REAUTHORING MY CAREER NARRATIVE TOWARDS HOPE AND AGENCY TWENTY YEARS IN ADULT GUIDANCE COUNSELLING PRACTICE

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ACRONYMS

AEGI	Adult Educational Guidance Initiative
AEGS	Adult Educational Guidance Service
AI	Artificial Intelligence
BACP	British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
DES	Department of Education and Science
ELGPN	European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
ETB	Education and Training Board
FET	Further Education and Training
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
INAR	Irish Network Against Racism
IPA	International Protection Applicant
JVC	Jesuit Volunteer Communities
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
NICEC	National Institute for Career Education and Counselling
NTIA	Narrative Therapy Informed Approach
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
REALT	Regional Education and Language Teams
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
STF	System Theory Framework
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VTOS	Vocational Training and Opportunities

May your new work excite your heart,
Kindle in your mind creativity
To journey beyond the old limits
Of all that has become wearisome.

May this work challenge you toward
New frontiers that will emerge
As you begin to approach them,
Calling forth from you the full force
And depth of your undiscovered gifts.

May the work fit the rhythms of your soul,
Enabling you to draw from the invisible
New ideas and a vision that will inspire.

(O'Donohue, 2008)

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Last but by no means least, my deepest love and gratitude to my husband John who at all times believed in me even when I did not believe in myself, was a great sounding board and kept the show on the road.   To my darling children Sarah and Cillian, love you both so much and looking forward to having lots of fun times ahead!

Abstract

The focus of this research is seeking to reflexively engage with my experiences of the impact of recent rapid transformations in my adult guidance counselling practice, culminating in working with increasing numbers of migrant learners. Inquiring into these experiences of finding myself at a crossroads in my career after twenty years in practice, questioning if I can continue in the role. I chose a narrative inquiry self-study methodology to engage with my narrative of these experiences and how I had constructed this narrative in relation to broader organisational, policy and societal narratives over time. The lens of System Theory Framework, storytelling narrative career counselling approach and Narrative Therapy Informed Approach are used to identify these four key emerging, dynamic and recursive themes: changing context and its impact; social justice - a core value; recommitment to self-care; connectedness and collaboration in practice. Engaging with these themes enabled a process of reauthoring to a more agentic, hopeful narrative of my practice. This research has the potential to be useful for other practitioners navigating contexts requiring rapid transformations in their practice. And it points to the potential of using these narrative career approaches in working with clients also navigating career transitions over their lifespan. Recommendations for further research are offered including moral distress in the field of guidance counselling and relevant career adaptability skills for working in neoliberal environments.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Context

1.1 Introduction

I have been working in the field of adult guidance counselling for twenty years in the adult education sector. Since I started out, there have been significant changes in the sector, most notably in the past ten years with the transformation of this adult education sector to a Further Education and Training (FET) sector. This changing context and key related policies are outlined in the context section later in this chapter. There have also been largescale external events including the COVID-19 pandemic and most recently the Ukraine war which together with increasing numbers of other migrant cohorts seeking refuge here have required rapid transformations in my practice.

It is in these rapidly changing contexts that I find myself in the unfamiliar terrain of questioning if I can continue in this role.   Finding myself at a crossroads in my career. Having to revisit assumptions that this was going to be the job that I would do forever, having considered my work in adult guidance counselling to be privileged and having generally experienced high levels of satisfaction and congruence in my role.   And yet, this had begun to change in the twelve months or so prior to starting this thesis. I noticed that I was speaking differently about my practice, hearing myself saying to colleagues "I am so tired", "I am not sure what my role is anymore", "I don't know if I can stay in this role".

1.2 Inquiry emerging from problematic experiences in practice

While I am fortunate to have access to excellent monthly individual supervision which has been a lifeline, I felt I needed to do more to sit with these uncomfortable and unsettling thoughts and feelings and hopefully find a way through them. This is what brought me to this inquiry, to:

> claim sanctuary by distancing myself a little from the urgency of the demands of policy and practice with their understandable concerns for prompt and immediate action in order to prise for myself some space for critical self-reflection (Sultana 2011, p.280).

My research inquiry centres around seeking to critically reflect on these troubling experiences and work through my recent questioning of whether I could continue to stay in this role. What could sustain me in my practice? We were encouraged at our first group supervision session to keep a research journal 'as a support to knowledge-creation and to thinking, writing and communicating' (McCormack, 2015). Looking back on my journal, I am reminded of my initial strong emotional responses when attempting to talk about my recent experiences in practice into which I wished to inquire. I would get quite tearful at times and struggle with trying to coherently describe the thoughts and feelings and to understand why I was feeling like this as an experienced practitioner who had adapted to many previous changes in my role including the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Walsh (2015), referring to Foucault's core personal experiences profoundly informing Foucault's analysis of issues including mental health and sexuality, speaks to the importance of both personal emotion and experience 'as rich material for social exploration' (p.156). Drawing on entries in my journal led to me writing the following in our first assignment:

> *This dissonance sense of not being sure what my role is anymore, of just about surviving in the day-to-day busyness, increased feelings of exhaustion and of cumulative toll of undergoing rapid transformation….This is what has led me to seek out this Masters programme to explore these experiences in the hope of not just surviving, to thrive.*

In the remainder of this chapter, I will outline the wider contexts in which my practice is located, including the development of the adult guidance services that I work in and the rapidly changing context and policies relating to the emergence of the FET sector. I will also draw on the perspective of practitioners through the inclusion of the Adult Guidance Association's (AGA) vision for the services and Hearne et al. (2022) research.

1.3 Background to Adult Guidance Services

The national Adult Educational Guidance Initiative (AEGI) was set up in 2000 arising from the White Paper on Adult Education: Learning for Life, which called on Vocational Education Committees (VEC) 'to invest systematically in the development of core

supporting services such as guidance and counselling' for adult learners on literacy, community education, back to education and in some case Vocational Training and Opportunities (VTOS) programmes (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2000, p.14).   Defining guidance as 'a range of activities designed to assist people to make choices about their lives and to make transitions consequent on these choices' (DES, 2000, p.156), the white paper also outlines related activities in the adult education context including advocacy and innovating systems change.   Advocacy is linked to working with others to remove barriers to access for learners and innovating systems change is linked to supporting change including 'institutional and guidance practice to maintain and improve quality of guidance provision' (DES, 2000, p.157).

The service provides impartial, free and professional guidance in 37 locations nationwide and some outreach locations at the pre-entry, entry, ongoing, pre-exit and follow-up stage for those engaged in adult education and training (Adult Guidance Association, 2020) with separate guidance provision in colleges of Further Education, Youthreach, Training centres and prison services.   The staffing model differs from other educational guidance settings with teams made up of Guidance Co-ordinator, Guidance Counsellor(s) and Guidance Information Officer(s) roles (McKenzie & Stokes, 2021). This team dimension is integral to the Adult Guidance Association's (AGA) vision for a model of adult guidance counselling as illustrated in Figure 1.1 below
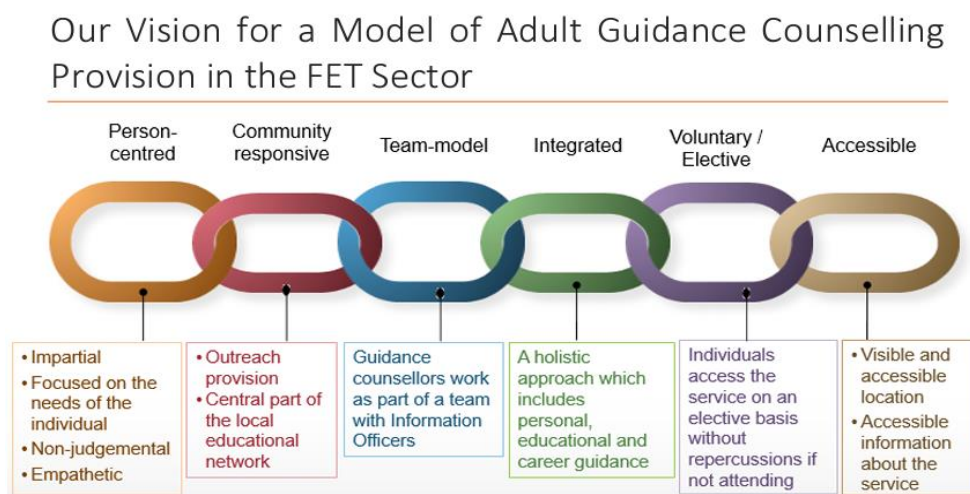
Figure 1.1 Vision for a Model of Adult Guidance Counselling Provision in FET (AGA, 2020)

The service is available to adults aged 18 and over, and those aged 16 and over who have left school early. Operational guidelines (NCGE, 2014, p.5) prioritised target groups traditionally under-represented in adult education including adults and young people with little, low, or no formal qualifications, unemployed, not in work and not on the live register, employed with basic skills needs and lone parents. Guidance and information are delivered in group and one-to-one settings. The services operate on a full-time, year-round, objective, professional and quality-assured basis (Adult Guidance Association, 2020). Additional strengths of the service, including an enabling and inclusive ethos are illustrated in figure 1.2 below.

Unique Strengths

VALUE	Adult guidance and information services have **substantial value and benefit both the individual and the wider economy** as it can mitigate socio-economic disadvantage and enhance individuals' educational retention rates and employment opportunities (Indecon 2019; OECD 2018; Ibec 2020; SOLAS 2020).
QUALIFIED	Staff in FET guidance services are **highly trained** at Level 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications, which is higher than many other jurisdictions where guidance counsellors are typically trained at undergraduate level (Career Development Institute 2019; CEDEFOP 2009; DES 2016).
BEST PRACTICE	The AEGS model of guidance has been acknowledged by the DES/SOLAS (2014) as a **model of best practice** on which any future adult guidance services should be built.
EVIDENCE BASED	The **Client Management System** used in FET guidance services allows guidance counsellors to record important data in relation to the number of beneficiaries of the service, progression of clients etc. Based on this data, management recognises that the AEGS "continues to have significant value in FET and ETB" (NCGE 2018:2).
PROACTIVE	Guidance counselling, when resourced sufficiently, is not just reactive - it is **proactive**. In particular, one-to-one meetings in confidential settings and the time given to clients help **prevent 'course hopping' and drop out** and facilitates sustainable employment.
SKILLS	Guidance counselling facilitates the **enhancement of individual employability** and the acquisition of **Career Management Skills** which are critical to managing one's own learning and work life paths (Council of the European Union 2008). It supports the development of an increased self-awareness of transversal skills which are critical in this unpredictable world of work.
ENABLING	A person-centred, impartial approach enables adults to make **meaningful, realistic and well informed educational, training and employment choices**. Intergenerational benefits
INCLUSION	Embedded in the community with **highly developed networks**, FET guidance services are trusted by service users and referral agencies. We actively deliver on the **FET active inclusion goals** by offering support to the most marginalised and disadvantaged.

Figure 1.2 Unique strengths of Adult Guidance Counselling Provision in FET (AGA, 2020)

The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) provided support to staff during the period 2000–2022 including the provision of in-service training, development of resources and oversight of the digital client management system, Adult Guidance Management System (AGMS). The AGA is the representative body for staff, eligible staff may also be members of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC), the national representative body for guidance counsellors working across all sectors.

1.4 Emergence of a unified Further Education and Training sector

I started working as an adult guidance counsellor in a Vocational Education Committee (VEC) centre in the early 2000s. I provided guidance support to adult learners on part-time literacy and community education programmes. A separate state agency, FÁS, was responsible for the vocational training of adults. Ireland was undergoing a period of rapid economic growth known as the 'celtic tiger' up until the mid-2000s but by September 2008 Ireland was facing bankruptcy and in 2010 the government applied to the 'troika' (European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund) for a bailout. This was given on condition of an austerity led public service structural reform agenda which would have significant impact, not least on education and training policy and structures, leading to the creation of a unified Further Education and Training (FET) sector (Mulvey, 2019; Fitzsimons & O'Neill, 2024). A timeline of the emergence of this FET sector together with the subsequent key policies relating to FET guidance are outline in Figure 1.3 below.
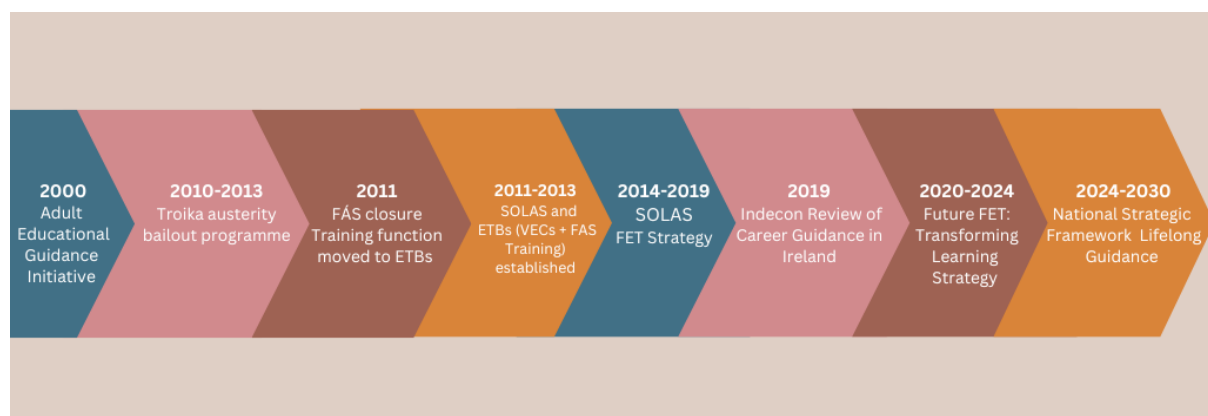
Figure 1.3 Timeline of emergence of FET structure and key policies (Canva)

SOLAS was established as the new authority in FET with responsibility for the co-ordination and funding of education and training in FET. The 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs) were amalgamated into 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The national public employment and training agency FÁS was dissolved, and the training functions were also amalgamated into the ETBs. The employment service function within FÁS was amalgamated with the Department of Social Protection, and a new front facing public employment service INTREO was established (Glanton (2023), Hearne et al. (2022)).

