get the full picture of the phenomena being recorded.

Crotty (1998) argues that a phenomenological study is designed to discover phenomena and unearth previously unnoticed or overlooked issues, as it explores the experience and meaning of the phenomena. Crotty writes that this type study is about description and understanding whereas grounded theory moves beyond description to a theory of ‘what is happening’. Grounded theory seeks to understand ‘what is happening’ by basing any theories or conclusion in the data but also by using literature around the phenomena and by taking notes (memos) and constantly comparing pieces of data. The decision-making process in the transition from school, what is working well and what is working not so well is well understood and has been extensively written about and so I have used a version of grounded theory to seek to go beyond description to understand what is going on for individual students as they make their choices.

Participatory research methods are geared towards planning and conducting the research process with those people whose life-world and meaningful actions are under study (Bergold and Thomas 2012). Bergold (2007) earlier had talked about the notion of co-researchers involving research partners in the knowledge production process. Bergold and Thomas (2012) propose that participatory research involves a high degree of democracy where researcher and participant are ‘equal’. In my dissertation I have spoken about positionality and am aware of ‘power’ situations and the teacher-student relationship that is still there even though the students are not in my own school. I felt that such a democratic approach might confuse students and put them off the process. In their article Bergold and Thomas (2012) argue that there needs to be a great willingness on behalf of participants to disclose their personal views and experiences. Again, I felt that this might be difficult for students and a

new experience for them. An approach whereby I asked questions in relation to a specific area would result in students being more comfortable to expand on their experiences of the decision-making process. I took a constructivist grounded theory approach to interpret their views and to ensure that themes were emergent from the data even though the themes are as a result of my interpretations. The success of any research is a function of whether the participants 'feel safe' (Kemmis, 2001) in the process. I am not sure if the students could 'feel safe' in a research where they were expected to be 'co-researchers'.

Finally when considering a methodological approach I was aware of practical issues. The participants in this study are not students in my own school and so access was quite limited. There were logistical concerns involved in arranging to meet the students and so one-off semi-structured interviews were the best fit for my purpose. A system where I could record and then transcribe and analyse the data at a later date was the best way of ascertaining the views of the students in relation to realities of the decision making-process. To conclude, the four research questions which have evolved as the work progressed, as explained in chapters 2 and 3 have had a direct relationship with the paradigm chosen the methodology, and methods used. The research questions demand a deep understanding of how students experience their own realities of the decision making process and so an interpretivist approach helps to understand what is going on. The methodology for this study is qualitative and the method used is essentially a series of semi-structured interviews as it is the views of the participants that I want to ascertain.

#### **4.7 Reflection on practice**

In their book on professional development and reflection Forde et al. (2006) start from a position that a process of de-professionalisation has occurred over the recent past. They believe that teachers have lost much of their autonomy and agency and that this process of de-professionalisation has been introduced with the intention of achieving standardisation, bench-marking and performance management (Forde et al. 2006). The authors concede that these may have some credibility from a political imperative and a standards point of view, but the results they propose is a lessening of the ability of teachers to control their own destinies and to retain ownership of their own practice.

While career guidance practitioners cannot simply choose to ignore government policy and initiatives with respect to career guidance provision and curriculum in asserting one's own

practice we must deliver these policies and initiatives in a way that best enhances student's opportunities for learning while simultaneously protecting the professional status of career guidance practice (IGC 2014). A process of reflecting on practice is an important step in achieving both of these aims.

What then is reflective practice? It is intended that using critical reflection will allow career guidance counsellors to identify what we do well and what we need to improve in our practice. It is also meant to enable career guidance practitioners to become more open-minded and adopt more flexible approaches to working with students so that career guidance practice is able to respond to and initiate change. In addition, reflective practice is meant to promote 'analysis of underlying beliefs and assumptions that practitioners might hold without having full appreciation of why they hold them and what alternative beliefs might have equal credence' (Forde et al. 2006, p.67).

As with many things it is easier to see the benefits of critical reflection than to actually engage in it. A starting point for my own critical reflection is the ideas of Hargreaves (2000) where he examines the changing position of professional education in a school setting. Hargreaves (2000, p.157) identifies major recent changes: the 'marketisation of education'; the growth of client culture, and the way in which the public needs to be persuaded just how complex and difficult teaching is today in an 'age of cultural diversity and new technology'. Both Hargreaves (2000) and Ball (1990) argue that autonomy has been trimmed back regarding classroom judgement, to be replaced by targets, standards, monitoring and accountability. Notwithstanding Moons' proposal (1999) that reflection is a difficult notion to define, there are a number of contributions that I consider when searching for a working definition of reflection.

Dewey (1933) argues that reflection involves not simply a sequence of ideas but rather it is thinking that has a consequence. In Dewey's (1933, p.9) classical definition of what constitutes reflective thought he uses terms such as 'active', 'persistent' and 'careful consideration'. It is the possible and on-going benefits of critical reflection that has prompted me to engage in Brookfield's 'four lenses' (1995, p.29). He describes how we can view what we do and think as teachers through four distinctive lenses. These are: our autobiographies as teachers and learners; our students' eyes; our colleagues' perceptions, and theoretical literature (Brookfield 1995, p.29). In the chapters that follow analysis of data and implications and recommendations for practice, it will become clear how this research and dissertation is



part of an on-going method of critical reflection. The methodology used to collect, analyse and present the data is inextricably linked to the 'four lenses' approach to critical reflection.

Finally, in relation to praxis Kemmis and Smith (2008) pose a couple of interesting questions. 'In what ways can an understanding of praxis inform and guide the actions of educators' and 'to what extent does the conditions of educational practice today, especially in schools enable, contain or disable praxis'? (Kemmis and Smith 2008, p.4). Praxis as explained by Kemmis and Smith (2008) is an action, decision or a way of doing things that is morally committed and is orientated and informed by traditions in a particular field. Praxis is what people do when they take into account all the circumstances and exigencies that confront them at a particular moment and then taking the broadest view they can of what it is 'best to do', they act (Kemmis and Smith 2008). When the career guidance counsellor, through his/her practice, takes into account, not only his or her own interests but also the long-term interests of each individual student and the long-term interests of society and the world at large, then the guidance counsellor is engaging in praxis.

Praxis is addressed to educational practitioners 'who want to judge their actions by their educational consequences, that is, the consequences of their actions for the particular students and communities with whom they work' (Kemmis and Smith 2008, p.8). Critical reflection can enable us to step back from the day-to-day practice to assess and evaluate our practice as a whole, specifically the role played by career guidance counsellors in the decision-making process as experienced by young people. Critical reflection can help better understand that our actions often involve in-the-moment decisions about complex and demanding situations that may not always be in the best interests of the students. As Kemmis and Smith (2008, p.19) explain 'the capacity to recognise what is more important and significant in the hurly-burly of the moment and to interpret things against the bigger picture'. Thus as educators and specifically career guidance counsellors we are obliged to deliberate, drawing on our knowledge and experience, before deciding what to do in the knowledge that things may turn out in ways other than we would wish. This process of deliberation has been and will be facilitated through my interpretations of the realities facing students as they engage in the decision-making process.

## **4.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have outlined how this is a piece of qualitative research – specifically that the research is interpretivist, using a social constructivist approach employing constructivist grounded theory methodology to gather, analyse and interpret the view of students as they experience the choices process. The planning and logistics of the actual research has been detailed including ethical considerations and sampling. A social constructivist approach has been explained in some detail including issues of epistemology, ontology, ideology and axiology in relation to the research and a constructivist grounded theory as a methodology for the research has been introduced. I have also clarified how my interpretation of data has a constructivist approach where implications and recommendation for practice can lead to a modified practice, a social constructivist approach. This is where career, guidance advice and information is first, a co-construct of the realities of a decision-making process for individuals and second, advice and information is based on notions of equality and social justice where all students were able to make good, well-informed choices in the transition from school. The notions of critical reflection and praxis are situated in my own practice as a career guidance counsellor, especially how knowledge of what is ‘going on’ during the decision-making process can facilitate an improvement in practice. In the next chapter I present the findings in relation to the reality of the decision-making process as expressed by the students and teachers.

## **Chapter 5. The decision-making process for young people in the transition from school.**

### **5.1 Introduction.**

The overall purpose of this findings chapter is to identify the key elements of the reality of the decision-making process for individual students as expressed by the students themselves and by staff members involved in supporting them through the process. The findings are presented thematically, the themes having emerged as the result of an analysis process described in chapter 4, and illustrations of which are included in Appendices D, E and F.

This chapter first by way of backdrop to the findings that follow clarifies the key approaches in the literature to careers decision making. It goes on to explain the ways in which the themes from the findings help address the research questions.

The findings are divided into two main sections: first, drawing on the emergent themes of *multiple influences* and *whole school supports* the ‘how’, ‘when’, and ‘where’ of the decision making process are presented. Second, the themes of *inequalities*, *inconsistencies in support* and *rational decision-making* help to present the findings on the consequences of the decision-making process.

Finally, the findings from this study are discussed in the context of the literature and to address the research questions towards an understanding of how the individuals in this study experience the careers decision-making process.

### **5.2 The context for decision-making.**

For most of the twentieth century career guidance provision in Ireland has essentially followed the approach developed by Parsons (1909). Parsons’ ‘trait and factor’ approach essentially attempted to ‘match’ people with jobs that would ‘best-fit’ by measuring their interests, aptitudes and abilities. There is no doubt that ‘best-fit’ approaches to career guidance have been enormously influential (McMahon and Patton 2000). For instance Holland’s (1985) self-directed research, personality types (Holland 1995, 1999) and Daws’ ‘Theory of Work Adjustment’ (2002, 2005) where people are matched with their environments as well as careers are intuitively appealing and are easily shared with students in a school setting. In the previous chapter a shift towards constructivism in careers education is described and so notwithstanding the value and current use of ‘trait and factor’ approaches

the findings here are set within this move towards constructivism. In response to the changing nature of work in globalised market places and the impact this has had on decision-making among young people new models are needed that are better suited to ‘illuminate the role of career development than traditional matching models’ (Bassot 2012 p.32).

A number of studies have been useful for the process of trying to understand the ‘how’, ‘what’, ‘where’ and ‘when’ of the decision-making process. A study by Semple et al. (2002) highlights the important influence of parents, Archer (1984, 2003), talks about agency as part of the decision-making while the findings from Smyth and Banks’ study (2011) in Ireland suggests that decisions are made within three sets of processes: an individual student’s attitude and experience of school, the school’s approach to career guidance advice and information and the extent to which young people themselves research and evaluate different options. An important aspect of the findings presented here is the way in which guidance advice and information is provided for. In the UK a report by a House of Lords Committee (2015) it was shown that sixty-two per cent of students found the school a source of support and thirty six per cent said the careers service was a direct support to them as they made their decisions. International evidence suggests that career guidance provision such as individual guidance sessions, group work and classroom based activities can have a positive impact on the development of students’ career related decisions (Morris et al. 1999) and research, in different national contexts, shows that young people would generally like more help with their decision-making in school (Keys et al. 1998; Maychell et al. 1998). Similarly in Ireland research has indicated that decisions are made as part of a complex interaction of school experience, family background and student aspiration (McCoy et al. 2010).

### **5.3 The research questions.**

By way of reminder here, the first research question seeks to identify and focus on the ways in which career guidance, advice and information are provided for, both the positive and negative aspects:

What paradigms of practice inform career guidance, advice and information delivery in Ireland, and how are these paradigms informed by ideology?

In section 2.5 I explained how this first research question had to be modified to include a consideration of ideology. The reading of literature on education policy in Ireland, including

careers education, indicated that ideology, particularly neoliberal ideology is a constituent part of how career guidance, advice and information is provided for.

Having focused on how career guidance, advice and information is provided for and how this is driven by a particular ideology the second research question asks:

How does career guidance advice and information impact on young peoples' decision-making in the transition from school?

The themes (Fig.5.2) are as a result of my analysis and interpretation of the ways in which the students describe their experience of the decision-making process. The third research question asks:

Can a social constructivist approach to career guidance, advice and information off opportunities for improved practice?

Chapter three explains in some detail why, if there is to be a different way of providing for careers guidance, a social constructivist approach is one of those worth considering.

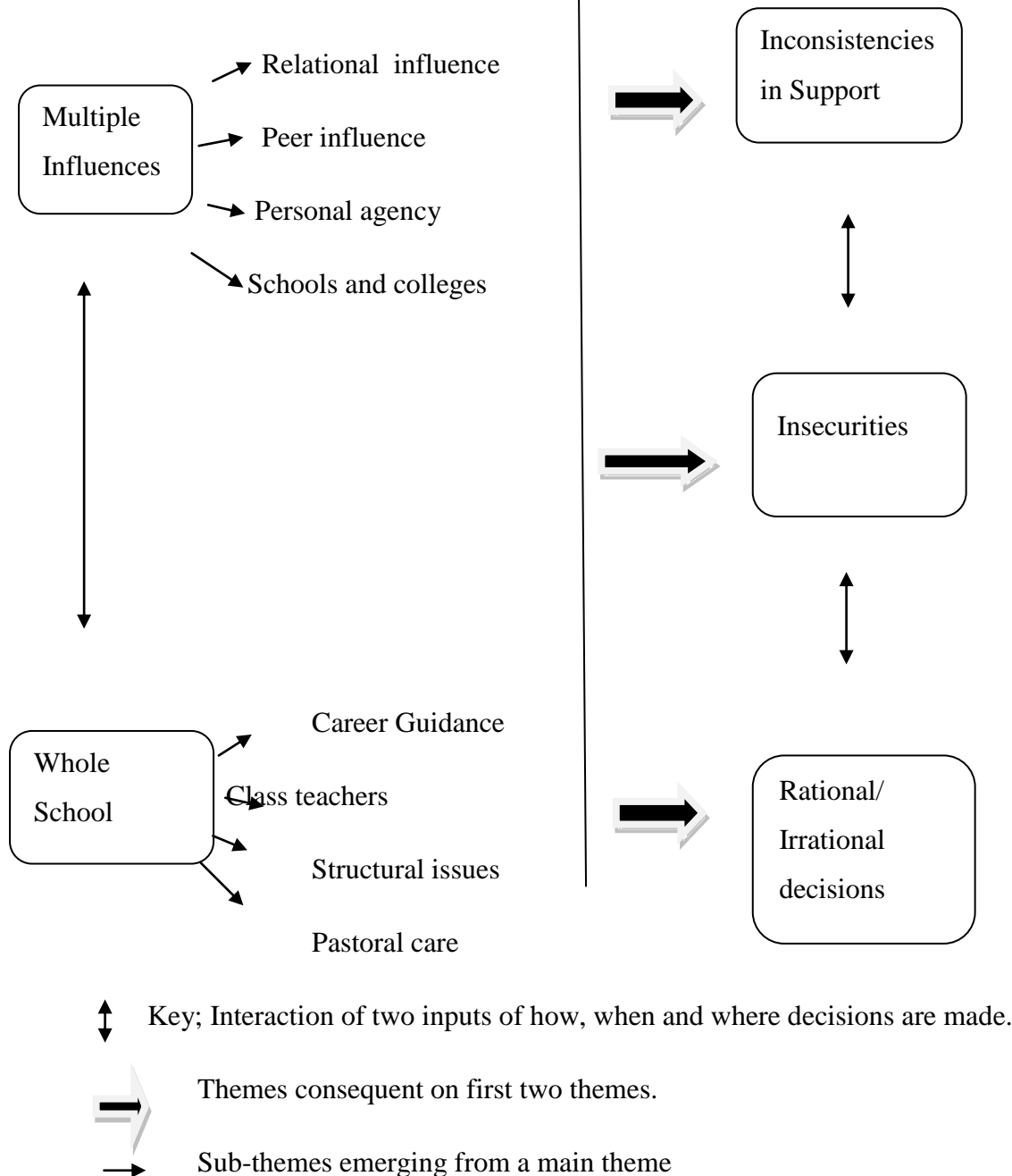
#### **5.4 Understanding the decision-making process.**

In this section the findings related to the decision-making process as experienced by students and staff are presented. From listening to the account of how individual students experience the process it became clear that the realities for each student were different but a consistency emerged in 'how', 'where' and 'when' decisions were made. Both students and teachers consistently indicated decisions were made within two arenas, multiple influences outside of school and whole school supports. Within the first main theme of '*multiple influences*' four sub-themes emerged. Multiple influences consisted of *relational influences*, *peer influence*, *personal agency*, and *marketing and promotion* by third level institutions. The theme of '*whole school support*' includes support from career guidance counsellors, subject teachers, pastoral care supports and structural considerations (as shown in Figure 5.1).

For the purpose of anonymity I have used the labels S1 to S5 to represent the first group of students who were making their choices. I have used RS1 to RS5 for the five students returning from college and CG1 to CG5 to represent the staff involved with providing careers advice.

The themes and how they link with each other to interpret what the participants are saying are shown in Figure 5.1 below. I deconstruct and explain this diagram in the sections that follow.

**Figure 5.1 Themes emerging from the data**



#### 5.4.1 Multiple influences

An analysis of the findings shows there are a number of influences impacting on how decisions are made. While each student has different experiences and is influenced by different things, a number of sub-themes consistently emerge from the data namely,

*relational influences, the influence of peers, personal agency and marketing and promotion* by third level institutions (as shown in Figure 5.1).

### Relational influences

The findings from this study support the view that parents and extended family play an important role during the decision-making process. For instance, the wider family have a strong influence on young people by providing an example of a certain lifestyle and offer supports for certain occupational choices which tend to follow their own occupations (Small and McClean, 2002).

However, an important aspect of the influence of parents, siblings and of the wider family is the contradictory nature of the advice where students are receiving mixed messages and as further indicated in the findings there is a hierarchy of influences where some members of the family are listened to while others are not.

The findings from this study indicate that all students and staff are very aware of the influence that parents and wider family have on the decision-making process and that very often these influences are saying different things to the young people. A good example of this from one student when she says:

My brother went to U.C.D and he did engineering and I had a few cousins also went there. And they told me it was a really nice college, it is very well established and it's the best known in Ireland. Dad also did engineering and he said it would be a great career for me. He also said there are a lot more girls doing engineering. (RS1)

However the contradictory nature of relational advice is highlighted in the next sentence when the same student says:

My auntie is a nurse and she said she loved it and Mum said maybe I should give that a go. (RS1)

Clearly there are conflicting messages being conveyed and it is little wonder the student would be confused about their choice.

Also in relation to contradictory influences, one staff participant (CG2) recalled a clear incidence of conflicting messages,

For instance, I had a boy last week who said he wanted to do sports science. He is very sporty and his career interest profile pointed to sports. We spent a good while talking about sports careers and the best places to study sports. We had a very productive meeting and he was happy with his choices and so was I! The next day he came into school to say that his mother said no way he was doing sports and he should do nursing. He has now put nursing as his number one choice! (CG2)

Students and staff clearly indicate the process of making choices is frustrated by different messages coming from different sources:

It can be very frustrating working with a student... doing your best to ensure they're making the right choices while at the same time being undermined by outside influences...advice not based on fact! (CG1)

And so, it hardly surprising that when students choose a course or college, it often turns out to be a less than perfect choice. As one of the 'returning' students succinctly said:

Sure in the end I was getting so much (advice) that I just picked something that would keep everybody happy. (RS2)

There have been a number of studies, (Semple et al. 2002, McCoy et al. 2010) where the influence of parents has been highlighted. This study supports the view that the wider family, especially parents, are a key influence. This study however, also highlights where informal advice from parents and family can often contradict advice given in school as part of formal career guidance, advice and information provision. Career guidance counsellors express a frustration in their practice, while they are aware that parents have an important input, career guidance, advice and information provision does not seem to accommodate family, especially parents, as part of formal career guidance provision in schools. The extent to which advice from parents can be contradictory is not something I would have anticipated at the start of this study.

