Lest We Forget: Lessons Learned in Ireland Following Budget 2012

Conor Mc Guckin and Aoife M. O'Brien
School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

School-based guidance and counselling provision suffered significantly in the austerity measures announced as part of the Irish national Budget for 2012. Through an exploration of the rapid changes visited on the profession in Ireland, this article offers a timely warning to international colleagues to engage in a service-wide reflective process regarding the nature, organisation, and efficacy of their role and profession. Highlighted are the central issues that have been experienced in Ireland, with suggestions for how colleagues could reflect upon the robustness of the profession in their own country.

■ **Keywords:** Ireland, guidance, counselling, school, profession, recession

If, drunk with sight of power, we loose
Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe —
Such boastings as the Gentiles use,
Or lesser breeds without the Law —
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget — lest we forget!
From 'Recessional', Rudyard Kipling (1919)

One of the most resonating and profound lines of a verse, which has insightful significance to the Budget 2012 decision regarding the provision of guidance counsellors in Irish Schools, comes from Kipling's 19th century poem, 'Recessional'. The repetition of three, simple, and unassuming words are weighty in their significance: 'Lest we forget'. They provide an eerie warning to us to remember the errors and sacrifices of those who have gone before us, and implore us to take note of our past mistakes so as to ensure that measures are in place to prevent such reoccurrences.

Prior to the global financial crisis, Ireland's 'Celtic Tiger' economy was thriving, with its economic policies and practices being held up as an example for other countries to emulate. However, the crisis has presented the Irish government with many unenviable and unpalatable choices in terms of austerity measures. Budget 2012 gravely wounded the frontline allocation of professionally qualified guidance

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Dr Conor Mc Guckin, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2, Ireland. Email: conor.mcguckin@tcd.ie

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counsellors in Irish second-level schools. This article highlights to international colleagues in similar roles the plight currently being faced by the guidance and counselling profession in Ireland, while offering a timely warning to consider the robustness of their own role and profession, and the extent to which these would withstand scrutiny from a government under financial pressure.

Guidance and Counselling in Irish Schools

Guidance and counselling has been provided in secondary schools in Ireland since the mid-1960s, with schools allocated guidance hours based on the number of students enrolled. Guidance counsellors are qualified secondary school teachers with a specific recognised postgraduate qualification in the area of guidance and counselling, and competence in the area of psychometrics (Department of Education and Science/Skills; DES, 2005). The job title signifies that the remit is broader than the provision of vocational guidance.

Guidance is provided for within the *Education Act 1998*, Section 9, specifically subsection (c), which states that: 'A recognised school shall provide education to students which is appropriate to their abilities and needs and ... shall use its available resources to — (c) ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices' (p. 13). The Act also stipulates that schools should 'promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students ... " (subsection [d])'. The Act does not, however, specify what constitutes appropriate guidance; nor does it make provision in relation to mental health and wellbeing. The DES (2013) has recently developed guidelines regarding mental health promotion and suicide prevention in second-level schools, with an emphasis on all members of the school community having a responsibility in this critical area of student support.

Budget 2012

Until the presentation of the national Budget for 2012, secondary schools enjoyed the allocation of one guidance counsellor position (22 hours per week) per 500 students enrolled at the school. Budget 2012 saw the removal of this ex-quota allocation provision (approximately 700 posts, an average of one post per school) with guidance counsellors to return to classroom duties. In their post-Budget 2012 Circular regarding staffing allocation, the DES (2012) informed schools that from September 2012 '... guidance provision is to be managed by schools from within their standard staffing schedule allocation' and that 'the provision of guidance continues to be a statutory requirement for schools under the *Education Act 1998*' (DES, 2012). School principals were thus given the flexibility to deploy teaching staff in whatever capacity deemed appropriate for the efficient running of the school (DES, 2012). As noted, while the *Education Act 1998* specifies that students should receive appropriate guidance, it does not specify that this has to be provided by a guidance counsellor. School principals have thus been left with the freedom to plan their timetabling of subjects and distribution of teachers, but with the dilemma of having to decide how best to provide for guidance.

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Impact of Budget 2012: Community Reaction

The ramifications of Budget 2012 are slowly emerging for schools, students, families, and wider society. In the absence of a well-defined and argued evidence base regarding the efficacy of school-based guidance and counselling, the initial reaction was sporadic, unfocused, and somewhat confused. Much of the discourse was related to the negative events that could now manifest with the absence of a dedicated guidance counsellor in the school to help students deal with their personal and academic problems (e.g., suicide). Constructively, the DES circular (2012) regarding staffing arrangements points to relevant policy and support documentation regarding the provision of guidance as a 'whole school' activity.