1.5 SOLAS FET Strategy 2014-2019 (2014)

Alongside these significant structural reforms, a new five-year FET strategy was developed. The FET Strategy 2014-2019 (SOLAS, 2014) spoke of the need for an integrated model of guidance for the FET sector. Building on the established practices in operation within the adult guidance services, all guidance staff outside of the Post Leaving Certificate structure were to be linked to the adult guidance services to 'ensure quality assurance of service, reporting mechanisms and access to national supports and continuous professional development' (SOLAS, 2014, p.114). It also proposed widening the remit of the services to become the Adult Guidance and Information Services for FET learners and the general public.

1.6 Impact of policy on adult guidance practitioners

Research with FET Adult Guidance practitioners was conducted by Hearne et al. (2022) through an online survey completed between January and March 2018. One area of focus of this research was to identify what impact the organisational changes in the FET sector outlined previously had on guidance counsellors' practice. In addition, the lack of progress in establishing the integrated model of guidance for the FET sector referenced in the FET Strategy 2014–2019 (SOLAS, 2014). The research draws on the work of Fullan (2007) who argues that educational policy reform is complex and that sustainable whole-system reform requires a 'tri-level approach at a local (institutional), regional and national level' (Hearne et al., 2022, p.136). Furthermore, the change required at individual and social level 'will be impeded by weak and unworkable infrastructures' (Hearne et al., 2022, p.136).

The research found that adult guidance practice is being 'profoundly impacted by national and localised lifelong learning and neoliberal policy outcomes' (Hearne et al, 2022, p.136), highlighting the complexity of the whole-system reform in the FET sector and the challenge of implementing a national Guidance and Information service at the three levels identified by Fullan (2007).   Some components of this process outlined in the FET Strategy 2014-2019 (SOLAS, 2014) were identified as already happening including the development of national and local referral protocols and the widening of the remit of services.

Hearne et al. (2020) found that the most significant change has been that the remit of guidance counselling has been widened with some practitioners reporting increased levels of middle management, more localised decision-making and a limited understanding of the function of adult guidance in FET in the absence of the FET Guidance strategy. The related diffusion of the role was also reported, into areas including marketing of courses and recruitment of learners. This points to the ethos and delivery method of the FET adult guidance services in their 20th year of operation, becoming 'eroded and fragmented' (Hearne et al., 2020, p.136). Increased workload, lack of referral pathways to psychologists and a general lack of information were also reported. This research brings some 'street-level' perspective (Hooley & Godden, 2021, p.1) on how policies are enacted by practitioners. Hearne et al. (2022) conclude. that while these issues continue to play out, adult guidance practitioners are 'striving to provide a professional service to their FET clients under difficult working conditions' (p. 137).

1.7 Indecon Report (2019)

The establishment of the integrated FET Guidance and Information Service was delayed most likely until the outcome of the Indecon (2019) review of career guidance commissioned by the Department of Education was published (Hearne et al., 2022). This report recognised that the FET sector is an important provider of lifelong career guidance and reiterated the need for integration of guidance services in FET, with a

code of practice aligned with the Guidance for Policies and Systems Development for Lifelong Guidance from the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN). A key objective identified was the provision of a 'consistent level of career guidance regardless of location or type of FET programme' (Indecon, 2019, p.66).

The AGA vision document (AGA, 2020) speaks to this inconsistency, linking it to under-staffing and under-resourcing of FET guidance services, highlighting the need for further investment to provide a well-resourced and accessible service which can offer quality guidance provision. This is essential if it is to reach adults who are the most vulnerable and excluded, and is in line with the operational guidelines mentioned previously. Johnston & McGauran (2021) in their research with jobseekers describe access to guidance within education and public employment services as 'patchy' (p.117). They outline how this impacts adults, contributing to the difficulty they experience navigating the wide range of courses on offer, the various eligibility requirements and related funding. The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC), the representative body for Guidance Counsellors including FET staff, is still calling for a consistent and integrated approach to FET Guidance in their pre-budget submissions (IGC 2023 & 2024).

Furthermore, FET Guidance and Information Service links with INTREO are deemed vital, and access to up-to-date, accessible labour market information is needed to support adults into employment (Indecon, 2019). The Indecon report recognised that the education and training sector cannot be the only provider of career services to adults and recommended the establishment of a new centralised 'technology facilitated service involving a blended service providing online information and career tools' (Indecon, 2019, p.66) which would also provide telephone or internet access to professionally trained guidance counsellors. It also identified the need for the development of a national policy for lifelong and life wide guidance which aligns with ELGPN's recommendation on the development and review of national policies. To facilitate this, the Indecon report recommended moving away from locating responsibility for guidance solely with the Department of Education and Skills, encouraging inputs from other relevant Departments including the Department of

Social Protection. This recommendation has been linked with the closure of the NCGE in August 2022 (Career Portal, 2022), with its FET guidance functions now re-organised into Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) which was set up in 2013 to 'collectively represent ETBs and promote the development of education, training and youth work in Ireland' (ETBI, 2013).

1.8 SOLAS Future FET: Transforming Learning Strategy 2020-2024

Another significant policy document relating to FET guidance is the SOLAS Future FET: Transforming Learning Strategy 2020-2024   (SOLAS, 2020). It incorporates Indecon's (2019) findings and recommendations, reiterating the pivotal role of ETBs in providing guidance on education, training, employment and careers to facilitate lifelong learning pathways.   Again, the need for an integrated and consistent approach is highlighted and would seem to go further than the Indecon (2019) report in stating that this 'should ensure that impartial guidance is available to all who seek it within the ETB region' (SOLAS, 2020, p. 54). It highlights the lack in FET of a single 'go to' (SOLAS, 2020, p. 54) IT portal to offer information and advice without the need for meeting a guidance practitioner, which it links to the Indecon report. However, as stated previously, the Indecon report recommendation related to a centralised portal with access to qualified guidance practitioners.   Similar to the Indecon report, SOLAS (2020) emphasises access to labour market intelligence, reinforcing the policy position from the FET Strategy (2014-2019) emphasising FET's role in supporting learners to gain skills that are 'economically-valuable to access and sustain all types of employment, tackling skills shortages and boosting the future growth and competitiveness of the Irish economy' (p. 51). This is to the detriment of other outcomes of learning, where 'social and personal benefits of learning are being sidelined' for many FET learners who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Hearne et al., 2022, p. 129).

1.9 National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance and Action Plan 2024-2030

Building on the recommendations of the Indecon (2019) report to develop national policies for Lifelong Guidance, the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance

was published in December 2023 as 'a significant milestone for systems of guidance in Ireland, which have been operating in several sectors for many years' (Department of Education, 2023a, p.5). It seeks to provide 'a more visible, accessible, streamlined and complementary provision of guidance throughout Ireland' (Department of Education, 2023a, p.4) through a systematic alignment of services throughout all sectors. Four key pillars are identified to inform the development of lifelong guidance: 1). Visibility and awareness of lifelong guidance services and information provision; 2). Standards and quality throughout the lifelong-guidance system; 3). Access, inclusion and universal design; and 4). Career-management skills and lifelong career mobility.

The definition of guidance used in the strategic framework is taken from the EU Council Resolution in 2008:

> a continuous process that enables individuals at any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which those capacities and competences are learned and/or used. Guidance covers a range of individual and collective activities relating to information-giving, counselling, competence assessment, support, and the teaching of decision-making and career management skills" (Department of Education, 2023a, p.10).

Guidance in an adult context is defined in the strategic framework using the National Guidance Forum definition from 2007 as a process which facilitates people:

> to manage their own educational, training, occupational, personal, social, and life choices so that they reach their full potential and contribute to the development of a better society' (Department of Education, 2023a, p.11).

This framework is also informed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023) Ireland Skills Strategy review which recommended the strengthening of the co-ordination of lifelong guidance in support of a strategic approach. This strengthening in co-ordination is evidenced by the establishment of the National Policy group on lifelong guidance by the Minister for Education with representatives from the five relevant government departments: Education; Further

and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Social Protection; Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; and Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The OECD Ireland Skills Strategy review (OECD, 2023) also speaks to the key issues of globalisation, digital transformation, green transition and demographic changes, requiring access to 'high-quality, person-centred guidance to support individuals in making the right career and life choices' (Department of Education, 2023, p.22). Guidance in helping individuals successfully navigate the rapidly evolving skills needs of the labour market is acknowledged in the review which also speaks to positive societal outcomes for educational attainment in relation to health and greater civic participation.

The framework now refers to the FET Guidance and Information services as the Guidance, Information and Recruitment (GIR) service and envisages a much wider remit for the 'uniquely placed' services to:

> have impact at the interface of individuals transitioning, be that from school to FET and/or HET, exploring career change, upskilling and retraining during periods of unemployment and while in employment. Therefore, the FET GIR service is provided to all individuals, regardless of their circumstances, who wish to explore the most appropriate options for them from levels 1 to 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) through FET to HE, into employment and/or self-employment. (Department of Education, 2023a, p.14).

The framework document also refers to GIR's involvement in employer engagement, learning support and inclusion FET teams, and engagement with the full range of state bodies including the DSP and HSE as well as community, disability and voluntary support services. To address the need for a more integrated approach to guidance and information in FET highlighted in previous FET strategies (SOLAS, 2020), the ETBI FET Guidance Steering Group has been established:

> to develop, support and inform the implementation and promotion of the best practice in guidance counselling in FET settings and in non-formal settings in accordance with national priorities and key-priority areas (Department of Education, 2023, p.15)

The Department of Education also published a strategic action plan for Lifelong Guidance (Department of Education, 2023b) which outlines the actions that will be taken at national level to achieve the outcomes outlined in the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance policy. The relevant government departments and bodies are tasked with leading out on the strategic actions which are categorised into short-term (three years), medium-term (five years) or long-term (seven years) over the six-year lifespan of the policy 2024-2030.

The first short-term action identified relates to the identification and mapping of the continuum of lifelong guidance and the interconnections between services in the current system. It also aims to identify any areas of duplication or gaps.

1.10 Towards a methodology

Hearne et al. (2022) identify some limitations in their research, including the lack of inclusion of more in-depth data from FET adult guidance practitioners using interviews or focus group qualitative research methods which was beyond the scope of their study.   This, they acknowledge, would have provided 'a richer and more nuanced interpretation of the contexts and issues' (Hearne et al., 2022, p.136).   I offer this thesis as one such FET adult guidance practitioner working in this evolving guidance policy landscape, reflecting on my individual experience, and seeking to contribute one 'insider' view (Whelan, 2021, p.97).   In the next chapter I will outline my methodological approach to this inquiry and the analysis framework for identifying the emerging themes which will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2

Methodological Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline the methodological framework used for this inquiry. Starting with clarifying my ontological and epistemological positions, I will justify the choice of methodology of narrative inquiry self-study and the methods used to gather data. The chapter concludes with outlining the analytical framework chosen and the identification of the emergent themes.

2.2 Engaging with ontology and epistemology

As I start this chapter, I become very aware that I am struggling to articulate what I have heard myself describe to others as the 'slippery' concepts of ontology and epistemology and more so how to articulate my position in relation to my research. I ascribe 'slippery' to them in an attempt to describe my experience of thinking that I understand these concepts and then moments later I have lost them again. I have come to recognise that these experiences of being challenged, lost, and confused often occur in my writing and I am striving to develop negative capability - the capacity to write into this state of unknowing, trusting that knowing can emerge (McCormack, 2015).

In seeking to understand these concepts to clarify my research position and approach, I have found that Willig (2019) provides accessible explanations of ontology and epistemology. She speaks to ontology as assumptions about what there is to know about the world we live in, what it means to exist and the "taken-for-granted upon which we build our understanding of the world" (Willig, 2019, p.187). Epistemology refers to how we can come to know knowledge, the processes by which it can be acquired and how certain we can be that it is valid. Prior to commencing this inquiry, I would have associated the concepts of ontology and epistemology solely with doing research. I was very struck by Willig (2019) arguing for the comparative development of a 'reflexive awareness' (p.186) of one's ontological and epistemological positions when working with clients as a core skill for effective therapists. I would argue that the same reflexive awareness is essential in my guidance counselling work with

clients.   How in my practice I need to be aware of my assumptions of what it fundamentally means to be human (ontology) and my assumptions in my beliefs about how to understand my clients (epistemology).   She has further increased my awareness of the need to reflect more on the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the models/theories that I use with clients as these get expressed explicitly in the language used, questions asked of clients.   This self-knowledge is important in being aware of my responses to clients' experiences, being open and not imposing my assumptions, working ethically. I will return to this again elsewhere in the thesis, it is mentioned here as it has been helpful in developing my understanding of ontology and epistemology.