#### Peer influence

The second influence as part of an overall multiple influence theme is in relation to the influence of peers. Three aspects which emerged from the discussions with students relating to the influence of peers are; peers are a significant influence on the decisions made; there is



an awareness in many cases that individuals give too much weight to the thoughts and feelings of their peers and as with relational influences much of the advice from peers is contradictory and can end up confusing the issue for students. For one particular student the influence of friends would seem to be the strongest influence on her:

A lot of my friends are doing teaching and they all say that the college is very good....the two girls I'm best friends with are both going to Letterkenny to do nursing so I am seriously thinking about that. (S2)

Contradictory messages from peers whether can have a disorientating effect on young people. The findings here indicate that 'what my friends think' affects the college location, the course chosen or indeed whether an individual decides to go to college or not:

I really want to do secondary teaching but everyone just laughs at that...the feeling seems to be...sure who would want to be a teacher after what we've been through (S3)

Another student said that she wanted to do music and that she had researched University of Limerick as being the best course for her but:

Most of my friends are going to Derry...so...I dunno...it's hard to decide. I know I shouldn't be just following my friends but it's hard to go away on your own (S4)

The feeling of staff, career guidance counsellor, year head and subject teacher was best summed up by one of the career guidance counsellors who said:

There is no point in saying to young people that they shouldn't be influenced by their friends. They are very much influenced by what friends think and what friends are doing (CG3)

Going to college is a time of significant change for students and it would be harsh for careers advisors to say young people should not put so much weight on what friends are doing. However, analysis of the data in this study shows clearly that there are contradictory messages between the views of the students themselves and those of either parents, peers or both. The findings show that for a number of students the influence of peers is firstly very important but that often the advice and opinions from peers is in conflict with any decision

the student might make on their own. As careers advisors it is necessary to understand the influence of peers on decision made and that this influence is not necessarily a negative thing. However this influence can be in conflict with decisions and choices students might make if they were left to their own devices.

This sub-theme of *peer influence*, emergent from the data, further indicates the individual nature of how students experience the decision-making process, where advice from outside school can often contradict either what the student might wish to do or what advice is given as part of career guidance, advice and information provision.

### Personal agency

The third sub-theme emerging from the overall theme is of multiple influences is personal agency. Much has been written emphasising the means by which students select academic and career choice options. For instance the aspect of social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986) which has received the most attention is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to ‘people’s judgements of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances’ (Bandura 1986, p.391). In terms of this study self-efficacy is a measurement of the students’ beliefs whether they can make a choice that is informed and is suitable for their needs.

Notwithstanding other influences, most students in this study essentially felt that they had decided on courses and/or colleges on their own. This was often as a result of their own research or more often because of a particular skill, ability or aptitude. Indeed the results of the questionnaire (Appendix A), show that students’ ‘own research’ and ‘own interest’ were the biggest influence on the choices made, eighty-eight percent declaring it was their research and eighty-six percent declaring it was their own interest that was the biggest influence on their decision-making. The students in this study are active agents in the decision-making process who for the most part were rationally weighing up the different options open to them, however these choices are made within the parameters of ‘what is possible’ (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997):

I really like the sound of Limerick college for music but maybe it’s a bit far...the course in Derry is very good...I could end up there sure. (S4)

A student exercising a good level of efficacy said:

My father didn't really want me to go to college but I had a great interest in writing and he knew I was quite good so he kinda gave in eventually. (RS4)

While students in this study articulated that they are making their own decisions the study findings clearly highlight that the decisions made at the transition from school is the culmination of a much larger process and of many influences. Whether or not the students in this study have a truly 'free-choice' is dependent upon a number of influences, both positive and negative, which impact on 'what is possible'. As one of the returning students succinctly put it:

I thought I was able to choose whatever courses I wanted but this didn't turn out that way... there are a lot of people to keep happy and a lot of things to think about. (RS4).

This particular student was adamant that he was interested in writing, was good at it, and wanted to study creative writing in college despite the 'advice' from home creative writing was the path he chose. The students in this study disclosed that while ostensibly they were free to choose whatever course or college they wanted, personal agency is affected by the various conflicting messages that the student is subject to whether from peers or family. The findings suggest that while all options are in theory open to students, conflicting advice and information from various sources mean that successful colleges and courses which can be considered to be 'less of a risk' are favoured by students. As one student responded when asked about her choice of college for nursing in her chosen course:

Well I looked at all them other courses and they looked great so I went to the open day but ah Derry is a lot handier and you could do nursing there even though it takes a year longer (S1).

The students felt that the ultimate decision on the careers and colleges chosen was essentially theirs to make. This reflects the traditional paradigm of practice that informs career guidance provision in Ireland, where course and college choices are often made in school, through a meeting between the career guidance counsellor and the student. Thus while this study has confirmed there are many influences impacting on the choices students are making as they leave school, the conflicting nature of these influences is very clear. The logical consequence of conflicting advice and influences is that decisions are not always the most informed and that they may not always be the best decisions for the student. Students appear to regard

colleges that are geographically easy to get to, courses that are perceived as being not too difficult and course and colleges where friends seem to be going are important factors in the students' decisions. Students in this study are aware of the 'risks' going to an unfamiliar town or city, and coupled with having to cope with and absorb contradictory advice and messages makes 'what is the handiest' (S2) appealing.

#### Marketing and promotion by third level institutions

The final sub-theme in relation to the main theme of 'multiple influence' is the effect of marketing and promotion by third level institutions. Essentially third level institutions have three strategies for marketing and promotion; open days, visiting speakers and their prospectus (either as part of a careers library or as a website). Students and staff in this study were positive about open days and appear to benefit from them. In many cases these trips to college influence what courses the student put on their CAO application form:

I actually went to five open days, I went to DCU (Dublin City University), UCD (University College Dublin), I went to the engineering talk and it was really good...you get to see what the place is like. (RS1)

and from a student still considering options:

I have been to a couple of open days...it was great fun and there seemed to be a great buzz...Letterkenny looks to be a cool place to go! (S1)

Students were also positive about visiting speakers from college coming to schools:

If you are interested in a college you could go to the talk, you got loads of good information...like on what courses they have and accommodation, (RS2)

Career guidance counsellors were also very appreciative of the efforts some universities made:

It didn't seem to be any problem to travel all that way...it was great for my students to see someone enthusiastic about their college and selling the good points to the students (CG2).

Open days and visiting speakers were received positively by both students and staff as a way of engaging with colleges first hand.

Finally, as we have seen in this and other studies (ESRI, 2011) research by students themselves is a key factor in the decision making process. Both students and staff indicated in their responses both in the questionnaire and the interview that college websites are a significant source of information and all colleges now take advantage of multimedia marketing. However, a hard copy prospectus still seems to be useful, especially as part of a careers library:

I still like to get a class set of prospectuses and have them available for students, they are very useful for careers class (CG2).

And:

I made sure to get a copy of the prospectus for UCD because this is where I wanted to go and it had all the information there (RS1)

The participants in the interviews indicated that open-days, guest speakers and student research into published materials and websites are a main-stay of career guidance, advice and information provision. In addition the students emphasise the constituent elements of *marketing and promotion* by third level institutions as having a positive effect on their decision-making. The staff in the interviews also indicate the positive effects of initiatives under this sub-theme. The first theme emerging from the data, *multiple influences* reflects the different elements of career guidance provision experienced by students. Student and staff recounted in the interviews that there are many aspects of how decisions are made as part of career advice and support. Accounts of their experiences of how career guidance is provided for makes it possible to address the first research question. These sub-themes contribute to an understanding of how decisions are made and the influences on these decisions.

As mentioned the first research question refers to paradigms of practice and whether these paradigms are based in a particular ideology. The findings above indicate that multiple influences: relational (especially parents), peer influences, personal agency and marketing from third level colleges are an integral part of how career guidance advice and information is provided for in the school where this study was carried out. Also, it appears that certain courses and colleges are privileged over other courses and colleges. Such courses like medicine, Engineering and Science are part of a neoliberal view of education where these courses are recommended to students in preference to, for example, the liberal arts.

In chapter 2 I explained how the first research question had to be modified to include consideration of ideology. The findings here support the literature reviewed in chapter two that a particular neoliberal ideology is a constituent part of how career guidance, advice and information is provided for. The students here report that certain colleges and certain courses, such as medicine and engineering, are encouraged and promoted as part of careers advice. The pressure to promote certain courses in colleges comes from parents, thinking about future employment, schools concerned with their standing within the community and policy makers who are currently promoting mathematical and technological courses as responding to the needs of the economy.

### **5.4.2 Whole school support**

The first main theme ‘multiple influences’ is used to highlight the ‘how’ of decision making. The second main theme emerging from the data ‘*whole school support*’ highlights the ‘when’ and ‘where’ of decisions made in the transition from school. In analysing the data four sub-themes emerged; *career guidance*, *subject teachers*, *structural issues in schools* and *pastoral supports* within the school (as shown in Figure 5.1). These four sub-themes are used to analyse what is meant by ‘whole schools supports’ and are presented here now.

The themes reflect the way the participants experience career guidance, advice and information as part of making decisions and as such are useful in addressing the research questions.

#### **Career guidance, advice and information**

Figures from the whole year group in the school, where this research was carried out, show that twenty-five percent of students from the higher socioeconomic group believe that advice from the career guidance counsellor was an important factor in their decision making. An interesting finding from this study is that this figure rose to fifty-seven percent in the lower socio-economic group. Students were broadly positive about guidance provision but at the same time express the desire for more time with the guidance counsellor and more information on options open to them. This apparent contradiction in the views of career guidance is explained by students’ awareness of time constraints on guidance counsellors. The following is a typical example of such awareness:

The help I got from my careers teacher was very helpful. She told me all about CAO and where was the best place to study... but she seems to have so much to do... she has classes and is even a year head... so I only had a short time with her. I didn't think she had time to see me again. (S2)

In relation to the provision of career guidance in the school, a number of aspects emerged from the data which help me to understand what paradigms inform the way career guidance, advice and information is provided for. First, in keeping with other studies in Ireland (ESRI 2011) the findings here support the view that career guidance is very useful for administrative aspects of choosing courses. Details such as closing dates, application forms, scholarships and grants are all administered efficiently by career guidance counsellors in schools. Second, students and staff indicate here that one-to-one meetings are very beneficial and are an important part of career guidance provision. Indeed all participants explained that one-to-one meetings are more useful than classroom based career guidance. A third aspect that emerged from the data refers to the timing of careers advice support. In addressing a question relating to the provision of career guidance, advice and information it is important to note that both students and staff feel careers interventions should come much earlier in the students' time in school. Both staff and students indicated that decisions taken early in school had consequences later when post school decisions are being taken. Finally, I have used the findings to address an aspect of career guidance, advice and information provision relating to the emphasis put on career guidance class. The students feel there is an over emphasis on 'going to college' to the detriment of other pathways. The following examples illustrate how the data helps me to address the research question in relation to the ways in which career guidance is provided for, particularly the 'when' and 'where' of decision making.

While the students expressed different levels of reliance on careers advice and advice from teachers in general, the influence of career guidance counsellors was a significant factor in the decision-making process overall. As one student said:

I had to go to the careers teacher as I had no idea what to do...at least after the meeting I had some idea (S3)

And another student said:

The help from the career guidance (teacher) was very useful for the dates, the booklet, (CAO), forms and all that stuff. (S5)

When asked whether one-to-one meetings or timetabled classes were of most benefit all of the students and the guidance counsellors asserted that the former were of most benefit. One student said that the guidance class was not really relevant to her:

I didn't really find careers class that useful 'cos it was all about CAO and UCAS and at that time I was pretty sure I was going to Derry Tech...so it wasn't much use to me. (S2)

A member of staff commented:

Guidance class is fine for general information...things relevant to most students, forms, deadlines, open days etc....but really the real career guidance takes place in the one-to-one meetings where advice can be tailored to the needs of the individual student. (CG4)

A concern emerged from the data where the findings indicate that both students and staff believe it would be beneficial to receive career guidance support at an earlier age in the first three years of secondary schooling. This was voiced strongly by staff who disclosed a certain frustration that they were not able to give the advice and support that they would like to give to junior classes in their schools:

I have to run around junior classes giving out information on subject choices and on what their choices are at senior level. I am not timetabled for junior classes so they receive very little guidance. (CG3)

A student when asked about guidance in junior school responded along the same lines:

We had the careers guy come in a couple of times....I was out for one of them. He talked a bit about subjects and stuff and what would be good subjects to do for leaving cert...but after that it was just up to our selves. (RS4)

A significant concern emerged with regard to the structure of career guidance provision, a certain amount of frustration was expressed regarding career guidance timetabled classes.



Issues arose during the interviews relating to the content of guidance classes which many students felt were too narrowly framed in terms of third level choices, CAO and UCAS applications. There appeared to be relative neglect of non-third level education and training opportunities such as apprenticeships. Typically these classes are timetabled once a week for each class group of perhaps twenty-five students. The frustrations felt by both students and staff relates to how to deliver a class (lasting forty minutes) once a week, which will benefit all the students:

I used to just sit there in careers class...bored out of my tree. I had no interest in what was going on most of the time. (RS4)

Another student said:

All I heard was CAO, CAO in every class. Nothing about apprenticeships which I was thinking about and I didn't hear anything about that stuff. (S2)

Subject teachers and making choices

A 'whole schools support' system in schools is envisaged to be exactly that and consequently the role of subject teachers, years heads and formal classes such as Social, Political, and Health Education (SPHE) have emerged as important aspects of the choices process.

In relation to influence from school, the significance of subject teachers was often highlighted during the interviews. One particular student who had a special talent in music and who was applying to various courses in music relied quite heavily on the advice from her teachers:

I had a chat with my drama teacher who said there were good courses in music and drama in Derry and you could take drama and music or just music and my piano teacher said it was a good course. (S4)

And further on in our conversation she said:

Well, there was a substitute music teacher who was there for just a few months and she was studying at the University of Limerick. I spent the whole lesson once

just talking to her about the course that she did...she said she loved it...that's where I am going to go. (S4)

This student carried out her own extensive research and she had a particular ability in music but the influence of the music teachers in the school is clear. Another student explained that his English teacher was one of the main reasons why he had now decided to do an English course at college:

I was always sort of interested in English...I enjoyed writing but it was only when I was in 6th year that I thought I might be good at it. The teacher read and commented on my writing even when it wasn't part of the course...he really encouraged me (RS4)

This particular student is a high achiever and right up until near the end of his final year all the advice from school and home was that he should pursue a course in Medicine. Applications to courses in third level colleges in Ireland are based on a competitive points system which can often lead to those students with potential for high points opting for high points courses. The findings from this study indicate that subject teachers can and do have an important influence on the decision making process for students.

The role and importance of subject teachers is further evidence that career guidance, advice and information is not provided through the career guidance counsellor alone. The findings here seem to indicate that, not only are subject teachers part of career guidance provision, they play a significant role in the decision-making process. There was a consistency in that most students reported that particular teachers, for instance the music teacher for the student applying to music courses, were important sources of advice on particular courses and colleges.

#### Pastoral care supports

Pastoral care supports are an important aspect of school life and the findings also indicate pastoral care plays a significant role in helping students make good decisions. Pastoral care

supports can be formal as part of a tutor system <sup>3</sup> or as part of a Social, Political and Health Education (SPHE) programme<sup>4</sup>, however the findings indicate that pastoral supports are usually on a more informal basis where students and guidance counsellors articulate that general supports often arise out of informal relationships with teachers.

Analysis of the reality of the choices process for individual students as told by the students themselves indicate that in a number of areas students do not receive the same amount or quality of support when they are making decisions. Whole school guidance and support is part of the Irish secondary curriculum and whole school structures often exist in schools (for instance the SPHE programme), however the realities can often be very different:

I was lucky because the music teacher also taught S.P.H.E and she knew I was interested in music. She went through the qualities you need to do music in the class with me. (S4)

And:

The only time I spoke about my courses was to the career guidance teacher. I wanted to do teaching and when I asked a teacher about it she just said not to do teaching, to do something else. (S3).

Whole school support often takes the form of pastoral support where the career guidance counsellor is a key member of the pastoral care team:

We have a pastoral care team in school where students can be referred from any member of staff. Generally as the career guidance counsellor I have a special responsibility for senior students who may be having difficulty with various challenges as they approach the end of their time in school. (CG3). In most cases the students in the interviews said that schools are very supportive during the choices process and often teachers, having experience of the third level system and having a level of expertise in their subjects were noted as good sources of support:

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<sup>3</sup> In the Irish education system tutors are usually assigned to a class group. Tutors are tasked with the general well-being of the students.

<sup>4</sup> SPHE is a school wide classroom based subject that includes a module on making decisions and transitions from school.

I found that the best person to ask about courses in English or creative writing was the English teacher...she was very excited that someone would think about doing creative writing. (RS4)

And from a member of staff:

I have often directed my students who have an interest in a particular area to teachers in that area. They have knowledge of college, of courses, and are usually happy to help and advice students. (CG5)

In general then, while there are undoubtedly whole school supports in place to help and advice students, the actual levels and quality of that support on a day-to-day basis can be inconsistent. There is also evidence that students who are more proactive either from within themselves or from home are the ones that seek advice from school supports, pastoral, subject teachers and career counsellors. This is as opposed to students who for personal or other reasons lack a 'push' from home are not as proactive that could perhaps need the support more. This is evidenced by a student, who said:

I didn't go to my one-to-one meeting with careers because I didn't know what I wanted to do....I thought that you had to have a good idea of what you wanted to do before you could go. (S3)

Again, like the influence of subject teachers pastoral care seems to be an important aspect of careers advice and support. Pastoral care appear to have an important impact on whether students are able to navigate the decision making process and make good, informed choices.

#### Structural concerns in relation to decision-making

I have spoken previously about obdurate realities around the decision-making process, a terminal examination, a points based entry system and an over reliance on 'going to college'. These realities are of course largely outside the control of the students and the theme *structural concerns* highlights further aspects of how decisions are made that are largely outside the control of the students. With respect to the research questions the findings help to establish that it is within these *structures* that career guidance is provided for. The students indicate that structures such as timetabling of career guidance classes, amount and timing of career guidance and whether students are free to choose their subjects and levels. The students are also aware of the impact that *structures* can have on their choices in the transition from school. Also, an important part of how career guidance, advice and

information is provided for relates to expectations and aspirations, that the school in general and the career advisors in particular might have for the student. My interpretation of findings in this study is that different expectations of students, for whatever reason, are an important influence on the final decision made..

During the interviews comments consistently made by both staff and students relate to what can be termed structural limitations on guidance provision. Three aspects in particular seemed to engage both students and staff in this study, first, timetabling of career guidance classes, second, the amount and timing of guidance and third, subject choices and levels of subjects on offer.

The findings from this study indicate that in general students (and staff) were positive about one-to-one career meetings with their guidance counsellor since these provided an opportunity to discuss their individual career plans:

My career meeting was great because it helped me to decide what I wanted to do... up to that I had loads of things in my head (RS2)

Similarly a student who had attended a meeting with the career guidance counsellor the previous week said:

My careers teacher, she really helped me a lot, she showed me books from different colleges and we were able to go through them and pick which was the best for me. (S3)

Many students compared the one-to-one sessions with their guidance counsellor to their timetabled guidance classes and felt that they were better because of the individual attention they received. Secondary schools in Ireland, in common with most countries operate under budgetary constraints and as such timetabled guidance classes will probably be a feature of career guidance, advice and information for the foreseeable future.

Recent Irish research has shown that students are positive about early information and support in relation to entry into higher education (McCoy et al. 2010). The findings here concur with that view as students explained during the interviews it would have been better to receive career support earlier in their school careers. In Ireland, again due to timetabling constrictions, junior students are not generally timetabled for career guidance. For some

students there was a realisation that their choices were limited because of decisions they had made in junior school, even in first year. A typical comment was:

I was looking at courses on the internet the other day and turns out...it's like...you can't do this 'cos you haven't got a language or you can't do that 'cos you don't have biology...well...we should've been told about that before we picked our subjects (S5)

Also some student who had taken subjects at ordinary level instead of higher now found out that as well as points there are certain subject requirement for certain courses. One student who was seriously thinking about a career in teaching explained:

I had a wee notion about teaching but turns out you need higher level Irish to do teaching...would've been handy if I had known that. (S2)

Structural considerations also came into play in the findings of this study in relation to subject-choices and levels of subjects on offer.