Since the commencement of the school term in September 2012, evidence has started to emerge of the choices that schools have made in order to deal with the staffing constraint. The response in some schools has been that, in order to protect their provision of guidance and counselling services, they have sent students home early, thus denying them their entitlement of 28 hours tuition a week. Other choices have been related to increasing or amalgamating class sizes to compensate for the cuts (Raidió Teilifís Éireann [RTÉ: Irish National Broadcaster], 2012).

Guidance counsellors are in the frontline of dealing with issues such as bullying, bereavement, suicidal ideation, self-harm, eating disorders, and depression. Currently, there is no other general counselling service available for teenagers in schools, resulting in those from a more affluent background being able to seek private counselling, leaving those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds in stagnant disadvantage. Dooley and Fitzgerald (2012) found that while one in three young Irish people do not talk to anyone about their problems, 25% said that they would seek information from a teacher or guidance counsellor in relation to their mental health. This compared with 44% who said they would be most likely to use a general practitioner or other doctor, 28% a psychologist, and 11% a telephone helpline.

The pressure now on guidance counsellors is that as well as having to teach a subject that they may not have taught for many years, they are also trying to continue to meet the demands of the students seeking counselling help, in a much reduced time.

Impact of Budget 2012: Gathering Evidence

Perhaps one of the most critical issues arising from the community reaction to Budget 2012 was the perceived lack of a robust evidence base regarding the nature, provision, and efficacy of guidance counselling work in schools. This is a critical issue for colleagues to consider — gone are the halcyon days when personal assumptions regarding impact and service delivery were accepted prima facia — only evidence informed and catalogued practice is understood and required by policy-makers. Emerging from the critical commentary has been research data exploring changes in the provision of guidance and counselling in schools (pre- and post-implementation of Budget 2012).

The Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI) is a second level teachers union that represents 18,000 members in community schools, community colleges, comprehensive schools, and voluntary secondary schools attended by 80% of all

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second-level students. ASTI (2012) found that 92% of schools sampled ($N = 151$) forecast that they would lose some guidance allocation posts, with 80% of larger schools forecasting a loss of more than one post compared to 11% of smaller schools. Seventy-one per cent of schools ($n = 139$) planned to reduce the hours allocated for guidance provision, reducing provision by an average of 7.8 hours: 40% would reduce hours by 10+ per week, rising to 53% among larger schools. Of those schools not seeking to reduce the number of hours allocated for guidance provision ($n = 40$), 27% reported that they would reduce the counselling component of the service and focus on vocational guidance. Just 11% reported the converse of this. Twenty per cent reported that they would introduce a supplementary out-of-school counselling service. Those schools who reported that they planned to retain a guidance and counselling service, were instead amalgamating levels, reducing resource learning support, and dropping a subject.

The Joint Managerial Body (JMB) represents the interests of all voluntary secondary schools ($N = 400$) in Ireland. Of the 131 schools that responded to the JMB (2012) survey, 45.2% of these reported that they made classes bigger, 24.6% merged some higher and ordinary level subjects, and 34.1% reduced subject choice. Responding principals reported that one-to-one personal counselling and one-to-one career guidance were the areas most damaged by the removal of the ex-quota allocation.

Initial results of an audit recently completed by the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC; a professional body representing over 1,200 practitioners) indicated that 76% of responding members had a reduction in their allocated hours for guidance counselling. A similar figure (72%) reported an increase in class contact time for guidance and a significant reduction in their time for 'Social Personal and Educational Counselling' at one-to-one level. The research also reported that the cutbacks have had a greater impact on the most disadvantaged students.

The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) is an agency of the DES, with a remit to support and develop guidance practice in all areas of education, as well as informing the policy of the DES in the field of guidance. The NCGE are completing a two-phase research project exploring the provision of guidance in schools: Spring 2012 prior to the implementation of the measures outlined in Budget 2012, and autumn 2012 after the removal of the ex-quota provision. Of all the new research being conducted, this research is the most methodologically robust. Great importance will be attached to the outcomes of the research, providing the DES with information which will enable future planning to support guidance in second level schools. The questionnaires (both phases) were distributed to 724 second-level schools, to be completed by the principal and guidance counsellor(s). The response rate for phase one was 39% ($n = 280$). No data from the research is available as yet — 1 year after the Budget 2012 announcement.