Crotty (1998) calls on me as researcher to ensure alignment of my epistemology, theoretical perspectives, and methodology, to avoid a mismatch of data collection methods to my research question.   He provides a scaffolding approach to support alignment which begins with clarifying research objectives. Looking back to what I submitted for my research proposal in September in answer to what I wanted to find out about, I wrote:

> *Why am I experiencing an increasing sense of isolation, role uncertainty, risk of burnout, lack of visibility?*

Doing this thesis has brought me on a journey of looking back over my life to seek insight into who I am, where I have come from and how to make sense or ascribe meaning to my experiences. I enjoyed studying Biology, Physics and Maths in secondary school so I choose a Science Degree as I thought my career interests were aligned with the study of science where knowledge was objective and could be acquired from measurements and laboratory experiments. I have now come to understand that my formative ontological and epistemological position was aligned more with realism and that I predominately thought about knowledge as being objective (Crotty, 1998).

Looking back now, I remember having an interest in working with people, but I had ruled out the roles being presented in school of nurse, teacher, social worker, or nun! Even during my time in college, I became aware of an increasing sense that working in this scientific world was not where I belonged, I didn't feel at home or fulfilled. I vividly recall finally having the courage to voice this to a college chaplain in my final year and I remember the relief of feeling heard and being asked "What is the part of the college experience that you most enjoy?" I heard myself say that it was volunteering with the college St. Vincent De Paul student society, chatting and dancing with older residents on Monday nights. She suggested considering a year of volunteering on finishing my degree and gave me a leaflet on the Jesuit Volunteer programme which led me to volunteering with Dublin Simon Community. This conversation sowed the seeds for me to go on to work as an Adult Guidance Counsellor, to offer that support, space and guidance I experienced to others.

This volunteering experience changed my life in that I found myself working alongside other young (and not so young) people who were also seeking out understanding of themselves and the world around them and searching to find their place in it. Also, from building rapport with the residents, I got to know their stories and gained insight into the myriad of causes and effects of homelessness which challenged my previously held stereotyped assumptions. My assumptive world in understanding how the world worked was undergoing rapid transformation as I reflected on these experiences, which I now recognise as my ontological and epistemological positions shifting away from the certainty of the external objective reality provided by the scientific world to the awareness of knowledge as subjective, with multiple realities. I feel more at home in the epistemology of constructionism where my knowledge of reality is constructed from interacting and relating with fellow humans and interpreting our environments (Crotty, 1998).

2.3 Discovering Narrative Inquiry Methodology

In group supervision as part of this Masters we were encouraged from the beginning to use reflective journalling as a support in the writing process and in the inevitable moments of 'stuckness'. It could also be useful in providing a reflexive social inquiry

into my own meaning making processes (McCormack, 2015). This process of reflecting on my experiences, ideas and thoughts brought about a further shift in my perspective. Having the time and space to think, to reflect, to listen and to share, changed my assumptions about research and the methodology I would choose to answer my research question. Originally, I had thought I would use qualitative research methods of interviews and possibly focus groups with FET Guidance Counselling colleagues to explore collectively if they too were experiencing similar feelings including isolation, role uncertainty, risk of burnout in their work and perhaps discover that this experience wasn't universal and what I could learn from that. Thinking that perhaps my research would bear witness to this front-line experience from different perspectives. However, my gut was telling me that I needed to bring the focus of my research on to my own story and seek a different research approach to make sense of these experiences and to work through them. I was also conscious of the limits of time given the duration of this thesis and having to balance time for research with work and family commitments.

The methodology that I kept coming back to was that of narrative inquiry, which was a new research methodology to me. It views social inquiry as rooted in people's stories 'lived and told' (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000, p. 20). 'Narrative inquiry is first and foremost a way of understanding experience.'(Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p.542) It brings awareness to how we are constructing and being constructed by individual and collective experiences, 'narration is the practice of constructing meaningful selves, identities, and realities' (Chase, 2011, p. 422). It is a multi-dimensional exploration of experience involving temporality (past, present and future), interaction (personal and social), and location (place). We create and tell stories about how we experience and understand our worlds and narrative inquiry seeks to mine these stories for experiential knowledge.

> 'Being in this world, we need to remake ourselves as well as offer up research understandings that could lead to a better world' (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000 p.61).

I really connected with Ryan's description of herself as narrative inquirer with her pragmatic concern about her practice which is central to my research query:

> 'So, mine (research) is always, always rooted in what am I doing in the here and now and how does my practice have meaning? How has it value? What does it connect with? What am I actually trying to do here? How does research help me in the here and now of what I'm trying to do? Narrative inquiry did work for me more because what it kept putting me back into was the actual experience of what I was doing in my pedagogical practice and trying to probe into that and understand it more deeply.' McCormack et al. (2020, p.76)

Ryan later speaks to this methodology as giving her space to reflect on her individual position while part of and formed by a group and speaks to not existing outside of relationship (McCormack et al., 2020). I find this resonates for me in that I am seeking to engage in a new way with the emotive stories that I have constructed about my individual experience as a guidance practitioner whilst recognising that this experiential knowledge is not constructed in isolation. I too do not exist outside of relationship and my stories are shaped and informed (and challenged) by interacting with stories of others including clients, colleagues, fellow practitioners, management and related policies working in a Further Education and Training environment in Ireland. My being "in the midst" as Clandinin describes it (2013, p. 203), 'Within this space, each story told and lived is situated and understood within larger cultural, social, and institutional narratives' (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p.542). This relational dimension is a key part of my inquiry, seeking to get further insights and a better understanding of how my narrative is influenced by these broader narratives and what aspects I need to attend to so that I can sustain myself in my practice.

Narrative Inquiry can be located in more than one paradigm including 'realist, postmodern and constructionist' (Riessman and Speedy, 2007, p. 429). I have come to understand that my ontological and epistemological position finds a home within a social constructivist paradigm of Narrative Inquiry which focuses on individual learning or acquiring of knowledge through interactions with others and that many narratives of the same experience can exist, of equal value. This allows for the possibility of deconstructing previously held beliefs and invite other ways of thinking (Etherington,

2004). O'Grady et al. (2018) provide further insight into how narrative inquiry methods enable hidden discourses to be made visible They looked at the application of narrative inquiry methods in various educational settings in Ireland including that of an academic in her later career, finding ways to sustain herself in work whilst working in changing institutional narratives which speaks to my inquiry.

In this thesis, given the time and other constraints mentioned previously, I will seek to research my inquiry through narrative self-study. Clandinin and Connelly (2004) clarify how narrative self-study is defined, locating it initially with Deweyan inquiry 'thought intertwined with action – reflection in and on action – which proceeds from doubt to the resolution of doubt, to the generation of new doubt' (p.582), into problematic situations in practice that are 'confusing, uncertain, or conflicted, and block the free flow of action' (p. 582). This resonates deeply for me as an adult guidance counsellor with over twenty years working in the field and who considers this privileged work, and yet in recent times I find myself in the unfamiliar and disconcerting territory of increasingly questioning if I can stay in this role. Fitzsimons and O'Neill (2024) speak to the possibility of viewing these moments of disorientation as an opportunity for Mezirow's transformative learning, and stress that for such learning to occur requires the 'creation of time and space for authentic and meaningful critical reflection' (p.6). This is the hope for my inquiry.

Clandinin and Connelly (2004) describe narrative self-study as located on a continuum between the personal and the social and how it can sometimes move from one to the other.   My inquiry starts at the personal end. It has been really challenging for me to write to the personal (O'Connell, 2023) as writing to other researcher's findings in academic literature is more familiar. In my earlier drafts I struggled a lot with weaving in the personal and the academic references in a coherent way. I also struggled to verbalise the personal in some group supervision sessions but did experience some breakthrough moments as demonstrated by this recording in my journal after the March group supervision session which:

> *brought my attention to my hidden discourse of hopelessness that I was experiencing, having lost connection with the ontology of hope, guidance*

counselling as hope. How can I offer hope to my clients when I had lost hope myself? It feels like I am reconnecting with hope again. While the external systems and structures in my work haven't changed, I am noticing a positive change in how I am thinking about it and responding. I am finding more agency in my work, reconnecting with my values…my claim to knowledge is that I have changed my practice to sustain myself.

2.4 Methods

As narrative inquiry is inquiring into experience (participants in the field), Clandinin and Caine (2008) speak about the process of narrative inquiry as beginning with field texts 'commonly called data' (p.544) and writing both interim and final research texts. They outline various methods which can be used to compose field texts including 'conversations…and participant observations…as well as from artifacts. Artifacts…include…policies' (Clandinin and Caine, 2008, p.544). The data used for this study were collected through conversations, participant observations, and policies.

2.4.1 Conversations

I engaged in conversations in a wide range of contexts including at work, CPD events and the IGC conference to assist me in my inquiry. While I haven't recorded these conversations, I have sought to engage actively with new insights gained from these conversations through the taking of field notes and subsequently through reflective journalling as soon as possible after the conversations took place. Some one-to-one conversations happened naturally, for example, with clients or with colleagues at work. Other one-to-one conversations I explicitly sought out, for example, with a valued former colleague who had made the decision to leave the role and other valued colleagues who were still actively committed that I had not connected with for a while to get a range of perspectives 'co-compositions…telling and showing those aspects of experience that the relationship allows' (Clandinin and Caine, 2008.p.544). Conversations in groups also provided thinking points for my journaling, including from CPD events where there were rich discussions with other practitioners, for example, at masterclasses for guidance counsellors working with adults, and through group supervision as previously mentioned.

2.4.2 Participant observations

Data was also collected through my observations as a participant at relevant conferences, seminars, and events to engage with 'how larger social, institutional, and cultural narratives inform our understanding and shape the researchers'…stories by which they live.' (Clandinin and Caine, 2008, p.545). Field notes were taken throughout these seminars in order to capture key points of interest as well as the mood of the wider practitioner population. These seminars also provided insights from leaders in the field of guidance counselling as to current issues and possible future directions. Conferences and events included adult guidance focused regional meetings and national conferences the Lifelong Guidance Strategy networking event and a series of professional Masterclasses. I also became more active on LinkedIn as a way to connect virtually with guidance practitioners in Ireland and beyond.

2.4.3 Policies (Guidance-related)

Reviewing and engaging with guidance-related policy documents also gives insight into the wider institutional and government narratives around adult guidance counselling and to reflect on the impact on my practice. These documents include the Indecon (2019) report and more recently the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (2024-2030) (Department of Education, 2023).

2.5 Ethical considerations

> 'The inherent ethics of narrative research lies in the resolute honesty of the researcher's reflexivity, which states clearly the biases, aims, and positioning of the knower and the circumstances under which the knowledge was created, with the researcher taking full responsibility for what is written.' (Josselson, 2007, p.549)

I have sought to maintain this reflexivity throughout by reflective journalling. Group supervision with supervisors and fellow students as well as individual supervision with my thesis supervisor supported my teasing out of ethical dilemmas. 'Engaging in the self-study (of teacher education), by its very nature, is an ethical approach to improving practice and the scholarship of practice' (Kitchen, 2019, p.113). Thomas (2019) highlights the risk for researchers in narrative self-inquiry of making themselves

vulnerable to improve practice, raising the ethical dilemma of how to protect the self as both the researcher and researched. I acknowledge feeling some vulnerability in sharing these personal experiences, and yet still feel compelled to offer this unfolding inquiry in the hope that it may also contribute to the scholarship of guidance counselling practice.

As a member of the IGC, I am bound by IGC's Code of Ethics (2020) which outlines four overarching ethical principles of respect, competence, responsibility, and integrity. Responsibility speaks to doing no harm and acting in a trustworthy, reputable and accountable manner. In relation to conducting research, it is to be done with commitment to 'honest, open inquiry, and communicate clearly any personal values that may affect the research' (IGC, 2020, p.5). Selecting my research methods of recollections of conversations and observations at a conference and other events, I acknowledge that I cannot get informed consent. I am writing about these experiences as I recall and interrogate them, I recognise that they are not facts, they are my subjective narratives focusing on my individual learning and knowledge creation, constructed from my interactions with others which is congruent with my epistemological stance outlined above.

2.6 Research Limitations

This inquiry is the unfolding of one practitioner's narrative into problematic experiences being deconstructed and reconstructed by reflecting on the influences of local and national narratives and indeed some international perspectives through engaging with current research. It is difficult therefore to argue for generalisability based on one person's story, instead I offer it as having potential to raise awareness of possible themes emerging for guidance counselling practitioners working in increasingly complex systems which could identify themes for further research. Pino Gavidia & Adu (2022) argue that narrative inquiry approaches with the focus on lived experiences within systems through storytelling has potential to make a contribution to policy to identify what may be hidden dynamics.

2.7 Analysis Narrative career theories as framework

In considering how to analyse the data I had collected through my journalling and observations, I found myself drawn to using narrative related guidance counselling approaches as a framework. I work with clients' stories daily, offering them a safe space to tell their stories and explore options/choices. These stories often begin with doubt, confusion or uncertainty which is where I find myself in my practice and which has led to this inquiry.   Through this inquiry I position myself as client, the researched, whilst also holding the position of researcher (Thomas, 2019).   It was this positioning as client which together with the narrative inquiry approach, drew me to re-engage with narrative career theories as an analytical framework.