As one student said:

I really wanted to do Engineering but I wasn't able to do Chemistry and Physics in school because I also wanted to do a language. (RS1)

The findings from this study highlight that timetabling and school resources can have an influence on the decisions that students make. One student explained how she felt that her choices were narrowed because of the subject choices she made when entering senior cycle in school:

I really wanted to do a language so I chose French and then because I was interested in health care I chose biology. I liked history and geography but this meant I had no business subject....so now I can't do business. (S1)

An important aspect of 'quality of support' relates to expectations and whole school support. The findings from this study suggest that the nature of guidance and whole school support, teachers, year-head, pastoral care team, can reflect the expected pathways to be taken by young people. Higher education being seen as the 'automatic' route for some and not for

others and some students felt that their guidance counsellor had low expectations for them where a technical college might be suggested in preference to a university:

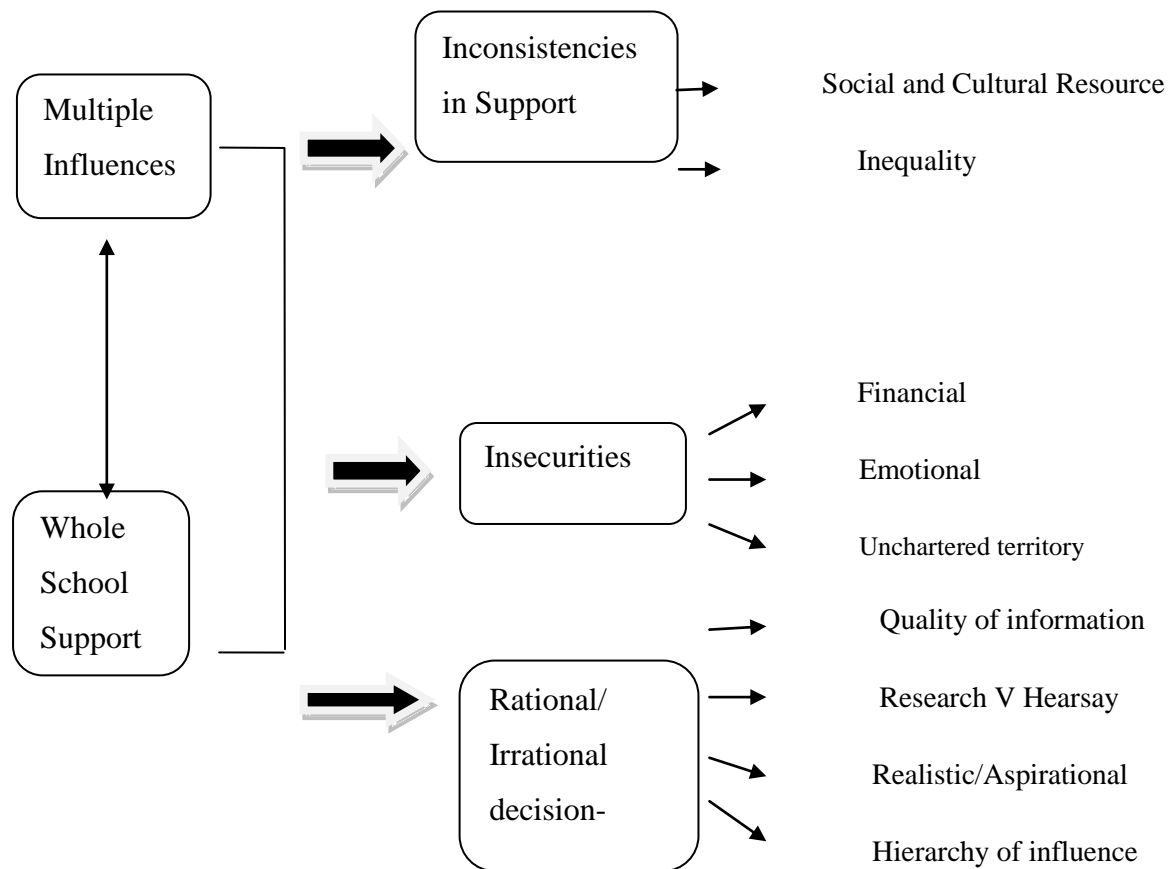
I went to my careers meeting and once I said I was thinking about nursing she kept talking about Derry Tech even though I said to her I went to the open day in Galway and liked it. (S1)

Another student felt that their guidance counsellor discouraged them from applying for what they wanted and argued that they should be 'realistic' about their career choices:

I had this notion about medicine but he just kept saying that's okay but you need to be realistic...what about this....what about that. (RS4)

Comments like the above are particularly relevant in light of the mixed socio-economic context of the school where this research took place. The findings indicate that students attending the same school may be subject to very different expectations from staff for a variety of reasons, prior achievement, social background and whether or not the school regards the prospective choices as realistic or aspirational.

**Figure 5.2 Linkages between themes used to analyse and interpret data.**



Key;  $\updownarrow$  Interaction of two inputs of how, when and where decisions are made

$\Rightarrow$  Themes consequent on first two themes.

$\rightarrow$  Sub-themes emerging from a main theme.

### 5.5. Consequences of how decisions are made

The overall purpose of this section of the findings chapter is to present an analysis of the consequences for students of the decision-making process in secondary schools in Ireland. Three main themes emerged from the data: inconsistencies in support; *insecurities* and *rational/irrational decision-making*. Links with the two main themes presented in section 5.4 and the sub-themes emerging as part of the three themes above are illustrated in Fig. 5.2.





In section 5.4 the findings relating to individual realities of the decision-making process were presented using the two main themes of multiple influences and whole school supports. A significant conclusion is that while these two themes were consistent for all the students, the amount and quality of influences and whole school supports varied widely from one student to another. Students reported variance in relational influences, peer influences, personal agency and their use of third level colleges support. Also in relation to whole school supports students reported different levels and quality of support in career guidance, supports from class teachers and support in relation to pastoral care. Students also indicated that structural issues, such as how careers class was timetabled, subject choices and subject levels were important factors in how they experienced the decision-making process.

The consequences of individual realities of the decision-making process are presented in this section.

The findings presented here now indicate that students have different experiences of career guidance provision and as a result the consequences of the careers support and advice are different for each student. The themes emerge from the ways in which the students articulate these different consequences. The themes used to consider whether a different way of providing for careers guidance advice is appropriate in my context.

Three main themes are emergent from the data: inconsistencies in support; insecurities and rational/irrational decisions. Within the first theme of inconsistencies in support, two significant sub-themes emerged from the data. The findings indicate students have different social and cultural resources, from home and their wider social environment when they arrive in school. Some students are better equipped to avail of school supports and inequality can often result when supports are within a one-size-fits-all structure. Three main sub-themes emerged from the data under the main theme of insecurities. The students indicated that they often experience financial and emotional stress and anxiety and staff were also conscious that the whole school process was very much uncharted territory for students. Finally, quality of information, focused research or hearsay, realistic choices or aspirational and hierarchy of influences are used to consider whether a decision or set of decisions might be regarded as rational or not.

### **5.5.1 Inconsistencies in support**

A recurring theme arising from the data is the inconsistent nature of the advice and support received by individual students. The first part of this findings chapter illustrates that structural deficiencies in the way in which career guidance, advice and information is provided for and the quality of such support means that students are reliant on outside influences and relational and social networks to help them make decisions. The findings from this study also indicate that decision-making, in relation to choices, are influenced by a number of factors including social background, home environment, expectations of success and the individual students' own aspirations.

#### **Cultural and social resources**

Both students and staff have articulated how higher education choice is exercised in different ways for different students or groups of students. The findings show the complex interaction of school experience, family background and student aspirations in influencing the choices taken at the end of secondary schooling. This study also indicates clear differences in the resources, family and social networks and information upon which the young people from different backgrounds can draw. Some students have indicated that they have access to insider knowledge from siblings and other family members in sourcing information about colleges and courses, while for others there was little or no family history of attending third level college. For some students there is a 'taken for granted' element about going to third level education with research and decisions based on specificities such as points and subject requirements. In contrast, the findings showed that for students whose families had little or no history of entry to higher education had to first decide on whether to apply to third level education or not.

During the interviews with young people in this study, the direct influence of parents and wider social environment was evident among students from all backgrounds. For some students from middle-class backgrounds certain occupations were 'in the family', and so students applied for the same course, often in the same university, to make sure they were successful:

My dad did electrical engineering and so did my brother, both in UCD so I knew a good bit about the course and that it is a good well paid job because we are comfortable at home. (RS1)

Also there was evidence of parents exposing their children to different types of work by bringing them to their place of work which often sparked their interest in pursuing relevant college courses:

I was able to shadow a radiographer in the hospital, set up by my friend's mum....so I was able to see the job at first hand. (RS2)

In addition to their parents, some students in this study relied on the experiences and advice of their older siblings and wider family. In some cases the negative experiences of siblings and wider family were just as influential as the positive ones, evidenced by the following quote from one student who had an initial interest in nursing but subsequently chose primary teaching:

Mum said I was good with children and would drop hints about the good points of teaching...mum is now a principal of a primary school. (S3)

And this student also said:

My auntie did nursing and has been a nurse for years and she said the work is hard and the hours are very long. (S3) In this study twenty four percent of students from higher socio-economic backgrounds said career guidance, advice and information was an important factor in their decisions while this figure rose to fifty-seven per cent for the lower socio-economic group. Some students indicated that there was very little advice from home on the specifics of the application process but at the same time a great deal of general support if students had aspirations to go to college at third level:

Mum and Dad never went to college so they don't know much about points, CAO and all that..... but they definitely want me to go (S4)

This is a typical example of a student who would be reliant on whole school supports and careers advice during the decision – making process. In this study however some students from the lower socio-economic group felt that the school, including the career guidance counsellor had lower expectations for them and the student themselves felt they were capable of much more in terms of post school education. The same student also declared:

The career guidance counsellor kept saying that Derry would be fine for me.....I suppose it would but I had looked up courses in Galway and Dublin that I might be interested in (S4)

The findings from this study indicate that despite students' assertions that they essentially choose their own courses and colleges, family and social environments have a clear demonstrable influence on their choices. It is also evident from the findings those families with a history of going to college and a tradition of certain occupations, especially professional occupations, have a definite influence on the young people's decision-making. Students with family members who have third level qualifications can obtain specific information about the content of the courses that they are applying for and the types of careers following on from those courses:

A lot of my friends went to St. Pat's. My mother actually went there and my sister is there now...so I thought I might as well go there. (RS3)

### ***Inequality***

Educational inequality is the difference in the learning results, or efficacy, experienced by students coming from different socio-economic groups (Haskins & Kemple 2009). Family background influences cultural knowledge and middle class knowledge of norms and customs allows students with this background to better navigate the school system. Parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds also have social networks that prove to be more beneficial than networks based in lower socio-economic groups (Gamoran 2001).

An important over-arching theme running through the interviews with students and staff is inconsistencies in the various ways career guidance, advice and information is provided for students and the supports available for the students. The data from the interviews suggest a general level of inequality as a result of inconsistencies in levels of support from within and outwith the school environment. Whole school guidance and support, for instance, is part of the Irish secondary curriculum and is ostensibly provided equally to all the students (for instance the SPHE <sup>5</sup> programme), however the realities can often be very different:

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<sup>5</sup> Social and Political Health Education is a second-level subject in Irish secondary schools that has elements of careers education included.

I was lucky because the music teacher also taught SPHE and she knew I was interested in music. She went through the qualities you need to do music in the class with me. (S4)

And:

The only time I spoke about my courses was to the career guidance teacher. I wanted to do teaching and when I asked a teacher about it she just said not to do teaching, to do something else (S3).

Whole school support often takes the form of pastoral support where the career guidance counsellor is a key member:

We have a pastoral care team in school where students can be referred from any member of staff. Generally as the career guidance counsellor I have a special responsibility for senior students who may be having difficulty with various challenges as they approach the end of their time in school. (CGC3).

In most cases, the students in the interviews said that schools are very supportive during the choices process and often teachers, having experience of the third level system and having a level of expertise in their subjects were noted as good sources of support:

I found that the best person to ask about courses in English or creative writing was the English teacher...she was very excited that someone would think about doing creative writing (RS4)

And from a member of staff:

I have often directed my students who have an interest in a particular area to teachers in that area. They have knowledge of college, of courses, and are usually happy to help and advise students (CG5)

In general then, while the above shows that there are undoubtedly whole school supports in place to help and advise students, the actual amount and quality of that support on a day-to-day basis is somewhat inconsistent. The data from this study does not indicate systematic support structures where support would be available in the same quantity and of the same quality for all students.

There is also evidence those students who are more proactive either from within themselves or from home, are often the ones who end up seeking advice from school supports. This is evidenced by a student, who said,

I didn't go to my one-to-one meeting with careers because I didn't know what I wanted to do....I thought that you had to have a good idea of what you wanted to do before you could go. (S3)

The students (and staff) have indicated that the level and quality of support that students can draw on to help them make decisions varies from student to student. The findings as presented here suggest different levels of social and cultural resources results in some students receiving more informed support and advice than others. This apparent inequality is part of my initial concern that initiated this research and is an important aspect of addressing with a different approach to practice, based on the social constructivist priorities is now an approach worth considering. The findings in this study indicate that the realities of day-to-day life in school can lead to a situation where inconsistencies in the levels of support inadvertently contribute to reinforcement of inequalities already existing when the student comes into the school.

### **5.5.2 Feelings of insecurity**

This theme highlights that students feel insecure, financially and emotionally, while having to cope with uncharted territory. There is a consistency in what the students are saying. They all report that the final year of school is a stressful time, that there are financial worries and the whole experience is new to them. The complexity of the whole process of making choices, in the transition from school, demands a subtle and well thought out approach. By using the themes of inconsistencies in support and insecurities I am better able to address the first two questions and the 'answers' to the first two questions help to address the third research question.

The final year of school is a stressful time with exams, deadlines and projects, and the focus here is on making important decisions for post-school education:

Looking back I don't know how I coped with it all.....you coast through the first five years of school...then bam it all happened in sixth year. (RS4)

The theme of insecurities around the decision-making process emerged from the data in three specific areas financial, emotional insecurities and in relation to uncharted territory for students where students are confronted with making important decisions for themselves often for the first time in their lives.

### ***Financial concerns***

Financial insecurities highlighted in the findings include: The cost of third level education; the cost of moving away versus staying at home; having to give up part time work when moving away from home and financing third level education, grants, fees, scholarships etc. There are of course different levels of financial worry for students but the following comments indicate that *financial concerns* are important for most students regardless of socio-economic background.

As one student said:

The whole thing is stressful enough but having then to worry what I am doing to my parents – can they afford for me to go to college. (S2)

And another student responded when asked about finance:

I know you can get grants and scholarships but I have no idea how you could go about getting a scholarship or how you apply for a grant. (S1)

The interviews highlighted that for many students the choice process appears to be quite complex and influenced by a range of factors but location and cost was of major importance with the majority of those interviewed. For some students going to a college that was within commuting distance was important:

How far from home I have to go is definitely a problem for me ...the colleges that I can travel to and stay at home will work out much cheaper than going away.  
(S1)

For some students the distance from home was the decisive factor. In the area where this research was carried out, a small town in the north-west of Ireland, the nearest universities are in Dublin and Galway which are both over three hours away. The students from small towns or rural areas in this study expressed reluctance to go to Dublin or Galway citing distance and cost. The following is a typical comment from the interviews:



I just couldn't see myself going to Dublin because of the cost so I am going to look at courses in Derry or Letterkenny. (S3)

While cost and distance are understandable considerations for the students in this study it meant that choices of course and/or college were not always made on the basis of whether the course/college was the best choice academically nor from a future career perspective. During the interviews the importance of understanding the reality of the decision-making process for individual students as a pre-requisite for careers advice and support became clear. One student indicated that perhaps the information and suggestions were not based on her individual reality:

I had thought about going to Galway or Dublin and there were a couple of course I wanted to go to and sure me and the guidance teacher went through these but all I was thinking was...what about my job and would I be able to afford to go there (S2).

And straight to the point another student said:

Sure where would I get a part time job in Dublin? (S1)

Issues around the cost of moving away from home and having to give up part time employment are real issues when considering which colleges to go to and which courses to choose. Financial concerns, while mentioned by nearly all the students, are more pressing for some students and is further evidence that careers guidance provision needs to be part of a particular reality for each student.

### ***Emotional insecurity***

Response from students and staff consistently indicated that the decision-making process can be very stressful because of a number of factors. The main reason expressed by nearly all the students was in relation to whether or not they were making the right decision:

When I was making the decision I changed my mind about five times, it was all science, all Dublin colleges and then I got rid of Dublin as it was all Galway because I knew then that that's where everyone was going...I put in my final

course half an hour before the deadline. Sure I didn't really know if I was doing the right thing. (RS4)

The above was from a student returning at Christmas in first year who was still not sure if he had chosen the right course. The following is a fairly typical response from a student in the middle of the decision-making process:

There were so many things to decide on, stay at home or go away...where to go to college...even what course to pick. I'm stressed out by it...how am I supposed to know if I'm doing the right thing? (S2)

A number of students alluded to the situation where their workload is very much concentrated in the final year of school. This leads to a prioritisation of their current studies as deadlines to complete projects, sit interviews and examinations have to be met. Students said that perhaps not enough time was spent on choices as other things took priority:

You have to have loads of things done in 6<sup>th</sup> year, projects, mock exams, deadlines for CAO and UCAS and interviews if you get called...and then your final exams! (RS1).

And:

Sure I just put down a few courses because I had to do my mocks and also had to do my construction project. (S. 3)

Of course some students were very clear in what they wanted to do:

I always knew I would do engineering in UCD (RS1)

And:

It was always going to be something in healthcare for me. (S1)

However, the majority of students were quite unsure and found making such a major life decision quite daunting. In this study ten students were interviewed five going through the choices process and five students who had made their choices to go to college and were now returning for Christmas. Only one student (S1) was clear about what they wanted to do from the beginning. One student RS1 was eventually sure about what she wanted to do engineering, but even this student had considered information technology and nursing. The other eight students were not at all sure in their choices including the returning students:

I don't think I got a lot of help but I didn't seek out help....because I wasn't sure myself, whereas if I had a definite career in mind then I could have got a lot more help....but because I was so indecisive there wasn't much help they could have given me, that's why I didn't ask. (RS4)

The students all indicated that there was so much going on in the final year of school especially final exams that it was hard to concentrate on choices. Again, all ten students reported that the decision making process was a stressful time as they were not used to making such important decisions that have implications on the future. This aspect of uncharted territory for the young person is the third sub theme emerging from the main theme of insecurities.

The findings from the interviews with both students and staff, as detailed above show an awareness of the supports that are available for young people as they make their choices. However, aside from the advice and support that young people receive making decisions this is the first time for many seventeen and eighteen year olds that the decision is ultimately theirs. Particular concerns for students expressed in the interviews include moving away from home:

I am not sure if I'm ready to move away from home now the time's nearly here.  
Mum and dad say it's up to me. (S3)

And from a member of staff:

I'm never sure if I've helped the student prepare for such a big change as moving away from home at such a young age. (CG)

On having to make the final choice:

I know what my parents want me to do but I know I have to do what's the best thing for me cos it's my decision really you know. (S3)

One student verbalised the situation as:

For the first time I was told it was my future and it was my decision so I had to choose what was best for me. I always wanted to make my own decisions but now that it was here ...I don't know' (RS1)

And from a number of staff:

As a careers advisor you are never sure if the advice you are giving is the right advice – there is a lot of responsibility on careers teachers to help students in the right way – there is no right or wrong answers! (CG5)

While a small number of students in the study relished a situation where they could make their own decisions, the majority found that having such a level of responsibility, perhaps for the first time, gave rise to a feeling of insecurity and doubt around whether one is doing the right thing, making the right choice.

The theme of *emotional security* provides a useful insight into how students feel as they prepare to make important choices. The students indicate a stressful time, varying levels of being able to cope and concern about making important decisions with implications for the future. Again, like other themes, the clear conclusion is that careers advice needs to be tailored to the individual needs of the students.

#### **5.4.3 Rational / irrational continuum**

The third main theme emerging from the data as a consequence of 'how' 'when' and 'where' decisions are made is whether or not the actual decisions made are rational or irrational. The data reveals that at all times the students are trying to make the best, most informed decisions they can and four criteria emerged in relation to the rationality of the decisions: *quality of information*; *research versus hearsay*; *realistic choices*, and *hierarchy of influences*. This final theme brings together many of the elements from the other themes as it refers to the

actual choices and the extent to which the students and staff believe that informed and rational choices are being made.

