

## RESEARCH

Noting that we have no formal peer reviewed journal of guidance research in Ireland we regularly invite postgraduate students, through their Universities, to share their research and learning with the guidance community through these pages.

## An exploration of the Guidance Counsellor's perspective of smartphone usage amongst adolescents in post-primary Schools



**This article will describe some of the findings from my research dissertation produced on the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development in the University of Limerick, which was supervised by Dr. Lucy Hearne. The overall aim of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of Guidance Counsellors on smartphone usage amongst adolescents in post-primary schools.**

Smartphone technology is a phenomenon of contemporary adolescent life and is having an impact on society as a whole (Scott, 2015). Equally, Merchant (2017) attests that smartphone technology is the largest unregulated social experiment of our time. Understanding the complexity of smartphone usage in adolescence in post-primary education is a challenging undertaking, and this study considered the particular issues facing the guidance counsellor in supporting the students in terms of his/her wellbeing.

Whilst the literature reveals that some research has been done with adolescents on their views of smartphone usage, relatively little is known about the perceptions of the guidance counsellor in Irish secondary schools. In order to obtain the relevant data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven qualified guidance counsellors in one region of Ireland. The participants comprised of four male and three female guidance counsellors.

A number of key findings emerged in the study in terms of what guidance counsellors are experiencing in supporting students in contemporary education in the age of smartphone devices. These issues included the changing nature of student friendships, behavioural, cognitive and emotional well-being (including sleep deprivation) and learning and engagement in school. The first finding of this study indicated that smartphone usage by students is having a perceived definite effect on their everyday lives including their close relationships with others especially their friends. This correlates with previous research that in adolescence the peer group and friendships become more important and involve constant social interactions (Goggin and Crawford 2011; Ling et al. 2014). All participants in this study agreed the meaning of traditional friendship in adolescence was now distorted as the boundaries become blurred between online and offline.



Participants communicated that contradictions of connectivity are the real challenges for adolescents. The participants agreed that connectivity is disconnecting adolescents from real friendships and the opportunity to spend their time together. The smartphone paradoxically disconnects adolescents from each other, thereby reducing their ability to form meaningful relationships (Alter, 2017). It is also argued that smartphones hold the potential to facilitate as well as to disrupt human bonding and intimacy, and a key issue is setting boundaries relating to their usage (Lenhart et al. 2010; Marche 2012). In addition, some of the participants in the study suggested that smartphone use contributes to 'isolation' amongst adolescents and that they tend to retreat into the screen rather than hold face-to-face conversations. This is an issue identified by Zimbardo (2011) who states that isolation can have lifelong consequences on the brain and relationships and an adolescent's ability to make sense of the real world.

The findings support the view that the effects of smartphone usage in post-primary schools are having an impact on an adolescent's behavioural, cognitive and emotional well-being. The findings suggest this is compounded by smartphone usage as the developing adolescent brain is constantly switched on with constant alerts and notifications from a 24/7 digitally networked society as attested by Sheth and Solomon (2014). This is supported by a major survey undertaken in 2017 by Studyclix (<https://www.studyclix.ie/Blog/Show/2017-annual-student-survey>) which reported that 60% of adolescents are worried that they use their smartphones too much and 45% say they are 'addicted' to them. Participants in this study also spoke of adolescents accessing the smartphone during the night leading to sleep deprivation resulting in poor academic performance.

Finally, another key issue that emerged was the impact of smartphone usage on students' learning and engagement in school. The findings along with the literature, support the view that smartphone usage is decreasing connectivity to the adolescents' brain (Aiken 2016). It is argued that skills in critical thinking and analysis have declined with the advent of smartphone technology and is impacting students learning outcomes (Rambitan 2015). Smartphone behaviours can further diminish critical thinking skills which ultimately may affect educational outcomes for the student (Greenfield 2016). However, there may be positive aspects to a broader implication of smartphone usage by adapting classroom instruction to the modern world and designing collaborative learning to engage students' in the global classroom (Lock 2015).

Feedback received through my study indicates a desire from participants that resources should be allocated by the DES to fund and support both intervention research and relevant additional studies - focusing on policy and legal frameworks around smartphone usage. Feedback received also suggests that the DES should engage with current research findings on smartphone usage and their implications on the developing adolescent. This could inform policy makers on potential work to be undertaken within the school teaching environment in supporting the healthy development of our students. The findings further indicate that guidance counsellors consider CPD in digital literacy beneficial in keeping them informed of the latest social media and messaging apps being utilised by students and in support of educating students on the safe use of technology including personal safety.

Full thesis can be accessed at  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10344/6483>



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