2.7.1 Storytelling narrative career counselling approach

I was drawn to McMahon et al. (2012) storytelling constructivist approach, where clients are invited to become an 'explorer' (p. 136) in their own lives. Clients are viewed as storytellers and as an active agent involved in the 'construction of an alternative more hopeful future story' (McMahon et al, 2012, p. 138) with a focus on strengths. This approach seeks to broaden the story of career decision making, with an emphasis on guidance counsellor as facilitator rather than expert, asking open questions through story-crafting to encourage further exploration and richer stories. The client is supported in coming to a clearer understanding of who she is through connectedness between past, present and future, identifying life themes connecting previously unrelated experiences to construct future identities.   The guidance counsellor adopts the position of 'respectful, tentative and curious inquirer' (McMahon et al., 2012, p. 138), facilitating the recursive dimensions of process constructs of connectedness, reflection, meaning making, learning and agency.   In defining agency McMahon et al. (2012) identify a combination of intention, commitment and action that makes things happen. Also, the centrality of 'I' statements and the capacity to speak and act for oneself.

2.7.2 Systems Theory Framework

This storytelling approach is underpinned by the Systems Theory Framework (STF) of career development represented by a series of intersecting systems to represent the recursive influences on career development. These systems are: interpersonal (includes values, beliefs, interests); social (could include parents, peers) and environmental-societal (including location and socio-economic circumstances). The framework is a dynamic, open system with recursive interaction both within and between influences. Patton & McMahon (2006) also identify that the nature and the degree of influence can change over time and the system also recognises the influence of chance on career development. The process of learning is emphasised with clients as learners who are making meaning of their life experience. The framework further situates the relationship between career counsellor and client as a separate system, the therapeutic system with the diagram below (Figure 2) illustrating how each become an element of the systems of influence on the other, as well as the organisation and society contexts (Patton & McMahon, 2006b).
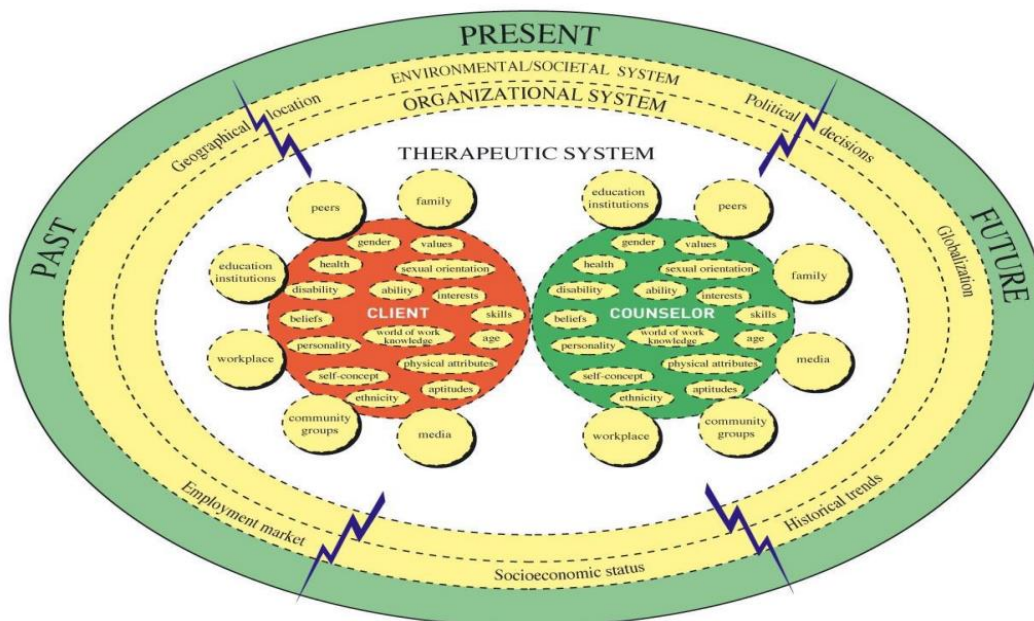

Figure 2. Therapeutic System (McMahon & Patton, 2016)

Language is used to co-construct the meaning of career for the client. The STF provides a conceptual and practical map (McMahon & Patton, 2006b) for career

counselling, and 'storytelling is the means by which the map is examined, connectedness facilitated and meaning elicited.' (McMahon et al., 2012, p. 130).

2.7.3 Narrative Therapy Informed Approach

Mate et al. (2024) offer further perspective on narrative career counselling theories, highlighting that in a world where work becomes more complex including remote working, people need frameworks and support with developing capacities to name what is meaningful for them in their work lives.   Describing their approach as a 'Narrative Therapy Informed Approach' (NTIA) which they propose can facilitate the:

> development of a client's identity as a capable and resourceful career decision-maker and, as a result, provide them with a greater sense of agency in relation to an evolving career identity over the lifespan (Mate et al., 2024, p.8).

This resonates for me as my hope for this inquiry, which Mate et al. (2024) propose can be done through re-authoring practices, building on the work of White (2007) which they define as engaging in a 'process of deconstruction-reconstruction of the person's stories as they unfold as a discursive construct' (p.9). The deconstructing of past stories that are problem focused and reconstructing alternative more aspirational stories which one can choose with more agency. They also speak to this re-authoring process as involving the choosing of the lens through which to view a problematic work or career situation.

Mate et al. (2024, p.10) identify 'Landscape of Action and Landscape of Identity questioning' which when used together helps one to make sense of experiences past and present and complement the reauthoring process in identifying possible future options. Landscape of Identity questions facilitate expressing preferred values and meaning whereas Landscape of Action relates to one's sense of agency in choosing to enact a preferred narrative in the future. And identifying actions relating to next steps and outcomes related to career decision-making. The Landscape of Identity questioning provides a 'thickening' of the story, reflecting on values and meanings in a context that is evolving, with both client and practitioner adapting a 'curious "not knowing" stance' (Mate et al, 2024, p.14) through more open and less structured

questioning. I propose to situate my identification of themes arising from my narrative inquiry within this concept of Landscape of Identity and Landscape of Action, recognising this as a dynamic process where I, in reality, move back and forth between these landscapes (Mate et al., 2024).

Narrative Therapy Informed Approach, storytelling narrative career counselling approach and Systems Theory Framework will all be drawn on in the identification and exploration of emerging themes. I have identified these four themes which will be explored in more details in the following chapters:

Chapter 3. Changing context and its impact;

Chapter 4. Social justice – a core value;

Chapter 5. Recommitment to self-care;

Chapter 6. Connectedness and collaboration in practice

While these themes are presented separately, in reality, they are dynamic and recursive.

Chapter 3

Changing context and its impact

3.1 Introduction

As outlined in the introduction in Chapter One, the starting point for this inquiry was that after twenty years of practice I found myself in the unfamiliar territory of increasingly questioning if I could continue to stay in this role. This questioning arose out of regularly feeling so tired, an increased workload, unsure of what my role was and frustration with the lack of time to work in a fully authentic way with a new cohort of clients, Ukrainians fleeing war. In this chapter, working with the narrative inquiry methodology, I will inquire into my constructed problematic focused narrative, situate it in the broader institutional and national narratives to find meaning and begin to make sense of these troubling experiences Later in the chapter I will outline how engaging with the constructs of identity threat and moral distress provide a starting point for the reauthoring of my narrative.

3.2 Rapid transformation of practice

Ukrainians arriving here fleeing the war which broke out in Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022 were granted Temporary Protection under the Temporary Protection Directive (EU Directive) for a period of one year initially. This gave instant access to eligibility for social welfare payments, to seek employment and to apply for FET and Higher Education courses. (Social Justice Ireland, 2023a). From April 2022 as part of the initial response by my employer, I began accompanying my FET colleague to go to where Ukrainians were being accommodated locally including a former convent and a hotel to engage and see what supports we could offer. The need for English classes for a range of levels including Beginners became evident as well as from initial queries (often with the assistance of one person with good English translating) that many people were highly educated and experienced in a range of professions including teaching, lecturing and medical. They had lots of questions about whether they could work in Ireland and whether their qualifications would be recognised. Others had been in University and were seeking to continue their studies or access higher education here.

Responding to these queries required rapid adapting of my practice, developing new resources with my Guidance information Officer colleague to try to keep up with information from the Government on entitlements to Further and Higher Education (Department of the Taoiseach, 2024). In more recent times there has also been an increase in the number of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners who are International Protection Applicants. International Protection Applicants are treated differently to Ukrainians with respect to their entitlement to Further Education, Higher Education and employment. On arrival they are entitled to access English and literacy classes only (SOLAS, 2021a). They can apply for the Labour Market Access Permission letter if they do not receive a first instance recommendation within 6 months (Department of Justice, 2024) which does then give entitlement to Further and Higher Education, employment and self-employment. Social Justice Ireland have highlighted the disparity in entitlements between these cohorts, posing the challenging question 'Do we have a category 'deserving refugee' and another category 'undeserving refugee', and, if we do, how do we distinguish between them?' (Social Justice Ireland, 2023a, p.7).

Nationally there has been significant increases in the number of learners participating on ESOL courses from 9,946 in 2020 (SOLAS, 2021b) to 29,354 in 2022 (SOLAS, 2023). I am experiencing increasing demand from ESOL learners (predominantly Ukrainian and International Protection Applicants) seeking to have individual guidance sessions to get support with accessing Further Education, Higher Education or employment/self-employment. Often the sessions require using translation apps such as SayHi which takes time. While I strive to give the best service possible, I was finding these sessions challenging as I found I had to adapt my practice and focus more on information giving and signposting because of time constraints. Also, trying to gauge a person's level of English with regard to progressing onto a course which required a minimum standard of, for example, B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages (Council of Europe, 2021). Their job titles didn't always translate directly to Irish roles.   It was very challenging not being able to answer all their questions or support them to easily identify a way forward. Sometimes I wondered if I was adding further trauma to a cohort of learners who were likely

already traumatised from having to flee their homes, leave loved ones behind as well as their professional identities.

3.3 Broader institutional narratives

Narrative inquiry brings my attention to recognising how my narrative is shaped and influenced by 'larger social, institutional, and cultural narratives' (Clandinin and Caine , 2008, p.545). The lens of Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006b) brings attention to considering the influences of organisational and national systems and their influence on the therapeutic relationship. I recognise that I have been working in an emergency situation brought about by the displacement of large numbers of traumatised cohorts as a result of war in a short time frame. I acknowledge that the response of the FET sector I work in was extraordinary on many levels. There was rapid expansion in the recruitment of additional ESOL tutors to meet the huge demand for English classes and additional staff were recruited to oversee the planning of and responding to the need for classes in their areas. Regional Education and Language Teams (REALT) were established to identify school places for younger Ukrainians and support schools with resources needed (ETBI, 2022). However, in my experience there was not an equivalent expansion of guidance counselling capacity which left us as individual guidance counsellors to self-manage our own responses within existing resources, having to

> depend on their ingenuity and creativity when it comes to catering for needs
> that were not envisaged when institutional structures and practices were put
> into place (Fejes et al., 2021, p.350)

Research on migrant/multi-cultural guidance counselling recognises that it is 'high stakes' guidance counselling characterised by low levels of normative guidance and high levels of uncertainty and complexity (Chant and Sundelin, 2022). The 'sometime complex process' of career guidance work 'is made much more difficult when supporting…refugees and migrants…among the most vulnerable members of society' (Akkök and Huges, 2023, p. 1) so that:

investment in multi-cultural guidance/counselling support seems pivotal. Career practitioners need to be trained, empowered, and well-equipped to design and deliver multi-cultural career guidance (Akkök and Hughes, 2023, p.8).

3.4 Closure of NCGE

At a national level there were also changes which had significant impact compared to supports received in responding to the COVID pandemic when the NCGE had developed resources for practitioners and created opportunities to come together online as practitioners, providing 'places' and spaces' to share experiences, resources and identify needs.   Prior to ceasing operations from 1st September 2022 (Careers Portal, 2022) they had begun to engage with representing and resourcing FET guidance staff in working with Ukrainians:

> It is vital that the Irish policy context and practice implications for FET and (ETB) AEGS (Adult Educational Guidance Service) is therefore further supported. (NCGE, 2022, p.1).

> Ongoing consideration of which are needed for equitable delivery and to facilitate professional and appropriate adult guidance counselling to meet the needs of this population of refugees. (NCGE, 2022, p.3).

The AGA did provide some invaluable support for members through facilitating an online meeting space for practitioners, providing 'places' and 'spaces' to reflect on our experiences and share queries and information. A Padlet was created to share information and resources.

3.5 Identity Threat

In the early days of my research, seeking to understand these challenging experiences in my practice, I started reading up on identity threat which Petriglieri (2011) defined as "experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings or enactment of an identity" (p.644). She acknowledges that individuals can appraise an experience differently and that frequent exposure increases the likelihood of identification with identity threat. Appraisal of the threat is outlined as involving a

primary appraisal about the significance of an experience for an individual's wellbeing and the secondary appraisal relates to choosing how to respond to the threat.