### *Quality of information*

The first sub-theme as part of this theme is in relation to whether decisions are made on the basis of relevant information or perhaps made on the basis of misinformation. The findings point clearly to a situation where the students who are returning from college indicate that they were not always armed with accurate information in relation to the choices they made. A good example of this misinformation acknowledged by the students is:

I did not do the HPAT<sup>6</sup> exam because I heard that only ten percent actually pass the exam. I thought that was very low – but I still didn't do the exam. (R.S.1)

When asked first where she got the information that only ten percent passed this exam the student was vague:

Ah sure I just heard it from around... that's what people were saying (RS1)

And second, when asked did she not think ten percent was a very low pass mark she said:

Yes I thought that....sure how could it only be ten percent ...I knew it couldn't be (RS1)

The concern for careers advisors is that this student felt that it was pointless doing an exam with a ten percent pass rate even though this was clearly misinformed. The level of misinformation upon which decisions were based was surprising. This was especially in relation to facts about points needed and subject requirements which are not open to equivocation. A number of the students in the study seem to take an 'easy option' by accepting advice from someone instead of checking the facts a good example of this being:

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<sup>6</sup> The HPAT examination is an aptitude type test used by medical schools in Ireland. All prospective students have to do it and their score is added to their leaving certificate points.

I heard that you would need two sciences if you wanted to do medicine....I only have Biology so that was that. (RS4)

There are in fact medical colleges in Ireland who do require two Science subjects but basic research would reveal that the sciences requirement is based on whether a student enrolls for a five or six year medical course (CAO 2015).

A certain level of frustration was also expressed by the staff members who participated in this study. This frustration is expressed by one staff member who said:

I couldn't count the number of times I hear students saying 'I heard that' or 'somebody told me' or 'my mother was just thinking that'...it can be very frustrating to think that despite all my efforts students are making decisions on information that isn't accurate. (CG5)

### ***Research v Hearsay***

The results of the questionnaire to the whole year group indicate that students make their decisions based on their own research. Eighty-nine per cent said they had researched their courses and colleges and seventy-nine per cent said they had researched college websites. Fifty-one per cent said they had researched courses and colleges using prospectuses produced by third level institutions. There is however evidence to suggest that hearsay still plays a part in decisions made. One student said:

I heard that limerick was not a nice city at all and that it's far away. I don't know how long it would take even to get there or if there's a bus...I just heard it's very far. (S2)

And one member of staff responded by saying:

It's amazing that after doing research, getting accurate information, getting the right results for careers etc. students will pick a course because it's near home, it sounds good or a lot of their friends are doing it. (CG5)

Following on from the above sentiment from the career guidance counsellor, the data would seem to indicate that decisions are sometimes made on the basis of hearsay as opposed to sound research. Comments like ‘I just heard it was a good course’ (S1) or ‘sure everyone said UCD was the best college so I went there’ (RS3) are all too common.

There is evidence from the findings that choices are not always based on sound research as evidenced by one student who changed to a completely unrelated course:

I applied to UCAS for radiography in Scotland. I liked it OK but it was always teaching in my mind and when I applied to Saint Pats for teaching I kinda knew what I was doing compared to the first time (RS2).

### ***Realistic choices?***

Whether a student’s decision is realistic or aspirational is an important criterion when judging if the decision is a good rational decision or not. Both realistic and not so realistic decisions were made and acknowledged as such during the interviews:

I had this notion about medicine in my head and even though I knew I hadn’t a hope of getting the points I still put it as my first choice – don’t ask me why. (RS4)

However, a representative comment from one career guidance counsellor was:

In fairness to most of the students they have a very good, realistic view of what they might get in the leaving cert in terms of points and they apply to appropriate colleges and courses. (CG2)

Recent Irish research has shown that advice and support can vary by social background and even within socio-economic groups (McCoy and Byrne 2011). Students in this research have described the types of support received from home and the differing levels of ambition and expectations for their children. Parents, siblings and wider family appear to play a major role in setting expectations levels. Whether some careers were ‘in the family’ or that parents brought them to places of work or that there was a general expectation that third level education was to be taken for granted. As one student said:

My parents are academic and my brother and sister have both done degrees so I was always going to go to college. (RS1)

However, an interesting finding from the research is that in many cases the students themselves had a realistic view of, what they could and could not achieve, what they might expect in examinations and the points they might get for college entry. Some students noted that their preferred or first choice was beyond what they were capable of and very often their choices on the CAO and UCAS forms were linked to a realistic view of their expected results:

My mum had a notion about me doing medicine but I knew that wasn't going to happen. I'm quite happy with nursing and it's actually what I wanted to do. (S5)

Thus while it is true to say that expectations from home have a role to play, the students in this study have articulated that, in general, they take a fairly realistic view of the choices open to them and that any ambitions are tempered by 'what is possible'.

### ***Hierarchy of influences***

In analysing the findings from this study it is evident that there are a number of influences that a young person takes on board when making decisions in the transition from school. Influences include; the subjects and levels studied for final exams, family and social environment, expectations and ambitions, reputation of colleges and courses and structural considerations around the application processes such as points and subject requirements.

The important thing for those charged with supporting and advising students is that the findings indicate that there are different weights and values attached to different influences by individual students. The findings from this study have highlighted that a one-size-fits-all type of career guidance, advice and information is not sufficient and that a co-construct of the realities around decision-making process is necessary. This is highlighted by the different responses of two students who are in the same class and the same school:

I didn't see any point in going to see the careers teacher as I had decided with my parents what course I was going to do and the college I was going to (S4)

And:



I had no idea what I wanted to do and nobody else seemed to know either but I talked to her (careers teacher) and picked a couple of courses I was happy with.

(RS2)

In relation to decision-making the findings clearly show a hierarchy of influences. Students value their own preferences and research first, followed by family and peer influence and then supports from school, including careers advice. The findings in this study indicate that whether this leads to making good, rational decisions is debatable. I would propose however that what is not in doubt is an understanding and appreciation of such a hierarchy should be part of career guidance practice in schools. The ways in which the students describe how they make final choices for college leads me to conclude that very often the decisions are based on misinformation and hearsay and are often not very realistic. The theme of *rational/irrational decision-making* suggests there is a deficiency with the way career guidance advice and information is currently provided for. I have mentioned before that the findings here support the view that careers guidance that is directive and is essentially a one-size-fits-all. This traditional approach needs a rethink and as I have mentioned earlier while a more constructivist view of careers guidance is an improvement, a social constructivist view is one approach worth considering.

## **5.6 Summary of findings**

The overall purpose of this findings chapter was to identify the key elements of the reality of the careers decision-making process for individual students as expressed by the students themselves and by staff members involved in supporting them through the process.

The findings as presented in this chapter are wide ranging and highlight a number of aspects of career guidance, careers support and advice and the consequences for the students as they navigate the decision-making process. Therefore, a summary of the findings is useful at this stage. The findings in this chapter are presented thematically and are in two parts. The first part relates to the way post school choices are made. The participants in this study, through the telling of how they experience the decision making process reveal that this process is experienced in quite unique ways by individuals. The themes emergent from the data attest to multiple influences on the students as they make their choices. The influence of parents would appear to be significant as is influences from wider family and friends. Marketing and promotion by third level colleges is described in positive terms and is another important

influence. The students and staff however, displayed an awareness that in the end, the choice was ultimately theirs to make. Notwithstanding, the findings indicate a range of careers advice and support available as part of whole school support. Formal careers guidance, pastoral supports and especially help and advice from subject teachers are all important parts of making choices.

The second part of this presentation of data focuses on the consequences for students of the way in which decisions are made. The main theme of *inconsistencies in support* indicates differences in the resources for information, advice and support from which young people from different socio-economic backgrounds can draw. The findings in this study indicate that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds have access to wider knowledge from siblings, parents and relations. A clear inequality has emerged where students from a particular social and cultural environment are particularly well placed to take advantage of a competitive, points based third level entry system currently operating in Ireland, where the findings also indicate an over-emphasis on ‘going to college’ at the expense of other pathways such as apprenticeships and employment.

The students in this study explained that making decisions was part of an already heavy workload in their final year and so having to make decisions was seen as stressful. This was mainly around financial worries, emotional stresses and having to make decisions for themselves often for the first time. Finally a particular consequence of the complexity of how decisions are made is that the students (and staff) felt they were not always in a position to make good, well-informed appropriate career choices. The students and staff reveal that choices are not always based on rational criteria and decisions are often made on a whim and whether a choice of course or college or both turns out to be the best choice can be a matter of chance. .

## **5.7 Discussion**

The research was first initiated by a concern that not all students are in a position to make informed choices in the transition from school. This concern grew through my experience as a career guidance counsellor in a secondary school.

The current thinking on careers education is that, what might be termed traditional, ‘trait and factor’ (Parsons 1909) approaches have been enormously influential (Leung 2008), continue to be influential (Savickas 1997) and are still the most widely used approach to careers

counselling (Savickas 1997). Furthermore, longitudinal studies in the UK (Bimrose et al, 2004; Bimrose and Barnes 2006), report that careers advisors in England are still heavily reliant on this approach. In Ireland a similar study by the Economic and Social Research Institute (Smyth et al. ESRI 2011) has found that aptitude tests and career interest inventories are mainstays of careers advice. The findings in this study strengthen these concerns in that the students generally indicate that careers interventions are good for testing, deadlines, applications and dissemination of information on courses, colleges and scholarships. An analysis of the data produced as part of the study has been used to understand how career guidance advice and information is currently provided for in Ireland. The narratives from the interviews reveal that current practice is deficient and that a one-size-fits-all approach based on psychometric testing and finding the 'best fit' for students is no longer appropriate. Both staff and students ignored this approach is somewhat inevitable and both recount frustration at the lack of time that is available for career guidance counsellors to meet students on an individual basis. The findings help to address the research questions, which ask questions about current practice, how this impacts on students, and whether a different approach now needs to be considered.

The findings demonstrate an over emphasis on 'going to college'. Second, certain colleges and especially courses seem to be privileged over others, courses that fit well into the current 'needs' of the economy (Apple 2004), where courses such as medicine engineering and mathematics are given preference over the liberal arts, creative writing for instance.

The findings in this study clearly show that course and college choices are not based on any one factor but are subject to many influences; individual, cultural, social and environmental. The findings support literature around making important choices in the transition from school where current thinking is that individuals operate within a context that includes:

A combination of physical, social, political and economic environment that persons occupy and combine to create the circumstances in which each person negotiates his or her identity, belief system and life course (Herr 1996, pp 6-7).

Chapter 3, a critical review of literature, outlines the development of traditional 'best-fit' approaches, after Parsons (1909) to a more personalised type of careers support based in social constructivist principles (Savickas 1997). The third research question has been formulated from my reading of literature and my desire to find a different way of approaching practice. This study is evidence of the unique nature of how individuals

experience the career decision process and how they make choices. This uniqueness is evidenced by: different levels of support received (both from within school and informal networks of support); differing quality of the advice and support, especially contradictory advice; different levels of personal agency and variations in the ability to cope with stress and anxiety; socio-economic environments vary from student to student, which can have significant impacts in terms of emotional and financial support.

Specifically the third research question asks whether a social constructivist approach can offer opportunities for an improved practice. The findings here would indicate that such an approach is needed to ensure that careers supports and advice is tailored to the specific needs of individuals. In the next chapter I therefore propose a modified approach to practice. I have used the findings and the literature to address the research questions and it is this that has led me to propose a different practice based in a social constructivist view of careers advice.

## **Chapter 6 A modified approach to practice**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In response to the concern of both students and staff as the participants in this study, and my own observations as a career guidance counsellor that not all students have the same opportunities to make informed choices, in this chapter I explore a particular view of career guidance based on a social constructivist model. Findings from the study indicate that the decision making process is experienced in different ways by individuals and so the primary purpose of this study is to understand the influences on the choices by students made so that a proposed modified approach to practice might address inherent inequalities in the provision of career guidance advice and information in Ireland. This chapter looks at insights from social constructivism where career guidance and advice is based on a co-construction of the realities of the decision-making process for each student. The findings as outlined in chapter 5 are set within such an approach and are the basis for suggestions for a modified approach to career guidance and advice.

This chapter has the following structure: first, a reiteration of the theoretical lens used to analyse and interpret the data will frame the meaning I have put on the data. Second, a brief recap of the findings leads into an outline for the case for a different approach to career guidance advice and information. Finally, a particular approach to practice is proposed using the findings set within literature on how decisions are made and careers education. Such a modified approach can have an important role in ensuring all students; no matter their circumstances have an opportunity to make informed choices appropriate to their needs in the transition from school.

### **6.2 An approach to research**

This research is interpretivist and used a constructivist approach to analyse data, employing a constructivist grounded theory methodology to gather, analyse and decide on the themes emerging from the data. This study based in education, specifically careers education is essentially a qualitative piece of research. Cohen et al. (2011, p. 219) argue that the ‘social and educational world is a messy place, full of contradictions, richness, complexity, connectedness, conjunctions and disjunctions’ and this study is no exception.

Mackenzie and Knipe (2006, p. 194) have argued that it is the choice of paradigm ‘that sets down the intent, motivation and expectations for the research. The intent, the motivation and expectations for my study lie in the interpretations of the views of the students and staff as they negotiate the choices’ process. This interpretivist approach to research has the intention of understanding ‘the world of human experience’ (Cohen and Mannion 1994, p.36).

The interpretivist researcher tends to rely upon the participants’ views of the situation being studied and crucially recognises the impact of their own background and experiences on the research. In seeking ethical approval for this research I agreed with my supervisor and the Ethical Committee of the University of Glasgow that I would not carry out research with my own students. Nevertheless, when I was carrying out the research I was first conscious that I was talking to young people, some who were under eighteen, and second, that even though I was not their teacher and they were not my students, a teacher-student relationship existed. I was very aware of the need to show respect around their views and to demonstrate that I was both listening to them and would consider their views as an important part of the research. As Homan (1991, p.59) explains ethical discussions usually remain detached or marginalised from discussions of research projects, yet ‘the moral integrity’ of the researcher is a critically important aspect of ensuring that the research process and my findings are trustworthy and valid. As the study progressed, I became very aware that being ethical requires more of the researcher than seeking permission to proceed. I was also very conscious of the need to acknowledge special vulnerabilities in ‘any research that seeks to interpret the meanings and implications of human practices’ (Pendlebury and Enslin 2001, p.361). Pring (2001, p.415) argues that ‘respect for others’ becomes a benchmark for showing duty of care to interviewees. Throughout the dissertation, I have been conscious of positionality and have highlighted particular issues as they arose. I reiterate that conclusions and recommendations based on the findings are as a result of my interpretation of what the students and staff have told me. I now present a summary and discussion of these findings.

### **6.3 Summary of findings**

The findings from this study were presented in chapters five. The first set of findings concentrated on the way in which choices are made as part of the decision-making process. The second set of findings relate to the consequences for individual students of how the decisions are made. A thematic approach as outlined in the methodology chapter was used to analyse, interpret and present the findings in respect of ‘how’, ‘when’ and ‘where’ decisions

are made and two main themes emerge from the data, multiple influences and whole school support. The first main theme, multiple influences supports research in Ireland that decision-making in relation to post school pathways is influenced by a number of factors including social background, the home environment, expectations from home and an individual's own preferences and aspirations (McCoy and Byrne 2011). The students in this study indicated a reliance on parents and guardians, siblings, and extended family when making choices. According to Schultheiss (2003), the relational influence may function as a positive resource but may contain hindrances as well and Phillips (2001) argues that decision-making is consultative and involves relations in whom students seek out support, guidance and advice from families and peers as well as school. Along the same lines Chant (2011) says that while we accept that parents and extended family may not be able to meet all the needs of the young person, few would argue with the premise that parents and extended family have the greatest influence upon the choices that they make. However, a significant finding from this study is that although parents are most familiar with the student's character, strengths and personalities, a range of multiple influences often results in contradictory advice making the decisions harder for the students. A second aspect of multiple influences revealed in the study is that there is often little coordination between the parties involved in giving support and advice. The findings here support Semple et al. (2002) who concluded that career guidance advice and information is often given without taking into consideration outside influences resulting in careers advice contradicting other advice given outside school.

The second theme emerging from the data is that of whole school supports. While the findings indicate that whole school supports are extensive, the narratives in this study reveal three important findings for providers of whole school supports. First, supports are ostensibly available to all but are inconsistent in their provision; second, there are structural problems in schools in relation to how career guidance and advice are provided and third, there are inherent inequalities resulting from inconsistent provision. Overall, students were satisfied with whole school supports including guidance but some students felt that there was an over-emphasis on college applications at the expense of alternative options such as apprenticeships or employment. In addition some students felt that school staff had low expectations of them particularly note-worthy as the findings corroborate other studies (Mc Smyth and McCoy, 2011 ESRI; NCGE 2014) which found that in Ireland students from low socio-economic groups are more reliant on guidance counsellors (and other school staff) for advice regarding choices. There is also clear evidence from the findings that students who

were more proactive with encouragement from home seek out more advice and support from school.

The second set of findings relate to three consequences of how the decisions are made. This study indicates clear differences in the resources and information upon which young people from different social classes can draw, where there is a taken for granted quality about going on to higher education for some student. The students here are active agents in the decision-making process but some students especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds make choices within the parameters of 'what is possible' (Hodkinson and Sparks 1997). Evidence from the findings reveal that these students are often not as proactive in seeking whole school support, and so school supports can inadvertently exacerbate inequalities already existing.

The students and staff from this study recognise that the decision-making process is a stressful time. The students reveal stresses around financial worries, emotional anxiety and the student ultimately has responsibility for their decisions. Finally, given all of the above it is hardly a surprise that in many cases the students are not able to make good, rational decisions. Choices based on sound research, good pertinent advice and personal interests or aptitudes are not always made, when drop-out rates in first year and dissatisfaction with choice of course or college are considered.

Regarding paradigms of practice, the findings indicate that career guidance advice and information is delivered in a one-size-fits-all fashion and that time to meet students on a one-to-one basis is severely limited. Evidence from the findings also support the criticism levelled at guidance in Ireland that it is often seen as nothing more than a matching process and significantly the findings support the criticism that the 'best-fit' approaches are an over simplification of a complex process (ESRI 2006). The findings from this study also concur with the findings from a recent House of Lords report (2015) where the participants felt there was 'an over emphasis on going to college'. The students in this study felt that the supports that are there are good as far as they go and are good for students who have ambitions and expectations to go to third level institutions. However, a number of students said supports earlier in their time in school and tailored to their specific needs would have been more useful. The findings from both the House of Lords report (2015) and this study suggest that the way careers advice is provided for in schools is deficient in three crucial areas. First, parents should be made aware of the range of options open to students because it is from



parents that most young people (ninety-three percent from this study) receive advice about their options. Second, support should be broader and include advice about the full range of options (college, apprenticeships and employment) and include what is realistic for the individual. Third, support should not just focus on careers but also include more ‘holistic’ support and pastoral supports that can assist the young person with difficult or challenging circumstances.

The findings point to the fact whole school guidance is not systematic or structured and therefore there are inconsistencies in the support levels young people receive in school. An understanding of the way in which choices are made are vital for career guidance, especially practice based on a social constructivist model. Dickhauser et al. (2005) have reported that there are three main areas that have an influence on how choices are made; academic considerations (reputation of the college or course and entry requirements); personal preferences such as interests, capabilities and geographical considerations and a variety of influences such as family, peers and school. The findings from this study clearly mirror these factors affecting choices.

### **6.3.1 Students and the decision-making process**

While the students’ narratives in the findings chapter reveal a high degree of agency in relation to choices where personal interests and capability are important driving forces for the young people, the psychological idea of the self-concept plays an important role. A person’s self-concept refers to the ‘representation and evaluation of individuals’ abilities’, (Dickhauser et al. 2005, p.674). This notion of self-concept is related to the idea of self-efficacy, where self-efficacy refers to a person’s belief of what they are capable of and has important implications for expectations, aspirations, self-hindering thought, willingness to stick at it and the amount of anxiety and stress they feel (Bandura 1991).