It is evident that there has been a historical paucity of research exploring the organisation and delivery of school-based guidance and counselling practice in Ireland. While the new research reviewed here is timely and welcome, it is evident that it is sporadic in nature, with results being difficult to compare and interpret meaningfully. The importance of getting such research results into the public domain cannot be understated, with some important data still not available one year after the Budget 2012 announcements. To learn from this, colleagues should seek

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to conduct an audit of the available evidence in their jurisdiction regarding the nature, organisation, and efficacy of their practice (if none exists). In doing so, the profession would be in a position to present a robust and satisfactory evidence-base that could counter any misconceptions or scrutiny of the value of their work.

Implications for Practice

Equality of opportunity is a philosophical cornerstone of the Irish education system. Access to a professionally qualified guidance counsellor is crucial when supporting and enhancing the emotional wellbeing of young people, especially in the context of rising youth unemployment and the escalation of mental health issues. Dooley and Fitzgerald's (2012) research highlighted the importance of 'One Good Adult' to the mental wellbeing of young people, emphasising that talking about problems was associated with lower mental health distress and higher positive adjustment. Colleagues should seek to audit the research in their own jurisdiction (and beyond) regarding the positive impact that they have on such issues, with the obvious benefits to society in terms of the preventative work that they do with young people.

From a social justice perspective, it is likely that the effects of Budget 2012 will be more acutely felt by schools and students in geographical areas of designated disadvantage, leading to further societal divisions and inequalities. The great advances that have been evidenced in relation to a holistic approach to the education and support for young people may, unfortunately, be eroded. Current evidence suggests that the three-dimensional approach to guidance counselling provision (personal/social, educational, vocational/career) is under significant threat and liable to become further diminished.

In all likelihood, Ireland will see some commodification of provision in this area, with decreases in school-based provision being matched by increases in private practice. It is imperative that a two-tier system of provision does not take effect, whereby access to a guidance counsellor is seen as a luxury available only to those who can afford it. For those groups with a responsibility to represent the profession, it is perhaps timely to explore their constitution and articles of association, code of ethics, and membership criteria. In doing so, guiding terms of reference should seek to solidify the professionalism of their members, whether in private practice or otherwise. With this is the obvious need to communicate the rigour of their regulatory practices to the wider public so as to enhance the reputation of responsible practice and the marginalisation of pseudo-professional practices and practitioners.

As a consideration for colleagues, perhaps a fatal flaw to the profession in Ireland was that it was not organised as a profession per se (i.e., employed as teachers with supplementary qualifications in the area), with involvement in government-led statutory registration. This issue is important at the macro level (e.g., insurances to protect the public, protected profession title) as well as a personal issue at the micro level (e.g., professional identity).

Colleagues should also consider issues pertaining to how the efficacy of their work is communicated to colleagues, allied professions, the government, and wider society. Indicated earlier was the absence of a coherent message from the profession in Ireland in the aftermath of the Budget announcement. Many practitioners still

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quote that some aspects of their work are confidential, either naively believing that this protects the students that they support, or possibly misunderstanding the importance of accountability. Despite this, an established profession should be able to move towards an infrastructure where the provision of statistics regarding caseloads, at both the individual and national level, might then provide useful evidence to those who may query the efficacy of the role.

For a progressive society like Ireland, it is hard to comprehend the rationale that would lead to such deleterious changes to the education and support of students, for indicative savings of €10.4 million for 2012, with full year saving being estimated at €32 million (Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 2012). Although a full monetary value may not be easily ascribed to the work of a guidance counsellor, either in terms of good vocational guidance and counselling interventions, there is indeed a valorisation to the work in that society profits from the intangible aspects of the work that does not lend itself to such measurement.

Conclusion

Using Ireland as a case example, with reflections on Budget 2012 and the associated consequences for school-based guidance counsellors, this article has presented a timely warning to colleagues to engage in self-reflection regarding the nature, organisation, and efficacy of their role and profession. Highlighted was the unexpected and rapid change in the provision of guidance within Irish schools, with examples of where colleagues could learn from the Irish experience. The true impact of Budget 2012 will not be known for years to come. What is known is that while guidance counsellors in Ireland remain worried about the current predicament, it is the young people in Ireland who will suffer. As a final call to arms, we remember Kipling's warning to us all not to repeat past mistakes: 'Lest we forget'.

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