Threat to identity meanings can arise from experiences of either lack of change or having to make undesired changes and threat to identity enactment with experiences that can prevent or limit expression of the identity (George et al., 2023). Reflecting on this research gives insight and meaning making to my experiences in practice of having to adapt my guidance interventions for increasing numbers of ESOL learners, with sub cohorts having different entitlements to education, towards more information signposting to cope with the large numbers. Engaging with these concepts of identity threat helps to make sense of my experiences of struggling with having to make this differentiation, leading to feelings of inauthenticity as I recognise that conversely, ESOL learners need more time for personalised guidance support as they navigate language barriers, traumatising experiences and a new education and employment landscape:

> The journey for individuals seeking protection in Ireland is one marked by profound challenges and heart-wrenching losses. They must bid farewell to their homes, commencing an arduous process of rebuilding their lives from scratch. The familiar contours of their daily existence become distant memories, often leaving behind cherished loved ones in the process. Their occupations, too, often slip away, as the hurdles of unacknowledged qualifications and language barriers prevent them from pursuing their careers in Ireland. The weight of these losses is immense, yet these individuals persevere, demonstrating an incredible resilience' (Cantwell, 2023, p. 7)

3.6 Moral Distress

While exploring identity threat brought some insight into understanding my experiences, I experienced a real breakthrough moment listening to an Emergency Department consultant (O'Connor, 2024) who had come back on RTE Radio 1 to do a follow-up interview on her personal journey of working through the toll her role had been taking on her. She spoke of not meeting the eyes of patients on corridors as

she knew that she wouldn't be able to see them anytime soon. This brought back for me a vivid memory of walking to the staffroom on some Friday mornings when most of our ESOL learners were in the centre and not looking left or right in case more learners tried to engage with me, needing 15 minutes to grab a cuppa and recharge in between appointments. A new, unsettling experience from me as those initial interactions with learners are key connection points but my cup was full. O'Connor's (2024) recounting of the emotional effort of going into work leaving less for other areas of life including pulling out of things on the home front forcibly struck home for me too. I had gotten into a cycle of seeing weekends as recovery time before facing into more of the same the following week. It brought my awareness to how I had less energy for family and friends or even interest sometimes in meeting up or making plans, my world had shrunk.

O'Connor (2024) recognised that she might be on the road to burnout, so she sought help and came to understand that she was experiencing moral distress, having to make immoral decisions prioritising patients who were sickest, but this meant others had to wait longer.   She linked moral distress with feelings of less empathy, more cynicism and with thoughts of 'no matter what I do won't get on top of this' which again resonated for me. She also spoke of seeing colleagues leave or reduce their hours. I am aware too of colleagues who have left and my own questioning if I needed to leave too. She spoke of taking time out to understand what was happening and of now being in a better place, having gained understanding of needing to make changes including a better work/life balance. O'Connor (2024) ended on a hopeful note, how she wanted to talk about her experiences and that what has helped her might also support other medical staff who might be feeling similarly, wanting colleagues 'to thrive and be motivated, finding joy again'.   This linked back for me to my own desire to not just survive in my work, to hopefully thrive. Also, to share my journey through this thesis in the hope that it too might be of help to colleagues seeking to make meaning of similar disconcerting experiences.

3.7 Inquiring into moral distress

Hearing this interview led me to research moral distress and what was being written about this in the guidance counselling field. I struggled to find any literature, and as Mänttäri-van der Kuip et al. (2024) highlight, research around moral distress is largely situated in the field of healthcare where it originated, and also in the field of social work. This, they argued:

> challenged the conceptual development and empirical examination of Moral Distress as a phenomenon occurring across diverse professional groups in different work settings (p.1).

They describe moral distress as a complex and dynamic phenomenon**,** of needing to understand how it differs from burnout.   They distinguished it from moral uncertainties and dilemmas, identifying it as arising from situations where one 'knows the right things to do, but institutional constraints making it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action.' (Mänttäri-van der Kuip et al., 2024, p.1). They draw attention to negative implications for health and wellbeing.   They introduced a general measure of Moral Distress, the Moral Distress Instrument which could be used across different professions. It is intended to measure the moral events related to constraining moral agency and also the distress response in response to these events (p.16). To measure the degree of stress, participants were asked to estimate the frequency of experience of such events and to rate how manageable the discomfort, if any experienced was for them. This highlights the part that individual factors, including subjective judgement of moral events, can play in the differing responses among professionals within the same fields/disciplines.

They speak to root cause items including lack of resources for professionals working in fields including social welfare*.* They identify two hindrance factors (p.7) which can restrict one's moral or ethical agency. Firstly, situations where people feel unable to do the job in the way they believe it should be done, citing the example of where one needs to compromise the quality of their work due to lack of time which resonates for my own experience. In their research with Finnish Social Workers (p.9) they found that this was the most common manifestation of constrained moral agency.   This resonates with me in having to shift from in-depth guidance to more information giving and

signposting.   A second hindrance factor speaks to situations where one knows the right thing to do, but feels unable to do it, for example, where a support measure identified as necessary may be deemed too expensive.   This was frequently the response given when raising the need for learners to access recognised certification of English levels such as Cambridge or IELTS (International English Language Testing System) to access Higher Education or employment.

Mänttäri-van der Kuip et al. (2024) also sought to capture situations where one feels that they have to compromise their professional ethics or their personal values in their work. They found that respondents evaluated having to make these compromises as highly distressing. This is a key learning moment for me in helping to make sense of my recent experiences around my own questioning of my authenticity and integrity which are core values in my work, along with social justice and the personal toll of finding myself working in ways that feels like these values are being compromised.

Mänttäri-van der Kuip et al. (2024) also looked at the relationship between moral distress and burnout. While they found strong association between them, they found that moral distress dimensions only partially explained the variances in exhaustion, cynicism and inadequacy associated with burnout, concluding that experiences of moral distress can contribute to burnout. Olcoń & Gulbas (2021) distinguish burnout being caused by large caseloads and moral distress when providers think that the large caseload is negatively affecting the quality of the services that can be delivered, the latter fits with my narrative.

Olcoń & Gulbas (2021) argue that providers who work with the most marginalised groups including migrants experience many constraints and pressures and therefore exploration of moral distress needs to be considered with these professionals.   They researched moral distress in social workers working with Latino immigrant families and organised their findings into the four themes of (1) "the system has failed them;" (2) compromised service quality; (3) "who really can help?" and (4) individual solutions to structural problems (p.973).

1. **System has failed them**
   The research showed providers struggling to address clients' needs including housing and lack of quality education which was beyond their immediate reach and capacity. I am linking this to with the range of challenges facing our ESOL learners including risk of homelessness, challenges in getting recognition of qualifications here, getting work in their profession, lack of affordable access to higher levels English to overcome barrier to accessing higher levels of education or employment.

2. **Compromised service quality**
   Providers' narratives spoke to dissatisfaction and frustration on reflecting on their own position within a system that provided limited social services, long waitlists and a general lack of resources including bilingual services for their clients. As mentioned previously, recognising those familiar feelings in my experience too in the face of increasing caseload, language barriers and having to adapt to more information focused, signposting service.

   > This highlights the dual impact on both client and provider: the system fostered inequality by creating structural barriers for clients, while simultaneously limiting individual capacity to deliver services (Olcoń & Gulbas, 2021, p. 975).

3. **Who really can help?**
   Participants identified the emergence of helplessness in the face of so many challenges. Being significantly constrained by the system took an emotional toll on the providers in form of frustration, disempowerment, and doubts in the effectiveness of their work. Providers described being tired and overwhelmed by the expectations to do more than they were capable of doing given a variety of systemic barriers, the limitations of their training, and time constraints. All of this resonates very strongly for me.

4. **Individual solutions to structural problems**
   Whilst participants often spoke to supporting individuals there was some referencing of structural change in their narratives. One participant emphasised

the importance of community resources and working with community leaders, especially in terms of creating a sense of connection.

Olcoń & Gulbas (2021) concluded that working with this marginalised group both 'produces and perpetuates providers' moral distress' (Olcoń & Gulbas, 2021, p.978) where the interaction of systemic failures and compromised service quality leads to feelings of helplessness, dissatisfaction and disempowerment. 'This emotional toll in turn creates a cycle where providers' capacity to envision authentic, systemic change becomes limited' (Olcoń & Gulbas, 2021, p.978). This is a key learning moment for me where this narrative inquiry is making hidden narratives visible to me, revealing this new knowledge of self, that a frightening sense of hopelessness had begun to manifest in me when guidance counselling is about 'offering hope, dignity and strives for equity and equality for all' *(Akkök and Huges, 2023, p.3).*

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to show how narrative inquiry through the lens of narrative career theories supported my beginning to 'thicken' (Mate et al, 2024, p.14) my knowledge of the issues in my practice by reflexively engaging with my initial problematic narrative and the challenging wider contexts in which it was constructed. The concepts of identity threat and moral distress was explored which helped to bring to light a hidden narrative for me of hopelessness arising from the need for rapid professional identity transformation in working with some of the most vulnerable cohorts. Some elements of these transformations I have come to recognise through this inquiry ran counter to one of my core values of social justice which I will inquire into in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Social Justice – a core value

4.1 Introduction

Researching moral distress as outlined in the previous chapter brought my attention to social justice as being one of my core values and the toll of having to work counter to this in my work with migrant clients. In this chapter I will outline where this value originated in my story (landscape of identity, Mate et al., 2024) and subsequent deeper learning about social justice in guidance counselling, with a focus on the context of working with migrants. Attention is drawn to the increasing neoliberalised FET context and the final section shares an experience of proactively engaging with elements of anti-migrant discourses.

4.2 Origins of social justice value

Reflecting back on where my value of social justice comes from, its origins are to be found in growing up in a family where my Mum and Dad would have been known as 'good neighbours' that could be called upon for help. I have many memories of my Dad on his way to the creamery and stopping at various neighbours gates where they would have left a bag with shopping list and money. These neighbours were elderly and didn't drive. One of the running jokes in our house was that you could never be sure what time Dad would be back as he always stopped for a chat when handing over the messages. Also, after mass on Sundays, I recall impatiently waiting for him to finish up talking with neighbours so we could get home. I am noticing this pattern repeating with my daughter sometimes impatiently waiting for me to stop talking! Many years later, I vividly recall the priest at Dad's funeral speaking when we didn't feel able to, about Dad never worrying about time, always making time for people and looking out for people.

I have many memories of visiting two older neighbours who lived on their own, heading off when I was old enough, by myself to sit with them and chat with them, enjoying

Figure 4.1 1976 Trócaire box (The Journal, 2013)

their stories and the treats! I also recall the Trócaire box (an example is shown in figure 4.1) put on the kitchen window each year at the beginning of Lent, bringing awareness of other parts of the world where not every child was as lucky as we were growing up, never having to think about whether we had enough to eat or drink or have a safe place to call home. At school I would have been aware that some kids were treated differently by some teachers, kids who already were having challenges at home. I have a vivid memory one day of being sickened by a teacher lifting a young boy off the floor and hitting him repeatedly with a stick. My friend and I decided we had to do something, so we waited for our chance to take the stick, and I remember throwing it with all my might over the hedge at the back of the school. If only it was as easy as that, another stick was found, and we were punished.

Figure 4.2 JVC brochure (front)

When I went to college studying Chemistry, I got involved with the St. Vincent De Paul society. As described in the methodology chapter this led me to reconsider a career in Chemistry and to explore my interest in helping people through volunteering. I volunteered with the Jesuit Volunteer Communities (JVC) living in Ballymun (Dublin) for nine months with other volunteers in community on a volunteer social welfare payment. I participated on a programme of social analysis and reflection as outlined in figures 4.2 and 4.3 based on Ignatian spirituality and I volunteered with Dublin Simon Community. During this time, I first

Figure 4.3 JVC brochure (back)

heard the term social justice as being central in Ignatian spirituality-being of service, working in solidarity with rather than doing for people experiencing inequality through issues including poverty, disability and homelessness. A key learning was in relation to advocating for change to the systemic structures causing inequality instead of individual responsibility (Jesuits, 1995). Subsequently working with Dublin Simon Community 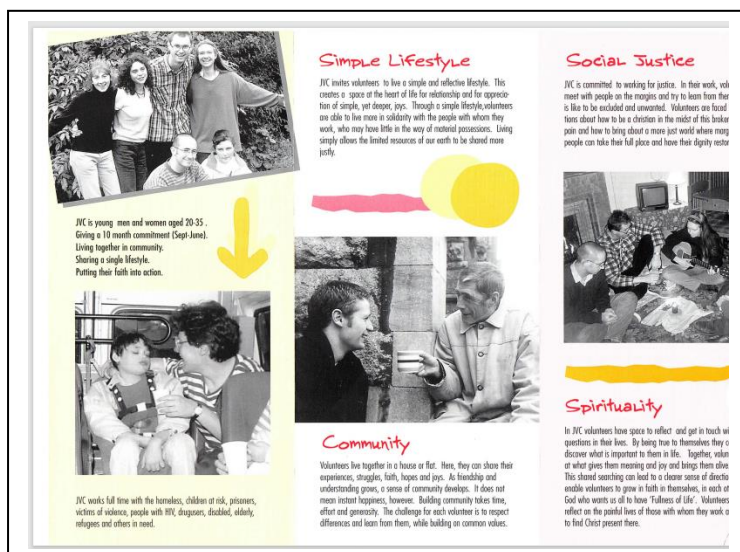as a FAS Community Employment Supervisor I became aware through working with participants of the link between early school leaving and inequality in accessing employment and more fundamentally on a person's sense of self and their options. It is here I became aware of the VEC's adult education services and Freire (2017) and his emancipatory transformative view of education as facilitating adults to critically engage with their learning and life experiences. This is where I began to find a home in working in adult guidance counselling within an adult education context experiencing high levels of congruence with my values.

4.3 Social justice in guidance counselling

Sultana advocates for critical awareness of definitions of guidance counselling, for example, the OECD 2004 definition which does 'not include any sense that career guidance can be addressed to social injustice nor that it can or should challenge the structures of neoliberalism'. (Hooley et al, 2017, p.12). This led me to look again at the definition (see Chapter 1) used in the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance 2024-2030 (Department of Education, 2023a p.10), based on the EU Council Resolution 2008, there is no reference to advocacy or system change.