A second consideration for students making decisions relates to the rationality of the decisions made. Rational models follow Parsons’ (1909) legacy where decisions are deemed to be based on models of ‘best fit’ where decisions do not consider opportunities, emotions, relationships and contexts to any real extent. The findings here do not support such a rational model as the model does not group the essential dimensions of real life decision processes and how young people construct individual realities. Any system of support and advice needs to note that decisions are made in real time and, as the findings here show, are often based not only on multiple and sometimes contradictory influences.

In response to the ‘trait and factor’, ‘best-fit’ theories, where decisions were made with and by individuals by looking at their characteristics and matching these to the needs of prospective careers, theory in relation to careers education has moved to incorporate environmental and social variables which take account of the influences that impact on the decision-making. However, Roberts developed an ‘opportunity structure model’ (1968) which proposed that apart from a small number of privileged individuals the general population is constrained in their choice of careers and thus limited to certain courses and colleges by social variables outside of their control, gender, ethnicity and social class. The findings in this study both in response to the questionnaire and in the interview indicate that choices are often made from a restricted number of options.

Selection to third level education in Ireland is through a points based system and as a result there is a significant cohort of students who, while achieving a reasonable level of education are excluded from entry to university education. Roberts (1968) has suggested the determinants of occupational choice include the home, the environment, school, peer groups and job opportunities. Roberts’ ‘opportunity structure model’ (1968) was the beginning of a recognition that even if a young person was ‘matched’ it was not automatically the case that they would have access to a full range of colleges and courses. The findings from this research indicate that students are choosing colleges and course choices within a frame of ‘what is possible’ (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) and that students and staff have opined a ‘free choice’ is not always possible. In keeping with the theme that vocational choices are a complex mixture of social and individual variables Gottfredson (1996) developed her theory of circumscription and compromise to explain why young people’s expectations and aspirations vary by gender, race and social class. The findings from this study support Gottfredson’s view that choices are viewed as the product of accessibility (choices are deemed to be realistic) and compatibility (‘best-fit’ choices).

#### **6.4 The case for a ‘different way’**

The findings from this study point to the conclusion that even though there are two arenas where advice and support happens; ‘relational and whole school supports’, it is now time for a different modified approach where practice is based on a co-construct of the reality for the individual student. The extent to which different influences affect student decisions and the reliance on these influences needs to be understood in order that relevant advice and support can be given. A conclusion, as a result of analysing and interpreting the stories that have

unfolded in this research, is that an awareness of both relational and whole school influences and a commitment to include both in construction of individual realities is a prerequisite to career interventions. Such career interventions which follow the Rogerian approach by not only focusing on each individual but on the various influences which impact on their decisions, should go a long way to ensuring that all students receive appropriate advice and support and that informed choices can be made which are appropriate to the young person.

Developmental career theorists such as Super (1990) Gottfredson (1981) and Ginzberg (1984) have noticed the importance of the adolescent years in laying the foundation for future career and educational pursuits. Each of these theorists acknowledges the ages 16-18 years old as being an important time in the development of interests, perception of abilities and ambitions for the world of work.

Results from this study indicate that advice and support from career guidance counsellors was of high or very high importance for twenty-four percent of students from higher socio-economic backgrounds and some fifty-seven percent of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The findings from this research are broadly in keeping with research from the Economic and Social Research Institute (Smyth et al. 2011, ESRI) which found clear differences in the resources and information upon which young people from different social classes can draw. The ESRI study has found that working class students whose families have little or no history of higher education entry are more reliant on advice from school personnel in making a decision. During the interviews the students in this study explained that in their opinion guidance counsellors were overburdened, combining teaching with their role as careers advisors and also students and staff highlight insufficient time allocation for guidance and guidance related activities. The findings here concur with other studies in Ireland that found students appear to be missing out on the guidance and counselling they need (McCoy et al. 2006). This is particularly relevant for students from more disadvantaged backgrounds who indicated during the interviews a greater reliance on career guidance and where parental experience of going to college may be absent and also where siblings and peers do not necessarily have the expectation or ambition to attend third level education. Another issue which arose during the interviews related to the content of guidance classes which some students thought were too narrowly framed in terms of third level choices and therefore CAO and UCAS applications. Students reported a relative neglect of non-third level education and of training opportunities such as Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses, training courses and apprenticeships. Again this reflects the findings from a recent study in the U.K. which found

students felt there was an over-emphasis on 'going to college' and respondents highlighted the particular difficulties faced by those with low or minimum qualifications, (House of Lords Committee 2015).

#### **6.4.1 Inequality in the decision-making process**

The findings from this study are particularly relevant in the light of the mixed socio-economic background of the school where the study was carried out and raise an important issue around teacher and guidance counsellor expectations and both the lack of information on and attention given to higher education entry for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In this study some students from working class backgrounds felt that their guidance counsellor had low expectations of them, they reported that they felt the same opportunities were not explained to them in the same detail as some other students. The findings from the interviews indicate that inconsistencies in support with respect to decision-making may well contribute to already existing inequalities. Again this study shows that lower socio-economic groups rely more on support from school than higher socio-economic groups do (thirty-six percent as opposed to twenty-nine percent). The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI 2014) has found clear differences in the resources and information upon which young people from different social backgrounds can draw. The ESRI report found that middle class students have access to insider knowledge from siblings and other family members in finding out about colleges and courses and that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to have access to such insider knowledge. There is no evidence from this study that this phenomenon is considered fully in the provision of career guidance, advice and information. There is no evidence of positive discrimination in the provision of career supports, highlighted by one career guidance counsellor who explained:

All students essentially receive the same careers guidance. They all have timetabled classes where I do general stuff, forms, and deadlines and so on. They all then have one or maybe two one-to-one meetings where I go through their particular choices. (CG3)

A particular example of an inequality expressed by students in the study is in terms of the content of guidance classes and focus of support for students. Many students were critical of the way in which guidance provision focused on higher education, particularly the application procedure, CAO and UCAS forms for entry to university:

I didn't really find the careers class very useful as it was all about CAO and UCAS and at that time I was pretty sure I was going to the tech in Derry so I wasn't applying to university (S2).

The Leaving Certificate, the final examination at the end of secondary schooling in Ireland is a 'winner-takes-all' examination as is the points system of entry to university education. The findings from the study indicate a situation that facilitates such a competitive system:

I had half an idea about an apprenticeship as my father had done but there wasn't much talk about them in the school, even in the class. (RS4)

The first theme through which the findings in this chapter were presented was inconsistencies in levels of support. The students and staff consistently explained how, for various reasons, support and advice received by students varied from student to student. The findings from this study strongly indicate that variance in support, advice and influence results in different levels of preparedness for decision-making for young people. Much has been written about schools (career guidance is not exempt) reinforcing already existing inequalities. Schools in Ireland are criticised for 'streaming' students into higher and ordinary level classes which mean that the choices of colleges and courses within the CAO system are restricted for the disadvantaged students. Studies (Ansalone 2006; Oakes 2005) have shown that middle-class students are more likely to be streamed into higher level subjects while working-class students are more likely to be streamed into ordinary level subjects. Social inequality also perpetuated through the widespread use in career guidance, in Ireland, of standardised tests as they include questions whose answers are most likely known by middle-class students whose backgrounds have afforded them various experiences that help them answer the questions (Grodsky, Warren and Felts, 2008). Evidence from the findings also suggest that, perhaps inadvertently, supports and career guidance teaches a hidden curriculum, a set of values and beliefs that privileges the career interests and aspirations of one socio-economic group over another (Booher-Jennings, 2008).

In trying to understand how the students' choices are made Bourdieu's theoretical framework is useful. Bourdieu (1986) sees his concept of cultural capital as breaking with the received wisdom that attributes academic success or failure to natural aptitudes, intelligence or particular abilities. In contrast Bourdieu (1986) explains school success by the amount and type of cultural capital inherited from family and social capital as advantages gained from social networks. Bourdieu (1996) presents the concept of cultural capital for a young person

coming primarily from the family. A sociological perspective on choices highlights the importance of the influence of non-financial social assets. Sullivan (2003) points out that moving beyond the traditional emphasis on an economic analysis to incorporate social and cultural capital highlights how inequalities of opportunity can be reproduced. The notion of cultural capital has been described by Bourdieu in 'Forms of Capital' (1996) where he describes three forms of capital: economic capital, which is a command over a range of economic resources; social capital, which includes resources based on relationships and networks of influence based on membership of certain groups and enjoying a circle of influential friends, and cultural capital which includes forms of knowledge, skill, education and advantage that a student possess coming into school.

The findings here reveal that the parents and the wider family provide their children with social and cultural capital by transmitting the attitudes needed to succeed in the education system. Bourdieu challenges a view of modern schooling as a mobility engine for promoting students through a class structure on the basis of their talents and hard work. Furthermore Bourdieu believed that modern schools are more adept at validating and augmenting cultural and social capital already present when the student arrives in school. This could be demoralising for careers education concerned with equality, but on a positive note Bourdieu argues that investment strategies can be particularly effective in the field of education. I believe, having listened to what the students and the staff are saying, and my own observations over the years as a careers advisor, that careers interventions have the potential to be particularly effective as advice and supports can target those areas where there might be deficiencies. Chant (2011, p.66) argues that 'in the same way that others (educationalists in particular) add to intellectual capital it is surely possible to add to, supplement and develop the cultural capital of young people as well' and the best way of adding to or supplementing cultural capital is surely to understand the current balance of that capital. The foundation for any proposed modification of practice as a result of this research is an exploration and understanding of the impact on expectations, aspirations and career choice of parents and wider family. The findings here indicate that young people do not see relationships with parents, family, and peers as obstacles to the development of autonomy and independent decision-making, rather the young people embrace and value the input. Schultheiss, Kress, Manzi, and Glasscock (2001) found that relationships with family and peers function as emotional and social support and can provide information and practical assistance. The stories told by both students and staff highlight the importance of such relationships as part of

the decision-making process. For Bourdieu cultural capital encompasses a broad array of competencies in language, social skills, preferences, ambitions and expectations emanating from family background. Cultural capital requires investment in time and interest and the findings indicate that this investment transfers into the decision-making process. The findings here indicate that parental supports range from being heavily involved to expressing support but having little active involvement, parents who have very little interest or involvement in cases of tension between the young person and the parent(s). The inequality in the level of parental support is clear and equal access to informed decisions is diminished as a result of this inequality. This is best summed up by Reay, David and Ball (2005. p. 21) who talk about 'the salience of confidence, certainty and sense of entitlement that is generated through high levels of cultural capital relevant to these struggles for position which take place in the field of education'.

In looking at career guidance and the promotion of equality Strauss and Corbin's (1990) three-level model is helpful. Equal chance refers to equality of opportunity based on meritocracy where young people are seen to achieve on the basis of their efforts and talents. The findings from this study clearly show that barriers, perceived or real, mean that equal chance does not necessarily mean equality. One particular student who had a special ability in music, felt that she was unable to go to a particular college which was the best one for her needs and ability because of the financial costs of moving away from home. 'Equal access' seeks to counteract inequality, as here the focus is on removing barriers where inequalities are addressed in order that a 'level playing field' could be achieved. In practice this puts an onus on whole school guidance to address a situation where some students feel there are barriers, perceived or real, to going to college. For career guidance the focus is to be proactive, to be positive about the options open to students and where a constructivist approach can help determine the actual needs as opposed to a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. 'Equal share' then is an 'ideal' for the future where all students would be regarded equally and where all students would have the same expectations for their post-school choices. The findings from this study indicate that the evidence is not there for such a vision yet.

An important aspect of career guidance provision emerging from the findings is in relation to the well-being of the students. There is clear evidence from the data that students felt insecure with regard to making decisions on colleges and/or courses. The students have highlighted insecurities in relation to emotional and financial stress and also being in uncharted territory (Fig 6.1). In education there has been 'an explosion of interest, policy debate, policy

making, academic research and programme development around the concept of well-being' (McLaughlin 2008, p.353). Also Robertson (2013) writes about the potential for career guidance to impact on well-being, where receiving attention and emotional support in a safe and trusting environment has obvious benefits. The students in this indicate that career-related problems can often be the source of distress for young people and if so then solving them may help to alleviate any stress or anxiety felt by the young person. A number of the students in this study display a sense of powerlessness and a lack of control which may contribute to this distress. It is my contention that careers advisors should seek to empower students to be proactive and believe in their own ability to make things happen. Career guidance should promote a sense of agency within the students. A social constructivist approach to career guidance, advice and information can challenge negative thinking by agreeing with the students on possibilities and co-construct a plan of action. There are a range of psychological concepts dealing with the importance of agency. The most developed is Bandura's (2001) concept of self-efficacy which is closely related to well-being and there is strong evidence that focused personalised career guidance results in greater confidence (Bimrose, Barnes and Marris, 2008).

The findings indicate that a lack of confidence or self-efficacy means that students are more likely to rely on misinformation and hearsay as opposed to research and are also more likely to rely on sources of information that are unreliable (as shown in Figure 6.1). In a recent study of secondary schools in the UK, Reay et al. (2005, p. 59) report how choices are made where 'powerful themes of serendipity, intuitive response, narrow focus, directionlessness and making decisions on the hop' are part of the process. The evidence from this study is that choices are often products of 'serendipity' and are often made 'on the hop'.

This section of the chapter has explored aspects of the ways in which decisions are made. The process is clearly a complex one and it is therefore incumbent on all those charged with supporting students as they make their choices to ensure they understand as much of what is going on as possible. Since undertaking this study I have modified my own practice away from the 'trait and factor', 'best-fit' approaches to a social constructivist approach, a change that will hopefully make the supports and advice more relevant to the times and the students in my care.

I am aware that a social constructivist approach represents a challenge as inherent in this approach is the need to rethink assumptions about realities and knowledge as experienced by



young people. There is an argument that fundamental to a constructivist approach is ‘that human knowing is proactive and that individuals actively participate in the creation of meaning and their own reality’ (McMahon and Patton, 2000, p.27). The creation of meaning and understanding is shaped through dialogue with those who have influence on and input into the decisions being taken. Dialogue and construction of realities relating to the decision making-process entails a co-construction of the reality, a process at the heart of a social constructivist approach. The findings from the study are now set within first, a general view of career guidance provision within a constructivist approach and second, a particular approach to practice, Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (1978).

### **6.5 A modified approach to practice**

The final part of this chapter will discuss a modified approach to practice. This part of the chapter aims to address the third research question

Can a social constructivist approach to career guidance advice and information offer opportunities for improved practice?

In relation to a modified approach to practice, I outline academic knowledge how career guidance advice and information might be approached from a constructivist viewpoint and then outline a particular approach incorporating Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (1978) that I believe is a response to the needs of students based on the narratives from this study. Much has been written about constructivist approaches to career guidance but there are two particular pieces of research that have resonance for my practice. First, according to Savickas et al. (2009) ‘life designing’ is conceptualised as a lifelong construction process that includes rational, emotional, relational, and social elements. Life-designing approaches stress the importance of their environments, how young people interact with and make sense of their environments. Savickas et al. (2009, p.239) argue that at the beginning of the twenty-first century ‘a new social arrangement of work poses a series of questions and challenges to scholars who aim to help people with their working lives’. The life-designing model of career intervention endorses five presuppositions about people and their careers: contextual; dynamic processes; non-linear progression; multiple perspectives and personal patterns. Savickas et al. (2009) have put forward a model recognising that an individual’s knowledge of careers and of their own identity is the product of social interaction. Meaning is a co-

construct and presupposes that careers advisors make a real attempt through narrative to understand how reality has been constructed for the young person.

The life-designing model posits that current career development models are insufficient as they are rooted in assumptions of stability of personal characteristics and secure jobs, conceptualise career choice as a fixed sequence of stages, and presumes relatively high stability of environments and people's behaviour. The life-designing approach believes that rather than conceptualising careers as a meta-narrative of stages, twenty first century theories should approach careers as individual scripts (Savickas et al. 2009).

The findings from this study reflect the 'life-designing' view that occupational prospects seem far less definable and predictable with job transitions more frequent and difficult. The life designing view now is that workers in the information age must become lifelong learners who can use sophisticated technologies and embrace flexibility rather than stability. From a practice perspective it is clear that young people need to be able to manage their own decisions and so the young people need to be involved in order to reflect on choices and to be more informed. Savickas et al. (2009) talk about a fundamental paradox shared by all 'trait and factor' approaches that career guidance counsellors aim to find the 'best-fit' between a young persons' life ambitions and environmental conditions by using psychometric tests, objective measures and normative profiles that eliminate precisely such contextual information. The student interviews indicate that identities are different and changing rather than static, abstract and over simplified profiles. The students in this study have a view of career where changing careers is to be expected and their career paths are difficult to predict. They seem to have accepted that short term contract work, using information technology, flexible working hours and changing careers at regular intervals are now the norm. The staff also indicate the need to help young people to develop the skills to manage change, and to be able to cope with challenging and unexpected circumstances in their career path.

Whilst carrying out research it became clear to Barnes et al. (2011) that many careers education programmes continue to focus on activities such as writing C.V.s, interview techniques and application procedures and career is viewed from a narrow positivist orientation as 'what is the best thing to do when I leave school'? The authors began examining the ways in which programmes of careers advice and information could adapt to begin to prepare young people for a more uncertain future. The concept of Career Learning

and Development (CLD) thus emerged, and is the second perspective on careers education that has relevance for a modified approach to my practice.

CLD is rooted in social constructivism and so in common with other constructivist approaches asserts that in a changing world it is no longer possible or desirable simply to match an individual to an occupation as their environment is no longer predictable (Bassot et al. 2006). Career Learning and Development differs from general constructivist approaches in the following three ways. First, CLD asserts that knowledge about career choice is constructed through activity and interactions with a variety of people. Second, rather than interacting with and reacting to environment, the young person and society are inseparable and third, CLD argues that young people develop in society and are inseparable from their culture (Barnes et al. 2011). In the context of this study the young people indicated that they have a very strong sense of place, where they are from is very important and localisms are very prominent considerations on their final choice of college and/or course. CLD therefore takes place ‘in collectives as people undertake activities and interact within their cultural setting, hence offering a collectivist approach to career development as distinct from the individualised approach of constructivism’ (Bassot, 2012).

Based on my research I would argue that with the support of career guidance professionals, young people can make more progress within a CLD approach, where learning about the choices to be made needs to be active and interactive. In the next part of this discussion, on a modified approach to practice, I look at Vygotsky’s theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (1978) to explore how through discussion and working with the young people a More Knowledgeable Other will be able to understand the reality of the decision making process for each individual and make progress within CLD approach. As Bassot explains (2012) CLD programmes designed with the constructivist principles of active, problem-based, experiential learning that involves interactions and dialogue with others will enable young people to make progress within their ZPD.

## **6.6 The choices process and the zone of proximal development**

The philosophical framework around a constructivist approach to career guidance, advice and information is based on the notion that reality is a product of one’s own creation, where the actual truth is a result of perspective and therefore knowledge and truth are created rather than discovered (Schwandt, 2000). Constructivists generally do not begin with a theory but

instead ‘generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meanings’ (Creswell, 2003, p.3).

While my interpretation of the data from the interviews is interpretive, my consequent proposed approach to practice is a co-constructivist approach where the realities of the decision-making process and the actual choices available are explored and discovered as a joint endeavour between the career guidance counsellor and the young people. With constructivist approaches, the emphasis switches from teaching to learning where there is ‘a change in role from career teacher to career facilitator’ (Mc Mahon and Patton 2000, p.27). Clearly then the emphasis shifts to where the young people are no longer passive recipients of advice but are active participants and constructor of their own learning.

Traditionally career guidance counsellors provided advice, solved problems, supplied information or interpreted and explained psychometric tests, in order that a ‘suitable’ choice or range of choices might be delivered to the students. Using a constructivist approach the emphasis in my practice is on the need to engage with students in an effective dialogue, a dialogue that includes all the factors that impact and influence the reality for the student. The traditional ‘best-fit’ approaches provide the security of a deceptively simple, well understood model where the career guidance counsellor is seen as the ‘expert’. The findings from this study indicate the complexity of the decision-making process and while the traditional approaches can be seen as a starting point, they no longer hold the key to making well-informed decisions.