The definition of guidance counselling that informs my practice is the one used in the Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000) which includes advocacy and managing and innovating systems change:

> Guidance refers to a range of activities designed to assist people to make choices and to make transitions consequent upon these choices. In the context of adult education these activities include: information; assessment; advice; counselling; teaching/careers education; placement; advocacy; feedback; follow-up; networking; managing and innovating systems change.' (DES, 2000, pp.156-157).

NICEC (2024) organised a webinar in May remembering Sultana to mark his recent untimely death. It was very moving, with family members present and friends sharing their memories and thoughts on his legacy including his five signposts towards socially just guidance counselling illustrated in figure 4.4 below (NICEC, 2024).
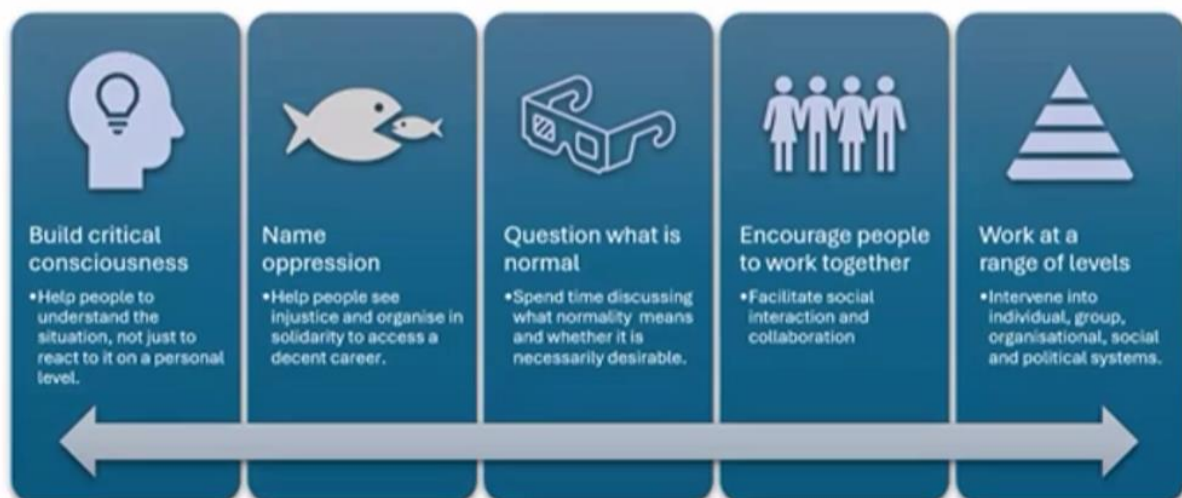
Figure 4.4 The five signposts towards socially just guidance counselling (NICEC, 2024)

I first encountered Sultana and his insights on social justice in guidance counselling when I attended his workshop for guidance counsellors in Dublin in 2018. He really challenged us as practitioners to have critical awareness of what our position was in relation to how we acted in our role and to understand what beliefs were underpinning those actions. He referred to the three constructs in the slide below (figure 4.5) of

Figure 4.5 Slide Sultana (2018) CPD

social efficiency-matching the client with labour market demand; developmentalist- a more agentic, choice focused approach and social reconstruction-focus on advocacy to change inequalities for groups.

In reflecting back on twenty years of practice through this inquiry I recognise my approach hasn't neatly fitted consistently into one of these constructs, moving back and forth between them whilst seeking out opportunities to advocate on behalf of clients. Sultana adapted a stance of trying to understand, reach out, improve, and recognised that one never wins on all fronts. He used a dialectical approach to issues, for example, between autonomy and solidarity in lifelong career guidance (Hooley et al., 2024). Lving and Malik (2004) speak too to this difficult balancing act for guidance counselling.

4.4 Career adaptability skills - still fit for purpose?

For this narrative inquiry, one of the methods I chose was observation at what is being said about guidance counselling at conferences. At the IGC conference in March, Robertson (2024) as part of his key address on sustainable careers and guidance, challenged us as practitioners to critically reflect on what career management skills we focus on with clients who are seeking work. Traditionally we tend to focus on the client needing to have adaptability to meet employer requirements. Robertson (2024) queried do we need to also now prepare clients for the possibility of exploitative work practices. Young (2008) identifies exploitation as one of her five 'faces' or forms of oppression she developed as a framework to deepen our understanding about how individuals and groups can be marginalised. Robertson (2024) speaks to needing to also teach clients about their employment rights and becoming savvy about how employment relationships are changing. Zero-hour contracts and low pay are some examples that come to mind here.

4.5 Neoliberalism in FET

While Robertson was speaking about these issues for our work with clients, through this inquiry I find myself reflecting on his words in relation to my own recent experiences in work. This provided another perspective in looking at the system's expectations around my adaptability to working with new migrant cohorts on top of an already busy workload, which Hearne et al. (2022) also referred to in their research with practitioners.   Glanton (2023), reflecting on 10 years of FET speaks to the increasing shift to an education and training neoliberal paradigm, the focus has shifted from adult education concepts of 'citizenship and community to skills and performativity' of the marketplace (p.788), the commodification of learners. She highlights the increased regulatory power of SOLAS with consequent increased administration burden for staff and the rolling out of an outcomes-based model of funding. It is vital that the ethos of adult education with its commitment to equality and social justice is not lost.

4.6 Social justice perspectives on working with migrant clients

> Career guidance viewed through a social justice perspective supports the creation of a better society, offering hope, dignity and strives for equity and equality for all, thereby enhancing social integration, community cohesion and more inclusive societies and economies' *(*Akkök and Huges, 2023, pp.3-4*).*

Sultana (2022) further speaks to 'the how to' of working with migrants, addressing barriers including language, recognition of qualification, culture shock and lack of social capital and networks to help with sourcing employment.   Needing to attend to migrants' career identity linked to negative self-concept which can in turn impact on their efforts to establish their career identity in the new country. Supporting to develop a sense of 'possible selves' (p.499) while having to adapt preferences and the potential to flourish. Working from a strengths-based approach, also emphasised by Chant and Sundelin (2022) who caution about the danger of a deficit model where migrants can be constantly told their English isn't good enough, what entitlements they don't have. Narrative approaches are suggested as a way of working with clients to co-construct

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identifying of options.   From my learning in doing this inquiry, I have begun to adapt my practice to using the storytelling narrative and NTIA approaches in working with some clients, becoming more narratively 'competent' (McMahon et al., 2012) in my practice. Policy supports are also needed in areas including recognition of qualifications and incentivising employers to employ migrants.

4.7 Macro level changing narratives around migrant policy and sentiment

Akkök and Huges (2023) and Sultana (2022) identify a role for guidance practitioners in calling out 'wrong assumptions, inequalities and bias' (p.4) which can have positive effects on influencing the public perception of migrants and refugees. Sultana (2022) speaks to language being important and that career practitioners need to confront 'the prevalent vocabulary, discourses and attitudes circulating in the mainstream in order to become aware of—and to overcome—personal prejudice' (p.1) to make more socially just practice possible. For example, looking at the statistics to counter the prevailing narrative of a refugee 'crisis' and those seeking asylum perceived as being a burden on the state in which they arrive. Also, that they are not a homogenous group. He also cautions against working with clients in an individualistic way, needing to advocate for overcoming structural barriers.   And as practitioners needing to be aware of our own unconscious bias, face our own fears and not avoid unwanted negative feelings that may arise.

These are very relevant issues currently in Ireland given the rise in anti-migrant sentiment in recent months particularly after the riots in Dublin in November 2023. The government has tightened rules, reduced welfare supports (for Ukrainians), reduced accommodation supports and expanded enforcement to deter new asylum seekers in response to the 'hardening public mood on immigration and asylum seeker policy' in the run up to June 2024 local and European elections (Carroll, 2024).

The Irish Refugee Council's recent joint statement on homelessness amongst international protection applicants speaks to the need to counter an increasing national anti-migrant narrative here:

Anxiety and anger about increasing inequality in our society has caused a rupture centred on immigration, and particularly aimed at those seeking protection. We appeal to the Government to do all it can to stop this avoidable crisis becoming magnified in the public's perception and used as a scapegoat for legacy issues. We call on the public to come together to demand better for everyone in Ireland.   (Irish Refugee Council, 2024)

Social Justice Ireland also speak to the changing narrative:

The increase of far-right/anti-migrant rhetoric in recent months, through online campaigns, attacks seen on homeless migrants, and weekly protests and demonstrations opposing the presence of migrants in some areas is cause for serious concern…Government must undertake initiatives to counteract this harmful messaging and to facilitate integration of migrants. This is not only the right thing to do but is politically expedient as resistance to current international protection policies provide a platform, and voter base, for the far-right. (Social Justice Ireland, 2023b, p.9)

4.8 National to local narratives

This national change in the dominant narrative shifting towards a more anti-migrant sentiment was also beginning to cast its shadow into some day-to-day interactions and conversations I was having with colleagues and learners.   Colleagues mentioned a fear of protests where for example an accommodation centre was close to a FET centre and some protestors were videoing and posting online. Also, fear for personal safety where classes are taught in accommodation centres.   And some uncertainty in how to manage related discussions in class, unsure of what the organisation's position was.   I too noticed some anti-Ukrainian sentiment when organising my third information session for Ukrainian learners that I would not have experienced in promoting the previous sessions.

While separate English classes were organised for Ukrainian learners at the beginning, this changed to mixing with other migrant learners at the same English level as time went on.   In one such class I was challenged as to whether this

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information I was sharing was only for Ukrainian learners giving visibility to some tension between migrant cohorts who were on very different payments and entitlements as mentioned in the previous chapter. Also, having to counter mis-information about other's entitlements in individual guidance sessions. While these were isolated incidents, I found these experiences quite unsettling.

4.9 Creating 'places' and 'spaces' for hidden narratives

Reflecting on my own experiences and those of colleagues as previously mentioned, I initiated a discussion of same within our local FET team at a team meeting to create space to share our thoughts and experiences. This led to a rich discussion with relief at talking about 'the elephant in the room'. And teasing out of what might help going forward including documenting experiences, concerns and recommendations to be shared with senior management as a proactive measure. Also, the sharing of resources already available including guidance service resources created on entitlements to education and presentations delivered to learners. We also identified the need for CPD on understanding the processes for the different migrant sub-cohorts coming to Ireland and linking with Non-Government Organisations who deliver training on awareness raising and helpful responses to difficult conversations.

4.10 Irish Network Against Racism (INAR) training

Following on from this, I and some colleagues attended the Active Citizenship Webinar organised by ETBI (2024) in April. This was facilitated by INAR staff which gave an overview of a workshop developed to:

> equip tutors with a suite of techniques and approaches in facilitating discussions in classroom settings ensuring learners can explore contentious issues through an informed, respectful and inclusive perspective (ETBI, 2024)

In taking us through the format for the workshop and sharing their reflections on having delivered it with some tutors already, they spoke to providing a safe 'place' and 'space' to look at this issue and figure it out amongst peers. Seeking to build confidence and support staff with becoming more at ease around the language of racism.

Other key takeaways included doing critical analysis of our own values and whether a reset is required. And that racism definition is linked to 'effect (whether intentional or not)' (ENAR, 2019, p.20). The workshop also supported us with framing and exploring when to shut down conversations, or when to hold the space to unpack difficult questions, how to change the narrative to a value-based narrative. The facilitators introduced me to the new concept of 'prebunking' – creating settings for framing the discussions grounded in shared values. They explained that based on research around anti-inclusive and far right discourses, because they are fear based and succeed through repetition, attempting to debunk myths for example 'Ireland is full' with 'Ireland is not full' that what still gets heard is that 'Ireland is full'. I look forward to reflecting further on these issues through participating on this workshop with colleagues in September.

4.11 Local grassroots community positive inclusive narratives

Whilst the dominant narrative would appear to be increasingly anti-migrant, there are lots of reasons for hope too in positive responses countering this narrative, creating welcoming 'places' and 'spaces' for migrants in local communities. One such example is shown in figure 4.4 below where local people came together to spell out *refugees welcome* which was shared widely with the hashtag refugees are welcome (Irish Refugee Council, 2016).

Figure 4.6   Still from Refugees Welcome Aerial Video (Irish Refugee Council, 2016)

In another example, Sheehy's (2024) video featured on RTE news highlights positive integration of Ukrainians and International Protection Applicants with many volunteering on the Tidy Towns committee in Fermoy, Co. Cork. An International Garden has also been created providing inclusive meeting and learning spaces.

In FET we also seek to make centres inclusive and welcoming spaces for all learners. We encourage our migrant learners where possible with English levels to join classes other than ESOL classes where they get to meet and learn with Irish learners, helping to integrate and also providing opportunities to connect with talents such as Art and gardening to help with wellbeing.

4.12 Conclusion

This chapter outlines my reconnecting with a core value in my work of social justice through drawing on landscape of identity (Mate et al., 2024) connecting with values and through reconnecting with the congruence I experienced in the earlier part of my career as adult guidance counsellor working in an adult education context. Also reconnecting with somebody who has been an inspiration in my career, Sultana, and deepening my understanding of how to work in a socially just way with migrant clients which includes challenging broader anti-migrant sentiment. This inquiry has also drawn some attention to the challenge of working congruently in the increasingly neoliberal paradigm in FET.

Chapter 5

Recommitment to self-care

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I engage with another theme which this narrative inquiry has brought my attention to, a recommitment to self-care in sustaining oneself in this challenging work. This chapter begins with a definition of self-care, then outlines my experiences with helpful personal strategies. Later in the chapter further insight is gained into my problematic experiences through CPD on compassion fatigue and the new knowledge about self that is gained from talking to a colleague who has chosen to leave this work. The final section considers the quiet quitters and great resignation phenomena.

5.2 Self-care defined

The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) describe self-care as:

> an ongoing process of caring for yourself; making a conscious effort to do things that maintain, improve and repair your mental, emotional, physical and spiritual wellness. It's about having awareness of your own being, identifying needs … Protecting and preserving yourself in the face of challenging work… (BACP, 2018).

A key phrase for me here is the 'conscious effort' involved in self-care, recognising that this is something I had let slip in the busyness. Also, the need for self-care in 'protecting and preserving yourself in the face of challenging work' recognising I had this knowledge already but that I had disconnected from taking action, coming to understand through this inquiry that I had come to view self-care as yet another thing that there wasn't time to do in the busyness. Through this inquiry I am committing consciously to prioritise self-care, drawing on landscape of agentic reauthoring of my narrative (Mate et al., 2024).

5.3 Mindfulness

One of the earliest learnings for me on this course was needing to attend to my self-care as defined above. As mentioned previously, I would get very upset in the early days of this course when trying to articulate strong emotions of disorientation, feeling lost and questioning if I could stay in the role. Our afternoon group supervision sessions always started with a grounding mindfulness exercise which I found challenging at times to stay focused, but overall, it was helpful to just be in the moment. It brought to my awareness how I was living a lot of the time with ruminating thoughts about the past or the future in relation to work and how just being in the moment brought welcome stillness and calm. Mindfulness was not new to me,

Figure 5.1 Anchor Breath Meditation Source: https://en.dinamicasgrupales.com.ar/activities-and-games/relaxation/anchor-breath-meditation/

but it is not a practice that I had integrated into my daily life, finding going for a walk in nature often worked better for me.   I had struggled in the past with finding some mindfulness practices too long for me.   And so, I set about exploring trying it again.

I had been listening to Niall Breslin's *Where is My Mind* podcast (Breslin, 2023) as I liked his way of exploring different aspects of mental health and wellbeing. When he mentioned that he was offering a 'Your daily hug for the mind' 31 days of mindfulness course (Breslin, 2024) starting in January I was curious and signed up for it. I liked that it was pre-recorded so I could access it at a time that suited me, usually first thing in the morning. Sometimes after a challenging day at work, I would listen to that day's recording again to ground myself, helping with getting better sleep. What also worked for me was that it was short, on average around 12 minutes. He advised approaching the mindfulness with the principles of acceptance, non-judgement, openness and curiosity and I found myself often repeating his mantra *when you lose your head, find your feet*. He varied his mindfulness approaches, including for example, gratitude-based ones. I also experienced writing in my journal as mindful. These practices

really helped with finding my feet, getting out of my head and created space for deeper engagement with my inquiry and the reauthoring process.   I also went with a friend to his live show as part of my intentional reconnecting with people in my personal life.

5.4 Compassion Fatigue

Following on from engaging with moral distress research as one way of understanding and making meaning of my experiences, I also sought out CPD at the IGC conference to learn more about concepts relating to burnout and vicarious trauma. Culloty (2024), in presenting the conference workshop on vicarious trauma shared a table from Oberg et al. (2023) in figure 5.2 below which distinguishes between burnout, secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue constructs.   I recognised many of the compassion fatigue symptoms as outlined including feelings of overwhelm and was noticing some recent reduction in empathy which again brought my attention to needing to look at my self-care.

Construct	Definition	Symptoms
Burnout	"a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job" (Maslach and Leiter, 2016, p. 103)	• Lack of accomplishment • Exhaustion • Detachment from your job (Maslach et al., 2001)
Secondary Traumatic Stress	A secondary stress condition which can be experienced when an individual learns about a traumatic event that has happened to someone else, rather than experiencing the trauma themselves and is amplified when the individual is aQempting to support the person who has experienced trauma (Essary et al., 2020).	• Fatigue or illness • Reduced productivity • Feelings of sadness, despair, hopelessness, anxiety (Siegfried, 2008)
Compassion Fatigue	"a reduced empathic capacity or client interest manifested through behavioral and emotional reactions from exposure to traumatizing experiences of others" (Cieslak et al., 2014, p. 76).	• Reduced feelings of empathy or compassion • Feeling detached or "numb" • Overwhelmed by work • Self-isolation and withdrawal. (Figley, 1995)

Figure 5.2   Burnout, Secondary Traumatic Stress and Compassion Fatigue (Culloty, 2024)

Culloty (2024) in figure 5.3 below from Vu and Bodenmann (2017) provides a very clear schematic of the individual, professional and organisational factors which makes one more likely to experience compassion fatigue.
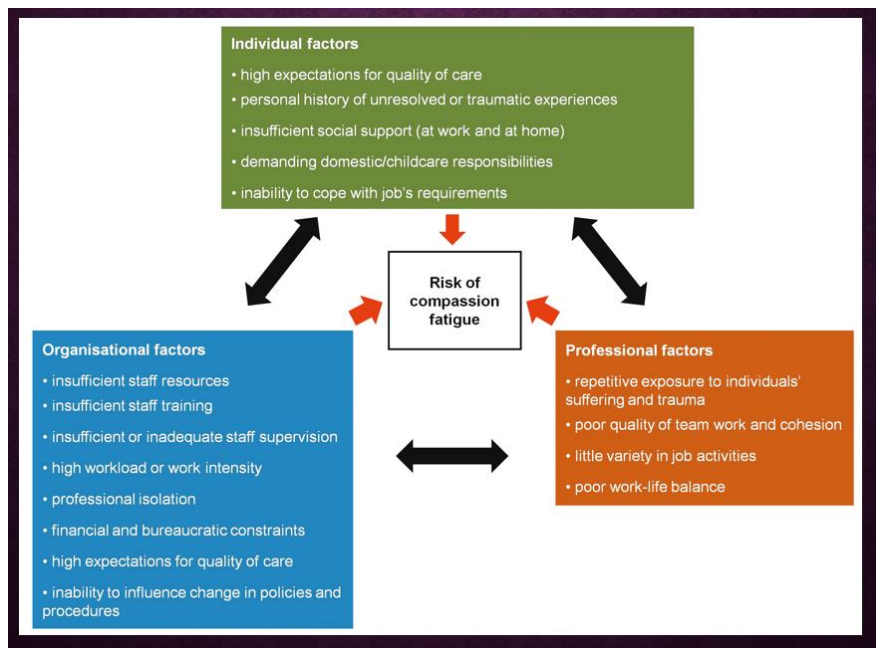
Figure 5.3 Risk factors for compassion fatigue (Culloty, 2024)

Included are many factors which I have mentioned previously as identifying with including; insufficient staff resources and training, high workload/high intensity, professional isolation (organisational); repeated exposure to trauma and poor cohesion/teamwork (professional) and high expectations for quality of care and some issues with coping with the job's requirements (individual). I noticed my mixed feelings as I took this in, I realised I had internalised my experiences of compassion fatigue as my not being able to cope, of not being adaptable enough.   Seeing the other factors listed and recognising that most of the factors were external, and that many of them were outside of my control helped me to get perspective. Through the acquisition of this new knowledge, which this inquiry has brought to my attention, I have begun to reframe my experiences, reauthor the story I was telling myself about my experiences, from a self-blaming one to recognising external structural and systematic factors.

5.5 Compassion Satisfaction

Culloty (2024) also drew on Radey and Figley's (2007) work on compassion satisfaction, described as an individual's sense of self-efficacy related to their helping profession and their sense of positivity and satisfaction regarding their helping work. Flipping the switch to compassion satisfaction involves employing self-care strategies that manage stress and defend against compassion fatigue which allow attention to be focused instead on quality of life and the aspects of our work that are rewarding. Learning about compassion satisfaction at this workshop reconnected me with the many times in my work that I have experienced this in the past (landscape of identity) and how it offers a more agentic reauthoring of narratives around working in challenging situations (landscape of action) (Mate et al., 2024). Reducing professional isolation is also helpful. I will return to this in the next chapter on connectedness.

5.6 Self-care in migrant guidance counselling

Chant and Sundelin (2022) also suggest some self-care strategies in working with migrant clients, describing this guidance counselling work as 'high stakes' with high levels of uncertainty and complexity. They draw on Bath's trauma wise care (2015) approach based on three pillars of safety, connections and coping which can support clients without having to be responsible for changing everything. Robertson (2024) during his presentation on sustainable guidance at the IGC conference (2024) also spoke to this work with migrant clients, that it can be experienced as overwhelming, that it can feel like the work is very removed from policy so again to recognise one can't do it all but to just 'do something', work out what is possible to do in one's role.

5.7 Reflecting on a choice to leave

Through this inquiry, I intentionally reconnected with a highly regarded former colleague. I had a very insightful chat with her coming to understand she felt that the cost to her wellbeing of staying for her was too much. How she chose to leave, having forged a new pathway that is more congruent with her values and belief systems. Having this conversation meant a lot to me, she provided a safe space to speak freely, asked very insightful questions about what I needed, what would bring congruence for

me - landscape of identity questioning (Mate et al., 2024). Speaking to her reframed a choice to leave can be an agentic choice, an act of self-care. She also provided hope that alternative congruent career pathways are possible. This conversation gave me opportunities to engage with what I now recognise as landscape of action questioning (Mate et al., 2024), confirming that I am not yet at a point where choosing to leave feels right for me, I am choosing to stay, for now. This inquiry has enabled me to begin the reauthoring of a more agentic narrative.

5.8 Quiet Quitters and The Great Resignation

Anecdotally I have heard of other people also making the decision to leave. While there is always going to be some turnover of staff, this is an area that warrants further research to identify if there is a retention issue and if so, what are the causes? Also wondering if there is any link with the wider changing in attitudes to work, depicted as quiet quitters and the great resignation post-Covid trends as pictured in figure 5.4 below (Hughes, 2024)?
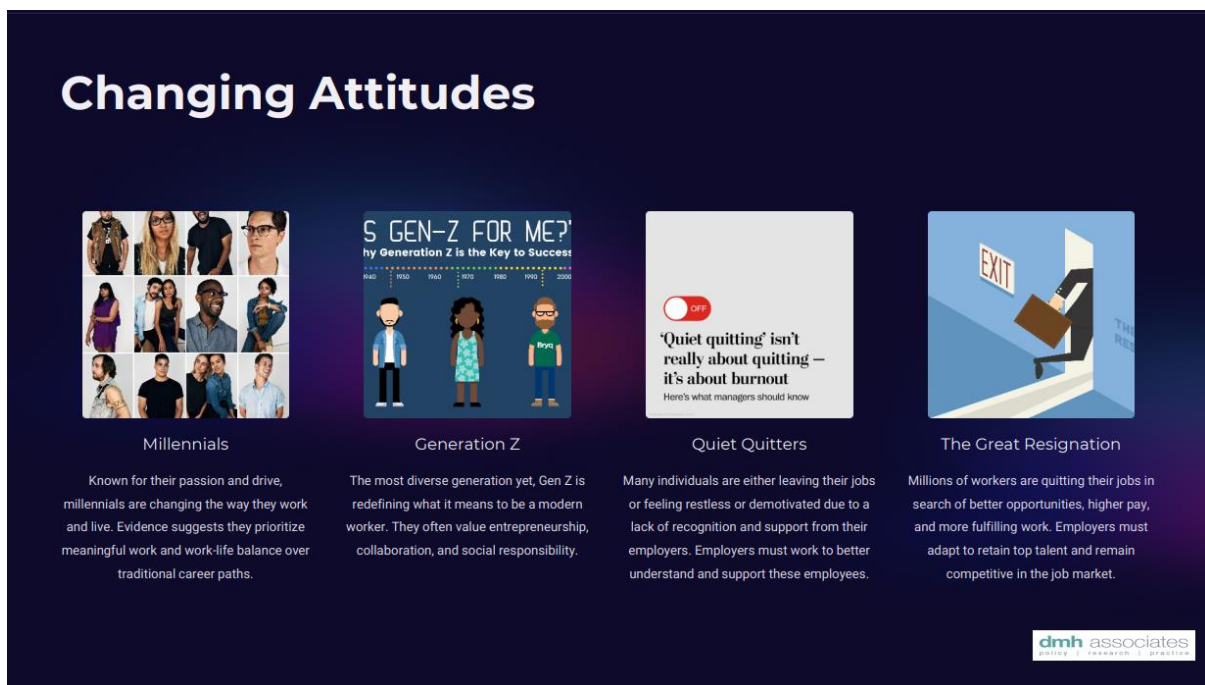

Figure 5.4 Changing attitudes to work (Hughes, 2024)

Formica and Sfodera (2022) explain quiet quitters are people who do stay in their job but do not intend to go above and beyond their role, highest numbers are in Gen Z

and young Millennials. They identify the drivers as perceiving a lack of: (a) feeling cared about, (b) opportunities to learn and grow, and (c) connection with the organization's purpose. The Great Resignation originated in reference to the millions of Americans who voluntarily quit their jobs during Covid, with numbers highest amongst accommodation and food service workers. The drivers here on top of low pay issues are: (a) failure to recognise performance and feeling disrespected, (b) toxic culture, and (c) professional fulfilment and meaningfulness of work. Covid acted as a catalyst for accelerating trends that already existed. Formica and Sfodera (2022) identify that the sources of dissatisfaction for both groups coalesces around needs, values, and purpose that enhances wellbeing and satisfaction. Employers then need to look beyond salary as being the main driver for work and pay attention to the drivers which related more to values and opportunities for development and fulfilment.