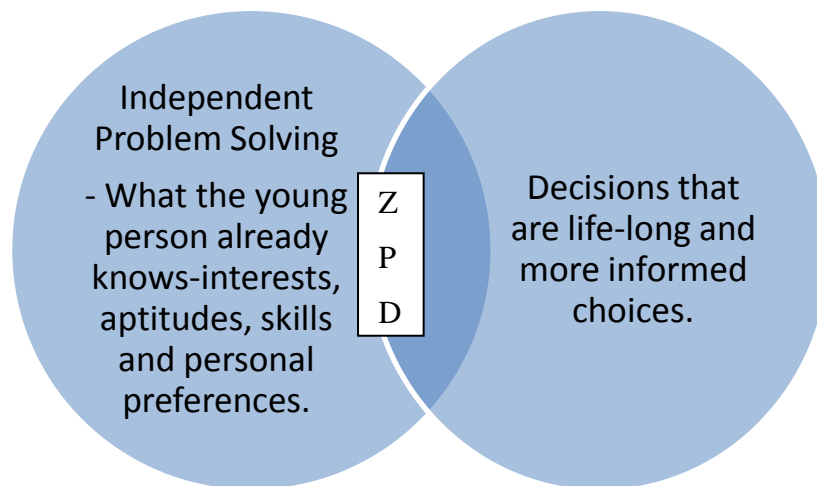
In the constructivist classroom the focus tends to shift from the teacher to the student where the student is urged to be actively involved in their own process of learning. For career guidance counsellors, this is a challenging view of practice, where the ‘deceptively simple’ ‘trait and factor’, ‘best-fit’ approaches have become entrenched in career guidance practice.

However, an approach that is particularly suitable to making choices is the zone of proximal development. The work of Vygotsky and other developmental psychologists stresses the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of ‘making meaning’ (Vygotsky 1978). In order to apply the work of Vygotsky to practice one must understand two main principles of Vygotsky’s work, the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The MKO refers to someone who has a better understanding or a higher ability than the learner with respect to a particular task (Galloway 2001) in this case the decision-making process. An important implication revealed by the findings is that

while the MKO would normally be a career guidance counsellor or other adult, this is not necessarily the case as the students in this study have indicated that family, peers and other teachers in the school could well be the MKO. The concept of MKO is integrally related to the second important principle of Vygotsky's work, the ZPD. Vygotsky (1978, p.86) defines the ZPD as the distance between the:

Actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

Vygotsky believed that when a student is at the ZPD for a particular task (as shown in Figure 7.1) for example, making a choice for CAO or UCAS, providing the appropriate assistance or guidance (scaffolding) will give the student a sufficient 'boost' to make a better choice. The aim of this approach is that once the young person with the benefit of scaffolding masters the task, the scaffolding can then be removed and the student will then be able to complete the task on their own. This is a crucial point because from my own experience and interpreting what the students are saying in the interviews there are a number of times when decisions have to be made and a range of choices to be considered. The best thing a career guidance counsellor can do for a young person is to equip them with the skills to be able to make these decisions for themselves. A Vygotskian classroom emphasises creating one's own concepts and making knowledge one's own property and this requires learning in school taking place alongside the learning that is already happened outside of school. This involves a teacher-student relationship that provides support and guidance based on the learner's actual reality rather than a perceived notion or 'best-fit' approach. An adapted model for career guidance and information is represented diagrammatically in Figure 6.1.



**Figure 6.1 Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, adapted to making career choices.**

Bassot (2007) has written extensively exploring the possible application of Vygotsky's (1978) concept of ZPD to the context of career guidance. Bassot (2006) reports on a metaphor used by one of the students, who took part in a small-scale qualitative research study in a sixth form in college in inner London. This study set out to explore the possible application of Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the ZPD to the context of career guidance. The metaphor used by one of the students was 'joining the dots'. Bassot (2006) interprets the metaphor in order to shed light on the ways in which individuals who are part of their social context construct career realities through interaction with others, including career guidance, advice and counselling. In a similar way I have applied a metaphor used during my EdD studies to how students build realities of the decision-making process along with others, within and outwith school. I have used the metaphor of building a home to understand and interpret how the students in this study draw on many influences to construct the reality within which decisions are made. Building a house first needs a plan from which the builders work with a solid foundation and then a number of people to contribute to the overall product, engineers, builders, electricians, carpenters and so on. However, perhaps the most important relationship is between the future owner of the house and the architect. The owner and the architect work jointly to bring together all the components needed to build a house

and I use the metaphor, especially the relationship between these two people to propose what the relationship between the young person and the career guidance counsellor could be. There are many influences impacting on the decision-making process as detailed by the students in the interviews but the career guidance counsellor and the young person should jointly construct a reality where a more informed decision can be made, a decision ultimately made, like the homeowner, by the young person.

The process of choosing colleges and courses is a complex one which is further complicated in the context of this study where students can choose colleges in Europe (Eunicas), UK (UCAS) and in Ireland (CAO). There are different application procedures and there are a growing number of students who apply through all three systems. A further complication is that the deadlines for the different application processes are all around the same time, usually in January/February of their final year (CAO 2016). As the architect might attest that the craftsmen, electrician, plumber, carpenter all want to work on the house at the same time!

Bassot (2007) explains that traditional theoretical underpinnings of career guidance practice are drawn from psychology focusing on individual agency and sociology, emphasising the role of society in influencing the decisions people make. I am interested in focusing on Vygotsky's ZPD which would fall within the paradigm of social constructivism which argues that knowledge, in this case about the decision-making process, is not acquired but is a co-construct between parties to any decision made. As Bassot argues (2007, p.161):

Learning is, therefore, an active and interactive experience and the career guidance interview can be seen as one kind of interaction among many in which a client might participate during the process of constructing their career.

It is my belief that, through dialogue with the students an understanding of the types of interactions and their importance and influence is a prerequisite to a good careers interview. The ZPD proposes that people can learn more by interacting with others than they can alone. Specifically, in relation to career guidance, just like the student in Bassot's study (2006) who saw his career guidance interview as a chance to 'join the dots', I use the metaphor of building a house to understand the career guidance meetings with students as part of my practice as an opportunity to bring all the different aspects of the project together. In applying Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD to career guidance there is a clear role for the career guidance counsellor to act as the More Knowledgeable Other, as the career guidance counsellor has the experience and expertise that the young people facing the decision-making process for the

first time would not have. The decision-making process is a good example of how ZPD theory can work in a career guidance context. The students in this study have indicated that there are many influences offering help and advice with regard to their choices and that the whole decision-making process was confusing and unclear for the students. Various pieces of information were in place, from within the school and outside school, some contradictory and conflicting and so ZPD can be seen as the difference that a career guidance counsellor can make by helping the student make sense of the advice and suggestions received.

The data from this study clearly indicate that the students demonstrate a high level of agency in relation to their choices. In the questionnaire, ninety-two percent said they believed they ultimately made the decision by themselves. The focus of ZPD is one of development, as the title might suggest and so relevance of ZPD today is the development of a situation where a more informed decision can be made. Using ZPD to develop an opportunity where informed decisions can be made by all students has implications in relation to the promotion of equality of opportunity. The findings from this study reveal that some students have social, cultural and economic advantages coming into school, and having analysed the findings I propose that using ZPD theory to guide how career guidance, advice and information might be provided for in schools has positive implications for career guidance counsellors interested in providing equality of opportunity. The ZPD is a place where all students with the help of careers advice can develop a sense of their own identity and in the particular context of this study, make informed choices appropriate to their individual needs. On a practical basis the narratives in this study reveal that for a variety of reasons there are some students who do not seek out whole school supports including career guidance. The ZPD can be the basis for individual career meetings where all students can benefit.

## 6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explained how the findings support my proposal for a different way of providing career guidance advice and information. The case is made for a modified approach to practice that moves away from traditional ‘best-fit’ approaches to a social constructivist view of practice. Such a view argues that notwithstanding obdurate realities of the decision making process individual students construct their own realities based on a number of personal, social and cultural perspectives. The proposed modified approach is predicated on a co-construct of the individual realities of how decisions are made, a co-construct between the student and the career guidance counsellor. This chapter outlines a particular approach



incorporating Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978). This chapter has explored a particular view of career guidance based on a social constructivist model and has been used to address the third research question.

Can a social constructivist approach to career guidance, advice and information offer opportunities for improved practice?

## **Chapter 7 A reflective review**

### **7.1 Introduction**

As this dissertation moves towards a conclusion, I reflect first on the concern that was the driver for this research. That is, that not all students are in a position to make the most informed decisions in the transition from school. This research, through interpretation and presentation of the findings, set within literature, is an attempt to address this concern. Specifically, the research proposes a different, modified approach to my practice as a career guidance counsellor, a different practice that is based in a social constructivist view of careers education. This chapter, a reflective view of the research, is in four parts. First, I recap on the concern for my practice including what evidences this concern. Second, the research questions are addressed by focussing on the themes emerging from the data. In the third part of this chapter, I move to consider why this research is worthy of consideration in the field and what evidences and supports the claims made as a result of this research. I also reflect on how researchers should consider the limitations of the work and where do these considerations take the field. This section also identifies future research avenues. Finally, in a concluding section, I reflect on the process of research question formation including any challenges or issues that remain both from a personal and professional perspective and from career guidance, advice and information provision in Ireland.

### **7.2 Concerns at the heart of the study**

In chapter 1, introducing the study I explained the source of my concern that is at the heart of this research. A brief revisit at this stage to the evidence for my concern might be useful. In the recent report 'From Leaving Certificate to leaving school' (Smyth et al. 2011) the authors note that a large body of research in Ireland and internationally has focused on the factors which influence young peoples' post-school decisions. For example Bourdieu (1986) emphasises differential access to cultural and social resources and Erikson (1996) emphasises the cost-benefit elements of decision-making and in Ireland research has highlighted the complex interaction of social experience, family background and student aspirations in influencing the decisions made (McCoy et al. 2010). The concern at the heart of this study is evidenced by both the drop-out rates and numbers of students expressing dissatisfaction with their choice of college or course. Research shows that attrition is highest in the first two years of university (Yorke and Longden 2008; Mannan 2007) and a study carried out by

University College Dublin (UCD Redmond et al. 2011) found that of all the students in the college who withdrew, sixty-nine per cent did so in the first year. In a recent study by the Higher Education Authority in Ireland (HEA 2010) a significant finding was that drop-out rates from the first year of college ranged from ten per cent to twenty-six per cent, with an average of fifteen per cent across all institutions. In addition, an on-line country-wide survey of third level students in Ireland found that forty-four per cent of students would take a different course of study if they could go through the system again (Campus.ie 2014) and a recent survey on student engagement in Irish third level colleges has found that twenty three per cent of final year students indicated they would not go to the same college if they could start all over again (HEA 2015). These statistics would suggest that the need to understand how choices are made are as salient as ever and the figures sit comfortably with the findings gathered in this study where there is little evidence of students being confident that they are making, or have made, the best decisions. Adding to my concern was the moral dilemma that my own practice as a career guidance counsellor was not meeting the needs of the students and the way in which career guidance, advice and information is provided for in Ireland leaves many questions to be asked in terms of equality and social justice. Moreover, the dramatic changes in society and economy driven by a neoliberal agenda which I have explained in chapter 2, appears to have brought unprecedented uncertainty to young people as they navigate the transition from school. Underpinning this confusion about my practice was a realisation that while I could emphasise and sympathise with the young people I could not claim to understand what the pressures were like for young people making decisions today. So, this study engaged in conversation with a group of young people making decisions in order to elicit stories about their perceptions and aspirations and to give voice to their views. Their stories are embedded in this research and my analysis of what is being said is interwoven with theoretical and conceptual discourse around career guidance, advice and information provision and the transition from school. Together the findings from this study and the literature, affects a move away from a state of concern towards a deeper understanding of the realities of the decision-making process. Such an understanding forms the basis of a different approach to practice that is needed to ensure students receive the best possible support as they make their decisions.

Chapter 2, a critical review of policy and Chapter 3, a critical review of academic literature in relation to careers education explains my view that career guidance practice in Ireland is informed by a neoliberal agenda and second, that ‘trait and factor’ approaches to career

guidance and information provision are still used as part of this neoliberal view. My real concern is that a neoliberal view of education means that an inequality is inevitable if students do not experience the decision-making process in the same ways where some are socially and culturally better equipped to take advantage of a competitive points based system. A points based system that that privileges subjects and courses, those that are most 'valuable' as part of a neoliberal agenda, science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM).

The proposal with regard to career guidance practice is that a social constructivist approach offers opportunities for improved practice, where an understanding of how individuals make decisions facilitates careers advice and support based on a co-construction of reality, where the career guidance counsellor and the student collaborate to make better, more informed, more appropriate choices.

### **7.3 Understanding how choices are made**

This study sets out to understand the influences on students' decisions and how the students felt as a consequence of these decisions. The research in this study was carried out by means of a questionnaire to a year group, ninety six students and three sets of semi-structured interviews with staff members and students. The questionnaire was used in this instance to help me focus on the types of questions I might ask in the interview and to try to ensure that I would not miss any issues and concerns deemed important as identified by the responses to the questionnaires. As I have pointed out in section 4.3.1 of the methodology chapter, it is important to note that the questionnaire was not used to validate the qualitative data emergent from the interviews.

Given the interpretivist stance towards the research it seemed that what was required was a choice of method that could accommodate the staff and students in the telling of their narratives. Collecting data by means other than face to face dialogue would I feel deny the opportunity for the participants' 'voice' to be heard. Using semi-structured interviews offered the opportunity to focus upon open-ended responses, allowing opportunities to explore issues of increased complexity and to interpret the experiences offered in the conversation. I do not pretend to fully understand the choices that are made as what participants have said is deeply internalised, often difficult to articulate, and always

incomplete, and so interpreting what others mean by what they are saying is always problematic.

Chapter 5, the findings chapter, outlines in some detail the connections between the themes and the research questions. By using the themes, I am better able to address first, the ways in which career guidance advice and information is provided for and whether this is based in any particular ideology. Second, the themes as presented in the second part of the findings relate to the consequences of how students experience career guidance advice and information. By addressing the first two research questions it became clear that the careers decision making process in general and making final choices in particular was experienced in different ways by individual students. The findings in this study and my reading of the literature, on both careers education and studies on how decisions are made, suggest strongly that a more constructivist approach to careers education should now be considered. The third research question therefore asks whether a social constructivist approach offers opportunities for improved practice. It is because of what the findings from this study indicate set within the literature that a proposal for a modified practice based in a social constructivist approach is explained in some detail in the previous chapter. The final question, while not strictly speaking a research question, asks how the findings from this research can inform career guidance practice in Ireland. It is to this question that I now turn as I reflect on why this research is worthy of consideration in the field of careers education.

#### **7.4 Contribution to professional knowledge**

There are a number of aspects that support the view that the findings from this study can inform careers guidance, my own practice first and then careers guidance more generally. First, I reflect on why this research is worthy of consideration and what evidences and supports any claims made as a result of the research. Second, I reflect on how researchers should consider the worthiness of the work, including the limitations. Furthermore, in research terms, I outline where these considerations take the field and in doing so I identify future research avenues.

As mentioned, as part of my practice I had a particular concern but I wanted to see what the literature was saying about career guidance and how decisions are made. I wanted to set the findings from this study within the current thinking on how careers education should be provided for in schools. The critical review of literature in chapter 3 is a review of how

thinking with regard to careers education has moved from 'trait and factor', 'best-fit' approaches after Parsons' (1909) early ideas through to career theories based on a 'co-construction or social construction of meaning' (Savickas 1993, p.213). A social constructivist approach where learning is constructed not acquired and each person has a different interpretation and construction of knowledge, based on past experiences, influences and cultural factors (University College, Dublin 2014). I explain in chapter three that while a social constructivist way of thinking is appropriate for my practice there are obdurate realities around the decision-making process; points requirements, minimum subject requirements and for many the cost of university education. Therefore chapter three also reviews the findings from studies into how decisions are made. Findings from a study into informal sources of careers advice by Semple et al. (2002) found that both formal and informal networks of career support (mainly parents) are used by young people and informal networks were the most influential in Semple's study. In Ireland, Mc Coy et al. (2010) finds that a complex interaction of school experience, family background and student aspiration influences choices. Also, a study by Smyth and Banks (2012) found that decisions about higher education choices are found to reflect three sets of processes: individual habitus; the institutional habitus, with respect to career guidance and young peoples' habitus, that is, the extent to which young people themselves consciously research and evaluate different options. In thinking about a different way of approaching my practice as a career guidance counsellor, I have drawn on these studies as the findings indicate a deficiency in a social constructivist approach where the student faces various realities when making choices and so is not free to construct a reality of their choosing with respect to decision-making process. In the same way a co-construct between the career guidance counsellor and the student has to take into account the obdurate realities as shown in the findings from these studies.

The literature on careers education and how decisions are made, as reviewed in chapter three, has given me valuable insights into how career guidance practice could evolve. The literature indicates that notwithstanding certain realities a more individual approach to career guidance provision should now be considered. The findings from this study support this view and show that course and college choices are not based on any one factor but are subject to many influences; individual, cultural, social and environmental. The unique nature of how the young people in this study experienced the decision making process is clear in terms of: different levels of support received (both in school and informally); the quality of the advice, with many students reporting contradictory advice; different levels of expectations and

aspirations, from themselves, school and home; varying levels of personal agency and coping skills around making important choices; socio-economic differences where some students have advantages coming to school in terms of financial and emotional supports, and finally the prospect of ‘going to college’ ranges from excitement to trepidation.

This research is worthy of consideration in the field as I have incorporated four separate aspects in order to come to the conclusion that a new modified approach to practice is needed. First, in my position and experience as a career guidance counsellor in a secondary school I have explained in chapter one the source of my initial concern that has instigated this research and why I believe the way career guidance, advice and information is provided for in Ireland is inadequate. Second, in chapter 2 I have outlined in some detail how European policy emanating from organisations such as the OECD and education policy in Ireland has promoted and facilitated a neoliberal approach to education in general and careers education in particular. This has meant a particular view of education where the needs of the economy are given priority and where career guidance has been expected to play its role. Thirdly, as mentioned above, chapter three is a critical review of literature as I wanted to find out what the literature has to say about how careers education has and can develop in the future. Finally, the findings from this study are set within the policy and theoretical implications and are used to address the research questions.

The research brings policy implications, theory and the findings from the study into practice and so, in the next section I detail a number of implications and recommendations for practice. These observations relate initially to my own practice as a career guidance counsellor but the hope is to create awareness among practitioners of the need for a different, modified approach to the provision of career guidance, advice and information in Irish secondary schools. However, I now turn to consider the limitations of my work and furthermore, in research terms, where do considerations take the field.

I set out on the Doctorate in Education journey to undertake a work based research to examine a real world concern. The research is interpretive as I wanted to discover and understand how individual students experience the decision-making process. I am conscious therefore that the themes and ultimate conclusions are my interpretation rather than a literal reporting of what is being said. I have outlined my approach and understanding of interpretive research in section 4.2.2 and I am satisfied that, by using grounded theory techniques I have captured the meaning of how staff and students experience the decision

making process. I was careful to observe recommendations for ethical approval (Section 4.2.5), decision on sample size (Section 4.2.6), arranging the research (Section 4.2.7), choice of method (Section 4.3) and transcription of the data (Section 4.3.3). There are however a number of limitations to this study.

This study is a small scale qualitative study, with a sample of ten students, five currently studying for their Leaving Certificate examination and in the process of making their choices for the following year, five students who had already made their third level choices and returning home for Christmas holidays and five staff members involved with advising and supporting students. I am aware that the student sample size was drawn from the same school and the study is limited by the number of participants but I suggest the validity, meaningfulness and conclusions generated by a small scale study have more to do with the 'information richness' (Patton 2001, p. 185) of what the participants are saying and the analysis, interpretation and presentation of the data than with the sample size.

In the first chapter of this dissertation and then throughout I have acknowledged my priority with respect to the research where I am involved with the decision-making process as a practising career guidance counsellor. I have acknowledged my own beliefs, biases and ways of approaching careers advice and support. With regard to the specific area of this research I can be considered an insider as I share a common bond with the participants as we are both involved in the decision-making process. However, I can be considered as an outsider as I did not research in my own school and with respect to staff, the participants do not work in my own school. Nonetheless I was aware that during the student interviews especially, that there still existed a teacher-student relationship and so I was conscious to explain to the students the purpose of the research and that they were free to express their opinions in whatever manner they wished. In addition, as outlined in chapter four, I was very careful with choice of methodology and methods to ensure that I was as objective as I could be.

In relation to the actual interviews there are a number of issues that researchers might consider. First, the questions asked were almost exclusively around the students' hopes and plans for going to college. I have indicated in chapter 1 that this study, being a small scale piece of research concentrates on careers and colleges at third level. I am aware however that there are other pathways for students leaving school, such as further education courses, apprenticeships or moving directly into employment, and these were not explored in any great detail. A fuller exploration of all the various pathways could feasibly be part of a larger



study in the future. Also in the interviews, I did not analyse the data with respect to gender. The students were a mixture of young men and women and on face value there did not seem to be any marked difference between male and female. Again, like the pathways, this aspect of data analysis could well be part of a larger study and perhaps with a larger sample, discernible differences between male and female might become apparent. Also in relation to the interviews my skill as an interviewer might be considered a limitation. As someone fairly new to qualitative research I initially had doubts around my skills as an interviewer. My interviewing technique developed in terms of probing questions, being able to respond to participants' responses, changing roles, taking notes, time- management during the interviews and the transcribing of the interviews.

The interviews were carried out with a fairly homogenous group of participants of the same age, at the same stage of the decision-making process and with a broadly similar view of education and the types of choices open to them. It was not within the scope of a small scale study like this to interview and analyse the responses of influential parties to the decisions being made, that is, the colleges where the students were applying to, parents, wider family and peers. In future research this might be possible and the findings would no doubt illuminate understanding of how decisions are made. Researchers should consider the decisions I have made in relation to my approach to carrying out the research. In chapter three I have explained in detail why I have chosen social constructivism as a framework and I have also explained why I have decided against other frameworks, ethnography and participatory action research for example. Chapter three also details why I decided that an interpretation of what is being said is the most suitable way of understanding what is going on and what meanings can be put on the data. I also explain the benefits of semi-structured interviews to ascertain the views of the participants and again I explain why I did not choose, for example, focus groups as a method. Finally, in the last part of this chapter I reflect on the formation of the research questions. As part of this process I reflect on a particular aspect, that of *whole school supports* and their role in careers decision- making. The findings indicate a significant contribution from subject teachers in school. The value of these contributions was not something I had anticipated. In the final section I reflect on this with regard to the formation of research questions but here I suggest a valuable avenue for further research could relate to the contribution of *whole school supports* as part of a whole school guidance programme.

Questions that could be considered include: are my limitations realistic and accurate? Is this study still of value adding to the body of knowledge in the field? Would future researchers consider the limitations as a sticking point or would they engage in further research regardless? Taking considerations of the limitations into account is further work in the field of valuable direction to take.

I believe that this study is worth expanding and applying the research questions to other new and interesting areas of research. This research has been worthwhile as it highlights firstly, the individual nature of how students experience the decision making process, secondly, that career guidance and advice information provision in Ireland fails to take account of formal and informal supports and inconsistencies in the amount and quality of these supports. Thirdly those decisions made in the transition from school and made within the context of financial and emotional insecurities and finally, that the ultimate decisions made by the students often do not score well on a rational/irrational continuum as the decisions made are often based on poor information, serendipity and unrealistic aspirations or expectations.

Considering the limitations I now suggest future avenues of research where the research questions in this study could be applied and more fully addressed.

1. As part of this research interviewed five students during the process of making choices and five students who have made their choices and were returning home at Christmas. An interesting expansion would be a longitudinal type of study where numbers of students could be interviewed as they make their choices and then interviewed again when they are either studying or working. This study has found out that there are a number of concerns around the way career guidance advice and information is provided for and the way students make choices. An interesting study would be to find out how the ways in which individuals experience the decision making process manifest itself post school. Essentially any suggestions and implications for a modified practice would be strengthened by an understanding of the impact that career guidance advice and information has on the students not only as they make their choices but implications for those choices at third level.

2. For logistical reasons this was a small scale qualitative study. It was carried out with a sample of ten students within one school and five staff involved in the decision-making process. I would propose that an area for further research would be to expand the sample group to the whole year group where there would be a greater range of aptitudes, interests and post-school plans. This study concentrated on students involved in decisions around

going to college and the staff were involved in supporting them make these decisions. A larger sample, for instance the whole group who completed the questionnaire would give an insight into how a modified career guidance practice could include the realities of decision-making for all students regardless of their post-school plans.

3. For researchers taking the limitations into consideration a valuable direction to take this study could be research into different types of schools. The school where this study was carried out represents a particular socio-economic background. While the ethos in the school is to value education and third level options in particular there were similar concerns among all the participants about the financial cost of going to college. It would be interesting to find out if the concern at the heart of this research was as relevant to different types of schools in different social-economic contexts.

4. As a result of this study I have incorporated social constructivist approaches to my practice as a career guidance counsellor. It would be interesting to conduct a follow up longitudinal study into whether an improvement in practice results in better, more-informed decisions being made in the transition from school. For instance improvements in practice that I am currently exploring includes involving 'influences' identified as part of the findings in my one-to-one appointments.

5. I would suggest that there are four parties ensuring students choose the most appropriate courses and colleges, government and policy makers, representatives of employers and employment, third level providers and the secondary school system. In my experience as a career guidance counsellor in the secondary school system I have found that communication between the different parties is minimal and certainly not systematic. An area for further research that would be of benefit to all parties would be to research into how communication channels between the parties could be improved.

6. Finally I have mentioned that in my teaching I have not experienced that students from different socio-economic backgrounds place differing value on education. This is because the context I am familiar with and in which this research was carried out is based within a catholic ethos, where education historically is valued. This historical context was explained in chapter 2.

In this study one of the area students find most beneficial was marketing and promotion by third level colleges. Students and staff expressed the opinion that 'open days' school visits and

college websites were very useful. There was a sense however that such promotions are quite haphazard in that some colleges were proactive while some colleges were not and also some students received quite a lot of information from colleges while some received hardly any. Communication between interested parties second level; third level; employees and policymakers could only be of benefit to the students.

### **7.5 Recommendations for practice**

As is evident from my interpretation and discussion of the findings from this study set within policy and academic literature, undertaking this study has significantly impacted on my thinking and practice as a career guidance counsellor.

As a result of this research a number of recommendations arose and I now propose specific recommendations.

1. The findings in this study support academic literature that says there are multiple influences on the decision-making process. Career guidance interviews with students should involve the main parties that have ‘influence’ parents or guardians being the most obvious. I would recommend that one to one career guidance appointments should involve the main influences on the ultimate decisions to be made.
2. Meetings with students should be a co-construction of the realities of the decision-making process for the individual student, and career guidance, advice and information for individuals should be based on an understanding of particular social, economic and cultural environments. Careers advice and support should be tailored to the specific needs of the individual. This study has shown clearly that the realities faced by students as they make decisions are particular to that student.
3. All students should have access to careers advice and information. In my own practice this has meant seeking out students who, for various reasons, do not feel they need or are entitled to the same levels of support as other students. The finding here indicate that it is often the students who are supported and encouraged from home that are the ones who are most proactive about seeking out help and advice. A social

constructivist approach to career support should necessarily acknowledge that some students need more 'encouragement' to seek out the support and advice they need.

4. As part of such a universal approach to careers support all pathways should be given the same weight and due consideration including apprenticeships, further education and employment. This study supports other studies in Ireland ESRI (2010) and in the UK House of Lords (2014) that students feel there is too much emphasis on 'going to college'. If careers guidance is to reclaim its role in promoting social justice (Bassot 2012) an important aspect would be to recognise different pathways post school as equally legitimate.
5. As a follow on from the fourth recommendation a holistic approach, as part of a co-construction of reality needs to be taken by careers guidance counsellors and those involved in whole school supports. Consideration needs to be given to individual aspirations, ambitions and expectations especially where a student might have low expectations for personal or social reasons.
6. In Chapter 7 of this dissertation constructivist approaches such as Life-Designing (Savickas et al. 2009) and Career Learning Development (Bassot 2012) were proposed as part of a modified practice. Important aspects of a modified approach to career guidance involves teaching students how to carry out their own research into possible options, evaluate and choose between options, and how to reflect on possible pathways into the future. Part of a social constructivist approach is to enable students to manage and be responsible for their own decisions.
7. Career guidance, advice and information should be provided for as part of a systematic whole schools support system that also involves subject teachers, year heads, SPHE classes, and pastoral supports. Whole school guidance is a policy requirement but the reality rarely matches the rhetoric. The findings from this study clearly indicate that subject teachers but also year heads, SPHE and pastoral support play an important role in decision making and should be incorporated into a social constructivist practice.

8. Finally, careers advice and information should be delivered at an earlier stage in school. There are a number of important decisions made in junior school such as subject choices and the levels that subjects are taken at. These decisions have important consequences for the options open to senior students as they make their choice. Careers support in the transition from school needs to take account of and understand the implications of decision taken earlier in school.

## **7.6 Final reflections**

Throughout this dissertation, I have explained the formation of the research questions the questions. The questions first arose through a concern as part of my practice. I then wanted to see what the academic and policy literature was saying about the types of issues raised in the research questions. The question is pretty much stood up to a testing from the literature and did not changed that much. Apart from few word changes the essential meaning of the questions survived the literature. The only change, as described chapter 2, was an amendment to the first quotation question to whether career guidance advice and information provision was informed by ideology. The impact of ideology was not something I had anticipated until a review of policy relevant to careers education.

In addressing the research questions the findings support the proposal for a different approach to practice. This is because the themes emerging from the data, inconsistencies in support and insecurities felt by the students' indicates that individuals experience the choices process in their own way. However, with regard to the phrasing of the questions a particular aspect of the first two questions, the provision of careers guidance, advice and support and its impact on students, was that whole school supports, especially support and advice from subject teachers was reported as being a very significant influence on the students. I have mentioned that an interesting avenue for future research would be the extent and impact of whole school supports. For my research the significance put on whole school supports by students is an important finding although not one directly asked in the research questions.

One of the findings from this study was in relation to the different aspirations and expectations among students. In the course of the interviews the students indicated very different levels of expectations and even aspirations. This seemed to come from a variety of sources, from home, from school and even from the students themselves. Again, like the

whole school supports the reasons for different expectations among students would be interesting to research into.

The value of this research however, was that this issue was highlighted but perhaps a more direct question in relation to expectations and aspirations would have yielded a fuller picture of the way students approach the careers decision-making process.

Finally, with regard to the research questions an important aspect of the research is that it was based on my practice and that I felt there was a deficiency in the way careers advice and support was provided for in second level schools in Ireland. Consequently the temptation is to concentrate on the negative aspects of careers guidance provision and the negative impacts on the students. There are of course many students who are quite happy with their choices and decisions and this research indicate an overall positive response to careers advice and support received in school. For instance, the higher education authority (HEA 2014) report that one in six students do not proceed to the second year of their course, this does mean though that five out of six students do proceed to the second year of the course. On reflection in order that I might improve my own practice I could have probed more into what the students and staff thought was working well with regards to careers guidance.

The concern at the heart of this study is that not all students are able to make the most informed decisions in the final year of school. This is evidenced by the drop-out rates and the number of students who, even though intending to stay in college, express dissatisfaction with their choices made. The findings from the study support this initial concern and also point to the need for a modified approach to practice. The approach to career guidance, advice and information proposed in this study is based on insights from social constructivism. A social constructivist approach is a challenge for any career guidance counsellor and I have outlined the reasons why ‘trait and factor’ methods are intuitively appealing in a school setting and why they are still very much part of career guidance, advice and information provision in Ireland. I am currently adopting social-constructivist approaches as a framework for my own practice. My aim is to co-construct a reality of the decision-making process for each student by trying to understand their social and cultural environment and by including those who are important influences on the choices made. I believe that that a social-constructivist approach offers opportunity to promote and uphold equality and social justice (Bassot 2012). An empirical study of applicants to higher education in the United Kingdom has found that state schools and working class pupils were likely to be selecting from one set

of limited options and private schools form another set of options (Reay et al. 2005). I am convinced that social constructivist approaches offers the possibility of addressing this problem as part of my practice.

While much attention has been paid in this dissertation to the incorporation of constructivist approaches into careers guidance, advice and information, it seems that this may not happen quickly. A constructivist approach to education is challenging as the emphasis shifts from learning to teaching, careers education is no exception. The emphasis in a constructivist approach to careers education is on the needs of the individual and this has not always been the case in my experience for careers guidance has taken a directive approach. While a constructivist approach is an improvement on traditional ways of providing for career guidance advice and information the proposal as part of this research is a practice predicated upon social constructivism. This is even more challenging as this approach is not at all directive and involves a collaborative approach for the careers advisor and the student who together co-construct the particular reality facing the student. It is then within this reality that careers advice and support are based. The findings in this study support the literature that argues career guidance is a complex process where the ‘deceptively simple’ (McMahon and Patton 2000) ‘trait and factor’ approach is still a mainstay of career guidance provision. I have described earlier in this dissertation that ‘trait and factor’ approaches and psychometric tests are intuitively appealing in a school setting, and where ‘trait and factor’ approaches provide an easily understood road map for career guidance, no such map is provided for by a social constructivist approach. The process in a social constructivist careers guidance practice is guided by the students and their particular needs. The process of career guidance in a social constructivist approach is therefore less directive and as such is a challenge for a career guidance counsellor who has been using traditional approaches. The traditional ‘trait and factor’ approaches still has a place but it no longer holds the key (McMahon and Patton 2000).

The challenge for career guidance, argued for in the literature and supported by the findings in this study is to provide advice and support relevant to the particular needs of the individuals. There are a number of issues for career guidance, while challenging, offer opportunities, as part of a social constructivist approach, for improved practice. Since the turn of the millennium there has been an increasing interest in well-being programmes in school. Career guidance may be able to encourage students to be optimistic, set realistic and constructive goals and focus on the future rather than dwell on the past. Career guidance



programmes can be an important aspect of well-being programmes in schools. A second issue for the career guidance is the growth of alternative pathways. This is a growing recognition that there is an “over-emphasis on going to college”, for instance the growth of apprenticeships not only in traditional areas but in “new” areas such as insurance, accounting, the information technology industry, reflect a growing recognition of the value and suitability of apprenticeship programmes as alternative to “going to college”. Finally, it is important to note, as part of any proposal for a modified practice is that career guidance does not operate within the structures of curriculum, textbooks, and assessments and so, has perhaps a unique opportunity to develop a service that is guided by the needs of the students. I would like now to conclude by making a number of observations about my research.

I understand validity in qualitative research to mean appropriateness of the tools, processes, and data (Leung 2008). Questions I asked of my study were: whether the research questions were valid for the desired outcome; the choice of methodology is suitable; the sampling and data analysis is appropriate, and finally are the results and conclusions valid for the sample and context. In brief, I propose that, as outlined in Chapter 4, every step of my research logistics has followed guidelines and recommendations for a qualitative study and is appropriate for my study.

I have used triangulation in my research to check and establish validity using different perspectives to arrive at consistency across the study. In order to ensure rigour in my research I have applied perspectives and approaches from the taught courses in the EdD programme in the University of Glasgow and have read widely around conducting small scale research, methodology, methods and analysis and interpretation of data. Throughout the six years of the EdD programme and in the carrying out of this dissertation, I have been fortunate to have a colleague who has acted as ‘a critical friend’ who has read, questioned, probed, asked for clarifications, and has made suggestions for improvement. I have also been in constant contact with my supervisor by telephone, skype and face-to-face and this has resulted in much re-drafting and improvements of the dissertation. Finally, an ex-colleague who has completed his PhD studies in education agreed to read through the final draft and I have incorporated many of his suggestions. These three people have been an invaluable source of help and encouragement and their insights have been crucial in the completion of this study.

The findings and conclusions from this study and any emergent recommendations for a different way of providing career advice and support do not claim generalisability, in that they cannot be extended from this sample population to the general population at large (Barnes et al. 2012). Although generalisability usually applies to more quantitative methods, transferability can apply to varying degrees to most types of research, where transferability does not involve broad claims but invites readers of the research to make connections between elements of this study and their own experience (Barnes et al. 2012). In this way, my research does not claim generalisability however the detailed nature of the results makes them ideal for transferability.

In conclusion there are a number of points that I would like to make with respect to the trustworthiness of my work (Bassegy 2000). I have been careful to use key respondents to ensure that my work is 'good' and that any claims for a contribution to knowledge in relation to career guidance, advice and information is based on the academic literature and a careful analysis and presentation of the data. Secondly, I am satisfied that the methodology of three sets of semi-structured interviews has resulted in a level of saturation where 'no additional data are being found....[to] develop properties of the category' (Hopkins 1993. P.154). Thirdly, my approach to triangulation to ensure the trustworthiness involves: incorporating the views of the participants, the current students, the returning students, and staff; methodology and methods, an interpretivist approach, questionnaire, interview, and a grounded theory approach to the analysis of the data; key respondents, and my own practice where I currently employ the recommendations emerging from this study.

Finally, I believe that this dissertation has an internal consistency which contributes to the trustworthiness of the research project. I have outlined the 'concern' at the heart of the research, the research questions are addressed and I have been 'up-front' in relation to positionality. The study has been contextualised with respect to policy and literature and the methodology and methods have been justified. Most importantly any recommendations for a modified approach to practice are as a consequence of setting the findings from the study within academic literature relating to the provision of career guidance, advice and information.

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## **Appendices**

## Appendix A: Survey of 6th year students

### Part A. Family.

Please indicate the highest level of education achieved by your parents/ guardians. Please tick appropriate response.

		Father	Mother	Guardian
1	Primary school only			
2	Secondary school but did not			
3	Finished secondary school			
4	Attended an Institute of further education e.g. Letterkenny Institute of Technology			
5	Attended university			

6. Have any of your family attended university?

	Yes	No
Brother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sister	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other relative	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

7. Are either parents/ guardians currently employed?

	Yes	No
Mother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Father

Guardian

☐☐

If you answered Yes to any of the above please state current or previous occupations

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## Part B Values and Goals

1. Would you say that it is taken for granted in your home that you will go to a third level college?

Yes ☐

No ☐

If you answered no, what does your home expect you will be doing next year?

Yes

No

Repeat ☐

☐

Apprenticeship ☐

☐

Work ☐

☐

Other ☐

☐

2. Do you intend to do more than a 1<sup>st</sup> Degree, e.g. a Masters?

Yes ☐

No ☐

☐

Don't Know

3. What are the reasons that have contributed to you considering any of the courses/ colleges you intend to apply for?

Yes

No

A) The reputation of the college

☐☐

B) The reputation of the course.

☐☐

C) Employment prospects after the course ☐ ☐

D) A general interest ☐ ☐

E) Other? Please state.



## **Appendix B: Interview Themes**

The following are the main themes that I intend to refer to in the semi-structured interviews:

Theme 1.

Attitudes towards the application process -straightforward, difficult, stressful?

Theme 2.

In terms of information, to what extent do candidates feel they are able to make informed decisions?

Theme 3.

In relation to careers information, where did candidates source this information and did they have help?

Theme 4.

What are candidates' main influences on the decision making process, parents, siblings, peers, school etc.

Theme 5.

How do candidates view the next few months/year- with optimism, trepidation, excitement..?

## Appendix C: Leaving Certificate Grade Points System

Points System- applied up until 2016.

Grade	Higher level	Ordinary level
A1	100	60
A2	90	50
B1	85	45
B2	80	40
B3	75	35
C1	70	30
C2	65	25
C3	60	20
D1	55	15
D2	50	10
D3	45	5

Points system- applied from 2017

%Marks	Grades	Higher level	Ordinary level
90-100	H1/O1	100	56
80-89	H2/O2	88	46
70-79	H3/O3	77	37
60-69	H4/O4	66	28
50-59	H5/O5	56	20
40-49	H6/O6	46	12
30-39	H7/O7	37	0
0-29	H8/O8	0	0

## Appendix D: Data Analysis RS1

### RS1

Interview 1 3/12/14

Thinks about (1) Interview 1 - STUDENT 1

College → to UCD → RS1(a) Interview 2

→ did C source before and really enjoyed that

but worked more RS1(a) Interview 3

→ UCD → 10. RS1(a) Interview 4

→ my brother went to UCD → not a good student, knows

→ and I had a few cousins who went there and they

did it and it was a really nice college

→ UCD established up the but known in Ireland people like to 10

at home but... informed about 11

→ C source → Jane in light - "Mum and you should go that 12

→ "Mum and you should go that 13

→ "Mum and you should go that 14

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→ "Mum and you should go that 100

### MEMO + COMPARISONS

①

RS1 - very close on the same and college she wants to go

to UCD

Engineering!

→ very strong influences from family - both father and brother

went to UCD to study Engineering

+ parents made to some colleges

→ "good" informed choice. → This student even at early

stage of I never to do

has standard "other" options

→ private source

→ health care

→ influences include a wide circle, not just family immediate

→ aunt was a nurse

→ differences in the reality of studying to other

Students

→ "comfortable" was mentioned a number of times!

→ accommodation, part jobs → not an issue

for her!





③ RS1(c)

1. I thought, but I like the subject > what I was required at 1  
 2. I was a bit nervous / and into Eng, Mum was a bit  
 3. I thought, I had really liked it & would like Eng - but I  
 4. was a bit like I really like it. I thought of it after that time  
 5. + I thought I was a bit nervous  
 6. I was a bit nervous / and into Eng, Mum was a bit  
 7. I was a bit nervous / and into Eng, Mum was a bit  
 8. I was a bit nervous / and into Eng, Mum was a bit  
 9. I was a bit nervous / and into Eng, Mum was a bit  
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 25. I was a bit nervous / and into Eng, Mum was a bit

④ RS1(c)

1. I was a bit nervous / and into Eng, Mum was a bit  
 2. I was a bit nervous / and into Eng, Mum was a bit  
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 22. I was a bit nervous / and into Eng, Mum was a bit  
 23. I was a bit nervous / and into Eng, Mum was a bit  
 24. I was a bit nervous / and into Eng, Mum was a bit  
 25. I was a bit nervous / and into Eng, Mum was a bit

(4) RS1(d)

⑤

→ probably / more willing to talk to my dad and my brother about it

⑥ RSI(d)

→ it was for

● sources of information

2

And did you go to any other shops with the school? - York 14  
went to W.D. and H. 17. [equal]

(3) // thought he "can dig our pain", I want to be expressive with =  
 • {volume of expression}

② It was really good though and it was good to see the Japanese ambassador.  
+ it gave you a excited about going. (you're always a good person) \*  
③ "What thing real" 13  
Reverend

26 It is given  $\rightarrow$  what about own research [don't remember] 14

→ Not differences between different branches of  
Exercising, still diff branches of Norway, but had

ing in my head + I would have started at the post office  
while @ the end - I was keeping many in mind - centered  
the more "substantial"

being engineering than as a nerd! [very hard record, correct, 20 nearly, 100%] 21

I / prob didn't look enough into the modules you wanted to bring. 23  
I / would advise people to do more, so I know exactly. 24

4 came a lot of people dropped out for they didn't both @ the modular @ college \* VB \*

advice on our website - make sure you know exactly what the course entails

100



1 If you were back to school is there anything you would have the opportunity? - are you happy?  
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RS1

Relating I No 1 - Rosin Hagerty - Very logical, rational.

[Multiple influences] outside school - Parents, B+S → "luckily I was able to talk to my dad + brother about it so it was fine."

[Logical/Rational] - "v. well established, do the best known in Ireland"

Girl → [STEREOTYPING] → she did Eng in the end, F, B, but she only come round half-way through 6<sup>th</sup> year before that she considering health care  
cg teacher as well → names to B+S/H4 Eng to CST class

[Open mind needed] → cg → parents → students re college/career.

"... before (eng) that I had always considered health care and all... everyone kinda does that (girls)"

[Expectation/Reinforcement] → "solid income" → [Support] → phone → parents → school  
[Rational] → Replication

"well we are really happy and have a very comfortable home" - sees Eng as a way of reinforcing, replicating this "it's tough to get a job in nursing" and "I was comparing money as well - I compared nursing to eng... you could be a bit more comfortable doing eng than as a nurse!"

[Commencement of Travel] → UCD → UCLH → definite considerations

[CONSIDERATIONS] → school teacher → reputation  
stereotyping → home → cost → time → friends  
gender travel away

[Transitions] → home → areas → school → college → supports → on your own  
→ track of going

[Preparations (or not)] → info → research → "I do like the subjects... in eng... which I was surprised at"

see quote in Matules - p4 → Rosin  
[Open days] → "I thought the open day was class... p4...  
Recommendation for cgai - speakers? → links with cg in colleges?



## Appendix E: Data Analysis RS4

(1) Interviewed 10/4 - 2 interviews → same  
 (2) Done/collapse? → Carlsbad walking with Frank / English - USSR  
Only offered to 15 → before points  
 → 3 years = long + Frank  
 [ RSH ]  
 (3) Are there still shared rooms? → Yes, I looked into this once  
 (4) ? → Yes, I really like it especially in 19 year +  
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[illegible]

(5) I hope to get some more material for my book. I  
 like to get a good one about a year  
 before I publish it.

(6) I am publishing in place  
 "If I had the time I would have loved to have shown it" to the  
 (7) (8)

[illegible]

MEMOS + COMPARISONS → INTERVIEW NO. 4 - STUDENT ①

→ Student seems pretty sure about where to work to go - in the village and the house

R.S 4(a)

- Parents → own records + influence of colleges <sup>popularity</sup> → Super drugs
- Medicine 1st → then "reconstructed" → Big difference <sub>Medicine → Crime</sub> Writing
- then a "real" scientist, → but still the scientist she had a real <sub>about what is science.</sub>

11/11/2008

→ Power of getting a job  $\Rightarrow$  Q2 - is the money from home?  
Can students of public  
not change the  
pattern? - especially in  
Q2<sub>1</sub> - better off family

\* US & UK begin with share - see. Right & was already his own share >  $\mathbb{Q}^2$  - when is the Machine going from  $\rightarrow$  parts?  $\mathbb{Q}^2$

→ Treating a boy reference → this seems to be a contrast  
with end of the absolutely

1.5 - about 100, but now doing about 1000.  
 2. To his daughter with did Bernard as "fucking"  
 3. "I know?" - 643, = 1000 Friends \*  
 4. Friends = "even taking it"  
 you try to put the numbers when they are going  
 down at all easily the way you should do it. But  
 +  
 "sense of familiarity is good" Peers  
 5. "I can remember meeting when I was young and thinking I could do  
 it a while" \* NITE-REST \*  
 6. Do you think you had all the info you needed to make a good  
 decision? - 5 "I thought I did but when I actually go  
 this it was probably different" \* NB \* saw as one of the go  
 to "from the properties and from the college website" \*  
 7. student feedback is important \* all influences  
 the decision  
 Making the decision 5 Sources v. Carthage writing  
 8. Any help? - If you want to talk to the heart - who were  
 tell them to get the information?  
 9. Properties is a good but if you want to get the truth it  
 good to talk to someone who is there \* Parents \* Brothers \* NB  
 "maybe a returning student" students \* NB  
 10. What would you advise age to do?  
 11. "I think this was just like any other thing and I don't know if you can  
 find it in specific to each person" - see Smyth and Smith

12. strong influence of friends was thought to be aware that this  
 is often put the but way to make a decision!  
 [RS4(b)]  
 13. again, a "red" indicator for the student  
 14. perceived that his decision was based on less than accurate  
 information  
 15. again, as with the students, website and "student feedback" in the  
 property, a good way to get info  
 16. \* This student at least is aware  
 that his decision was partly based  
 on word info and partly based  
 on info that is less than word \*  
 17. again, he is saying 'get the info!'  
 18. Strong recommendation for "returning students" as a way  
 of getting info and advice - this was the only student to  
 say this was a good source of advice \* NB \*  
 19. says that eg in school needs to be tailored \* see Smyth  
 (et al. 2012)



③ This notion is thoughts of the very eyes is determined in the subject.  
 → this student is saying that eyes needs to be turned to the individual needs of the individuals  
 → he is saying 2 things about 1 → opportunities but he only ever went to one → 1  
 Resources  
 Standard  
 [RS4C]  
 → Even though he had a clear mind when asked he would be able to feel conflicted making choices  
 → Indecision → Pressure  
 Sounding?  
 These seems to be 'conflicting' messages here - hence indecision/pressure. Perhaps Father saying one thing, mother saying another!  
 → Mother seems to be more influence!! → This seems to be a common finding!

⑤ getting around into about how to apply to CAO/UCD as many 1  
 suggest! but do not exactly... a one-on-one, a smaller 2  
 setting would be better for the 19 class you would do 3  
 why those broad out of your tree so it would be the same 4  
 stuff repeated [C-19 ad-hoc] 5  
 "people are looking for 1 different things, like if you are studying at 2  
 senior who is looking to experience... why? well 6-7  
 "I can explain but I only ever did it once" \* a conversation 8-10  
 0-11  
 CK) → "I changed my course 5 times" → indecision → Source 12  
 all source, all Dublin, then I got out of Dublin and it was 13  
 all Galway so I know then that that is where everyone was 14  
 going... my friends, I put in my final name put on how before 15  
 16  
 people are... it's more interesting is a class to actually stand 17  
 about what you want  
 Explanations? See CAO - "well, all my friends... everybody was 18  
 going to college, my sister and everyone 19  
 [C-19 ad-hoc] 20  
 "I was in the family and I college then went 21  
 to college. Dad didn't like anybody was more 22  
 parents about going to college... he actually 23  
 didn't want us to leave like 24  
 "even with the Dublin so she wanted us to go to the 25  
 26  
 27

3) Dad knew my friendship was a friend - so that's the way he  
 looked at it.

4) Dad as so I knew what the rest of my friends were doing  
 and I knew that I would be able to get in.

5) RS4(d)  
 independence, change thought Galway was open for us then Dublin  
 I would get lost in Dublin... as Galway you have a  
 it some people... it felt a bit more like a community than the  
 end of people.

6) RS4(d)  
 you happy enough with the whole system?  
 or pushing... for example, would pushing  
 the you pushed it because because of the points?

7) Well is the system to have it at a 12 as as they're pushing out  
 then really want to the same rather than just points?  
 and they're not as well.

8) "The system is like that some people who would be pushed to  
 some don't get in as they don't get the points."

9) RS4(d)  
 appears as many people in Galway who who's pushed... I know  
 now who would be from England to Science as their points were  
 pushing Science.

10) RS4(d)  
 knows somebody who does Astronomy... one who and then  
 changed to "higher science".

11) RS4(d)  
 very difficult attitude to RSI - when points and brother all and  
 to the pure science in Dublin -> This school "spirit" of  
 Dublin -> But Galway would be more manageable.  
 Differences in reality.

12) RS4(d)  
 Good awareness of the "system" -> the + and the -

13) RS4(d)  
 where did the one  
 from?

14) RS4(d)  
 interesting observation that authority is not a "proper science"



# NOTES

Referring I no 6 ~~to the~~ R54

"Creative writing with hands"  $\rightarrow$  was going for 16/  $\rightarrow$  then too bad but also not up

"Domino before the deadline for CAO?"

"Real interest of mine"  $\rightarrow$  personal interest in writing

Considerations  $\rightarrow$  "Job", "Money"  
 $\rightarrow$  "same of four levels is good"

Advice  $\rightarrow$  Mum, Dad, Aunt & Uncle  
 but place as  
 someone who  
 is already  
 there  $\rightarrow$  Dad's business are all in  
 the city side  
 $\rightarrow$  My aunt takes in Science

Decision  $\rightarrow$  Awareness  $\rightarrow$  ?

Ch 7  
 Difference is what they  
 think, Posters + news h. v.  
 "I thought I knew all about the course  
 but when I got there it was completely  
 different" - very different from the website,  
 prospectus and what you get at  
 the open day"

Equi  $\rightarrow$  "the eq class was just like  
 any other class and I don't know  
 if you could that was the specific  
 to each person"

3rd p 6  
 (back) "In the eq class you would be  
 sitting there bored out of your face  
 as it would be the same stuff  
 repeated  
 "it was interesting in class to  
 actually speak about what you want"

if there were no points I probably  
 would have done med... I like  
 my course now but I am not  
 sure about a job"

"talking to my friends... you  
 try to pick the universities  
 where they are going... I know it's  
 not exactly the way you should do it"

Decision  $\rightarrow$  "I changed  
 my CAO  
 courses then"  
 "Science, all Science, all  
 Dublin, then I got out of Dublin  
 and it was all Galway, cos I knew  
 then that that is where everyone was  
 going... my friends"

Explanations  $\rightarrow$  see p 6 & 7  
 bottom

TRANSITION  $\rightarrow$  what is going  
 on in their heads  $\rightarrow$  "D'oh, through"  
 (back of p 2)  $\rightarrow$  parents  $\rightarrow$  paying  
 degree  $\rightarrow$  money

$\rightarrow$  see p 4 & 5 of LMK

③ → Mother used to tell me, father did an apprenticeship and as soon as I joined → Respecting Differences \*

[RSH(d)]

④ → Very difficult attitude to RSI - when parents and brother all used to the same religion as Dublin → This created "spread" of Dublin → Riches Galway would be more successful

Differences in Reality

⑤ → Good awareness of the "system" → the + and the -

⑥ → Who did this one from?

⑦ → hereditary observation. That ancestry is not a 'proper science'

⑧ → Did she have an apprenticeship as a journey - so that's the way to school it?

[RSH(d)]

⑨ → Did we see? I know what the rest of my friends were doing and I know that I would be able to get in

⑩ → introduction, change. That's Galway was able for me then Dublin

⑪ → I would get lost in Dublin... in Galway you know a lot more people... it's like a lot more a community than the end of people

Differences in exp

⑫ → Can I get enough with the whole system?

⑬ → or looking... for example, was it looking for you, looking at medicine because of the people?

⑭ → It's like the NHS at home it's a lot as as they're going out from really, most of the time, rather than just people

⑮ → and they're not autonomous as well

⑯ → "The job system is like that, more people who would be needed to come down, get in, in they don't get the people"

⑰ → There are many people in Galway who know what... I know how the system from England is. Science is the people were looking Science

⑱ → know somebody who does testimony, one who and the longest to 'proper science'



## Appendix F: Data Analysis S4

Notes for Interview No. 1

Student 4 - S4

[S4(a)]

→ gave of WEBS was a bit new for student - 1st time working personal statement / 1st time for an interview. Also WEBS

→ Applying to WEBS = "3 choices" → QUB, Univ of Wales, Wales' but maybe → indication of not really thought out

→ Found the game on the WEBS website they putting in "Hwre."

- fine, but we had expectation of the exam / college / country

→ No intention of going to Wales! → seems possible to go to a college nearby!

→ own record? → for but rational? (chances of going to Wales??)

Interview No. 1 - Student (Student is in the middle of the discussion - working I)

I - Oh, think for agreeing to be interviewed - as I want to make I want to give a bit but about your class and why you picked particular colleges and particular courses - especially your influences - what, who is picking your choices

[S4(u)]

I - 1st Q is - did you apply for QUB and WEBS?

S - Yeah, both. 'Hwre' what we use here in school

I - and how did you find that process - stressful or easy enough?

S - The challenge - I was under a bit, and working the 1st was a bit strange, applying for England, writing one for this and not for the other. - I'm the kinda judge you on what you write - I didn't get any judgement on anything or anything [personal statement is a judgement with the 3 schools]

I - How many courses did you apply for in WEBS?

S - 5

I - Oh and what colleges did you apply for?

S - QUB, Hwre, one in Wales (Loughor), I didn't see to like this

I - why Wales - S - A college of Hwre in Wales, where the 1st was not in Hwre. - not really

I - When you get info on that?

S - It was on the WEBS website - I put in "Hwre" and it came up - Oh, I was not even sure that thing would be as high as England [QUB]

I - Oh and is that the only place you got info? Have you ever met anyone who had been there?

S - No! - own record on Wales - seemed very unclear about it

② [Sk(b)]

Hand/COMPASSION'S

→ So add, choice → Perry, local  
 → Influence → Drama teacher (very logical as it is music she is involved in!)  
 → Perry → 'a few probs' → friends previously!  
 picked a little more here as with other students friends (PSS - PSS) friends seemed to be v important.  
 → Now the school → Open days!  
 school seemed to be there for 'mids and bolls' information → but not for the real decision re course/college!  
 → Course requirements  
 (NB) This was consistent for all students

→ Seems to be good choice → consistency - the way it always has been. Other students - changed across and colleges - this student has discussed about colleges but is fairly consistent with course based in Music and Drama - but to go with what you are good at!

② [Sk(b)]

Stk and what the college did you apply for? - other  
 S - maybe for Drama. (Local college, convenience is important)  
 my drama teacher and there were good courses in

Perry and you for take the drama + music or just drama  
 and my drama teacher said it was a good course and a  
 few people (Perry) were talking about Drama - saying  
 that was good in all. I - about that of the drama teacher  
 I - when you say a few others (Perry) (Perry) (Perry)

S - just the people in the class (Perry)  
 I - and saw the teacher talking about Drama (Perry) (Perry)  
 S - 'Yes!' - the open days in all the requirements in all  
 I - and you go to the open day? (Perry) (Perry)

S - Now! - decided get it?  
 St - Did you go to the open day?  
 S - Yes, I was at the Music one. I - Did you find  
 it better

S - They gave me a booklet and we could walk around in a  
 few things about the course in all - if you can see  
 I - So, it was quite useful - S - Yes, it was is useful

I - that your course was it all Music?

S - Yes, Music, Music Drama, I with it, Music is always  
 I - So where did Music come from? (Perry) (Perry) (Perry)

S - I have been just always done Music. (Perry) (Perry) (Perry)



(3) S4(C)

- I play piano, a very good 1 am into the performance role as well... just have always had an interest in it

I Oh, and have you any family tradition with music? a career?

S - Now just (piano) I am brother or sister? or then read

S - Now I am really I and do you play any musical instruments yourself?

S - Yeah, I play the piano, guitar, I - & the whole family and I do S - Yeah, I Oh

I - Eh, in terms of CPO - how many careers did you apply for in CPO

S - S - as well I And what now they?

S - Mycroft, Music, Kinship - Voice studies, UCD - in fact for voice

Dumbbell - for Ref Hls and UCD for music. (Again very considered - the second to know what he wants)

I Oh, that's a wide variety from Cork to Dumbbell & UCD

- where did you get the info on those colleges?

S - Oh... on the website (again research very prominent - again she is doing that for things)

I - Yeah the CPO website?

S - Yeah, and then it came up and advice sources

then and you can see what the course is about and what course I would prefer is another order (with all the her own research)

MEANS/COMPARISONS (S4(C)) (3)

Talent & talent? She is not sure where she is going but is pretty clear on what she wants to do

Her own interest means to be the catalyst for her career process!

→ has a much more definite idea of what she wants to do because of this interest!

CPO → has applied to CPO as well

Again very considered choices → this is in comparison with the other students

eg PS4 → Engineering → Nursing

PS4 → Medicine → Creative Writing!

S2 → Nursing → Teaching → Nursing

→ Own Research - Websites!

'own research' → This is the main way for all students and that this was the way they did their own research!





⑧

SHC

J. OK, well we're nearly @ and ... just one.  
last question

S. OK, no problem ...

J. - At the end of the whole process, where do you  
see yourself next year?

S. Well... I would like them of those ... but

them is a bit worried about the rest ...

Change panel!! I'd say probably Barry ... its

a bit deeper + I would be able to go to

Harper's

J. Take on? S. Yeah, after 2 years

J. OK ... Thanks a much, you are very co-operative

S. OK, Thanks!

⑨

SHC

Final choice  $\Rightarrow$  What are the factors?

① Cost seems to be an important  
factor here

- this was not mentioned at all for  
some of the students

- difference in reality of dump

② Main influences - (a) She is

choosing the subject over me as

intended in will has a talent for

(b) "Hans" seems

to have a big say in the "share"

$\Rightarrow$  This turns up a good bit  $\Rightarrow$  You can

do what you are intended as but I have

a way where you do it"