Engaging with these insights from these phenomena and the drivers behind them has brought my awareness to many of these drivers being important to me including personal fulfilment and meaningfulness and also names others that may have been more hidden to me such as feeling cared about and more fundamentally the work being recognised and valued. Using the narrative career approaches analysis, these insights provide further 'thickening' of my story (McMahon at al, 2012) as to why I was considering leaving the role. This analysis provides further insight into the possibilities of using narrative career approaches when working with clients who are questioning whether to stay or go in their current role.

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter explored my experiences in reconnecting with self-care as an important theme for me in a further reauthoring of my career narrative towards a more agentic hopeful one. Engagement with constructs of compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction as well as the more recent phenomena of quiet quitters and the great resignation all provided a 'thickening' (McMahon et al., 2012) of my story, bringing awareness to the high importance I place on working congruently with my values, and being seen and valued is also important to me. A very insightful conversation with a colleague who has chosen to leave also reframed that choice as an act of self-care.

Chapter 6

Connectedness and collaboration in practice

6.1 Introduction

Connectedness has been described as a multidimensional construct that has intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions and has been linked to terms such as belongingness, and attachment to something bigger than oneself (family/community/spiritual domain) (McMahon et al., 2012). Often understood as relatedness, it is integrally related to wellbeing and identity construction. Key elements include closeness, relatedness, relationship and interdependence (McMahon et al., 2012). It is one of the key constructs identified by McMahon et al. (2012) in the storytelling narrative career counselling approach and looking at my analysis through this lens has made visible that experiencing connectedness is integral to my own well-being and identity construction.

6.2 Lessening connectedness with guidance team

Through this storytelling narrative lens, I've come to recognise that I have been experiencing less connectedness in my role which does have impacts as outlined previously including contributing to compassion fatigue. AGA (2020) outlined the centrality of team in their vision for FET guidance services which I experienced as a key strength of our services, having worked within a guidance team for many years. Restructuring of the guidance service within wider FET restructuring has resulted in a more dispersed service and fragmented service as referenced by Hearne et al. (2022). The lack of opportunities to meet as a guidance team has also had an impact, in my experience, with regard to planning co-ordinated responses to the Ukrainian cohort, collaborate on resources development and I would argue impacted negatively on visibility of the guidance service.

6.3 Supporting professional identity transformations

Brimrose & Brown (2019) speak to the need for careers practitioners to adapt their practices and acquire new skills and competences to support clients with navigating significant transformations including increased migration, rapid technological changes and new forms of employment.   These changes continue to significantly impact on career guidance counsellor processes and practices with multi-dimensional and cumulative impacts on professional identity. Five themes emerged from practitioner participants on an online learning course: learning from others, the role of the community of interest, shifting professional identities, feelings of isolation, and the effects on organisations (p.766) all of which resonate strongly for me, which I have come to know about my professional identity through this narrative inquiry.

A further 'thickening' of my narrative in landscape of identity (Mate et al., 2024), bringing to light a hidden narrative of loneliness and understanding that this is a consequence of experiencing less connectedness. They also identified evidence of the development of professional identity through storytelling and sensemaking narratives with conversations amongst practitioners switching between three perspectives of 'skill development, the structures and contexts within which skills are developed, and careers (narratives) and identities' (Brimorse & Brown, 2019, p.766). As figure 6.1 below illustrates. work identities are produced through 'a mix of personal agency, interaction with others, and existing social norms and discourses, and these factors interact in a dynamic and iterative way' (Brimorse & Brown, 2019, p.766).
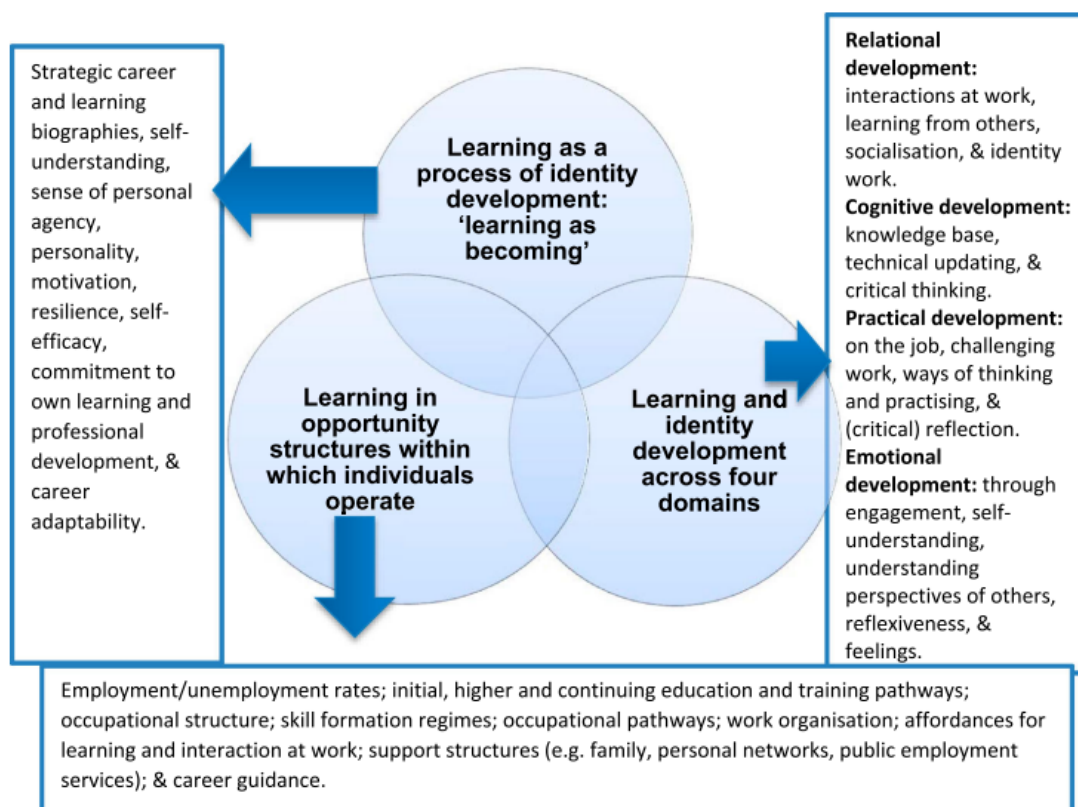
Figure 6.1 Key factors influencing learning and identity development at work (Brimrose & Brown, 2019)

6.4 Creating new team

Reflecting on the experience of moving from a city-based guidance team service to being the sole guidance counsellor in a large rural area was like starting a new job around ten years ago. I was challenged initially how to fit in with this new team as the sole guidance counsellor. Reflecting back over my prior career, I reconnected with positive experiences from previous roles in Partnership companies where I was in the only guidance related role on the team. I am now linking this back to Landscape of Identity exploration (Mate et al., 2024) reconnecting with positive stories and my strengths to reauthor to a more agentic narrative of the possibilities of integrating in this new team. Key to this was a collaborative style of working, building up relationships with new colleagues and also creating wider networks and contacts to support clients. Reflecting on my experience now I would also identify positives of being integrated into the broader FET team with giving the guidance service more

visibility and being based in centres gives more opportunities to meet learners and tutors and other staff members.

6.5 Online connectedness

Brimrose & Brown (2019) also spoke to the potential for online learning courses providing 'facilitated social learning spaces' (p. 768) to help practitioners reflect individually and collectively upon the effects of transformation including organisational change on their professional identities. And provided a community of learners embedded experience. As mentioned previously the closure of NCGE in 2022 has meant the loss of 'places' and 'spaces' for practitioners to meet online to explore issues affecting identity, access training and development of resources. ETBI have begun to host some online CPD, and the AGA has also hosted online CPD in response to practitioner members' needs.

I have also sought out additional ways to connect virtually with colleagues and LinkedIn has been one such online space which I have found gives me a sense of connectedness with the guidance community virtually. It is great to connect with leaders in the guidance field here and internationally including Deirdre Hughes and Liane Hambly. The figure below shows a post from Liane asking a very timely questions about what makes guidance roles hotter or cooler which I engaged with. Also, it is a great network to hear about CPD opportunities and information for clients. Finally, I have increased my own posting as a way to share my practice, information and posts of interest.
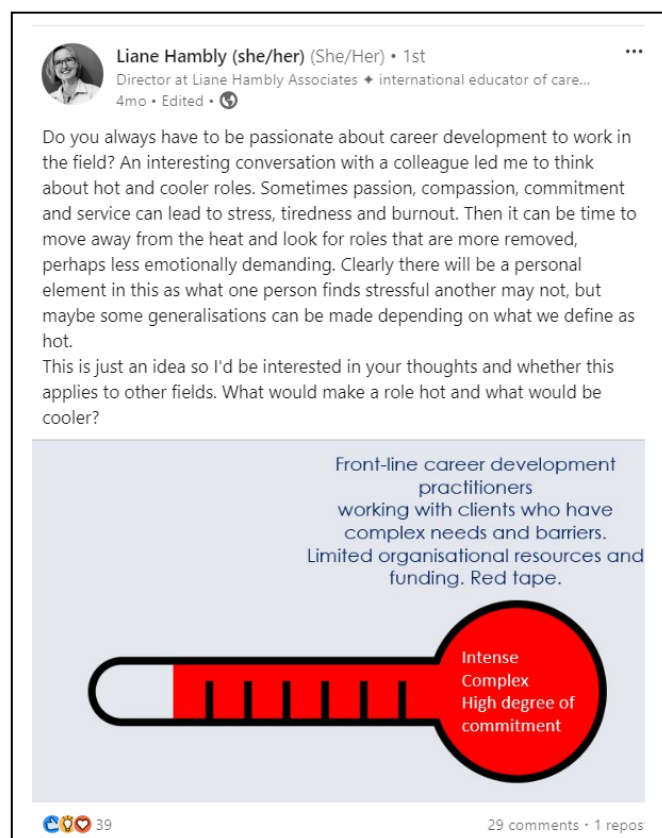

Figure 6.2 Liane Hambly LinkedIn (2024)

6.6 In-person connectedness

As mentioned in the methodology chapter I chose conversations as one of my methods ranging from individual conversations with colleagues, some new and others of my vintage. I have found these conversations have increased my sense of connectedness with colleagues working in similar environments whilst also being able to support each other with queries. I learnt from one colleague that they have set up a community of practice with guidance and non-guidance colleagues with an external facilitator. I was aware as mentioned earlier that my world had shrunk as I struggled to get through the day-to-day, so I set a deliberate intention and took action to renew connections and make new connections with colleagues which I have acted on as part of a more agentic reauthoring (Mates et al, 2024). Also linked to my method I have prioritised attending the IGC conference as well as branch meetings which also offer access to CPD opportunities as well as taking the mood of what's currently going on in the field of guidance counselling. Similarly with the AGA, attending our AGM, regional meetings and online CPD workshops.

Neary (2014) writes to the role of postgraduate study in generating a:

> perceived enhancement in professional identity through exposure to theory, policy and opportunities for reflection, thus contributing to more confident and empowered practitioners (Neary, 2019, p. 67).

This has been my experience of doing this narrative inquiry, it has enabled me to reauthor to a more hopeful, agentic career narrative which is empowering me in my practice. The connectedness with staff, supervisor and fellow learners on the Masters has been significant in this reauthoring process. Others are noticing this change in me too, a colleague mentioned after a recent team meeting that she observed a greater confidence in how I spoke to a particular issue that arose during the meeting.

The launch of the National Lifelong Guidance Strategy 2024 – 2030 (Department of Education, 2023a) is a very significant development in the field of guidance and I await with interest to see how it is implemented and what further identity transformations will be required and how practitioners will be supported in making these transformations.

I had the opportunity to attend the inaugural networking event for the strategy by the National Policy Group in May which was attended by representatives of stakeholders from all sectors connected to lifelong guidance. There were presentations from the five Department representatives on their contribution to lifelong guidance. Presentations were also given by exemplars in the field of lifelong guidance. There were also roundtable discussions for attendees to engage with the short-term actions of the strategic plan and the opportunity to give feedback on recommendations on their implementation. There was a real sense for me of being connected to, feeling part of the larger guidance counselling tribe at this event and hope for what is to emerge, resonating with Davis's quote in figure 6.3 below.

Figure 6.3 Quote from Angela Y. Davis (Source:
https://quotefancy.com/quote/1973166/Angela-Y-Davis-It-is-in-collectivities-that-we-find-reservoirs-of-hope-and-optimism)

6.7 Collaborative Practice and making it visible

Collaboration is mentioned regularly as being effective in responding to working in more complex environments. O'Toole (2024) spoke of the importance of practitioners collaborating and co-creating responses in a trauma informed approach. Also, collaboration between professionals and services across sectors and explore possibilities to co-create interventions/actions with active participation and input from clients and staff who will ultimately use and benefit from the action or intervention. Create opportunities for people to experience agency, O'Toole (2024) argues that

there is no wellbeing without a sense of agency. Sultana (2008) speaks in figure 6.4 above about the synergy that can result from collaboration which can trigger new ideas, initiatives as well as new ways of doing things.
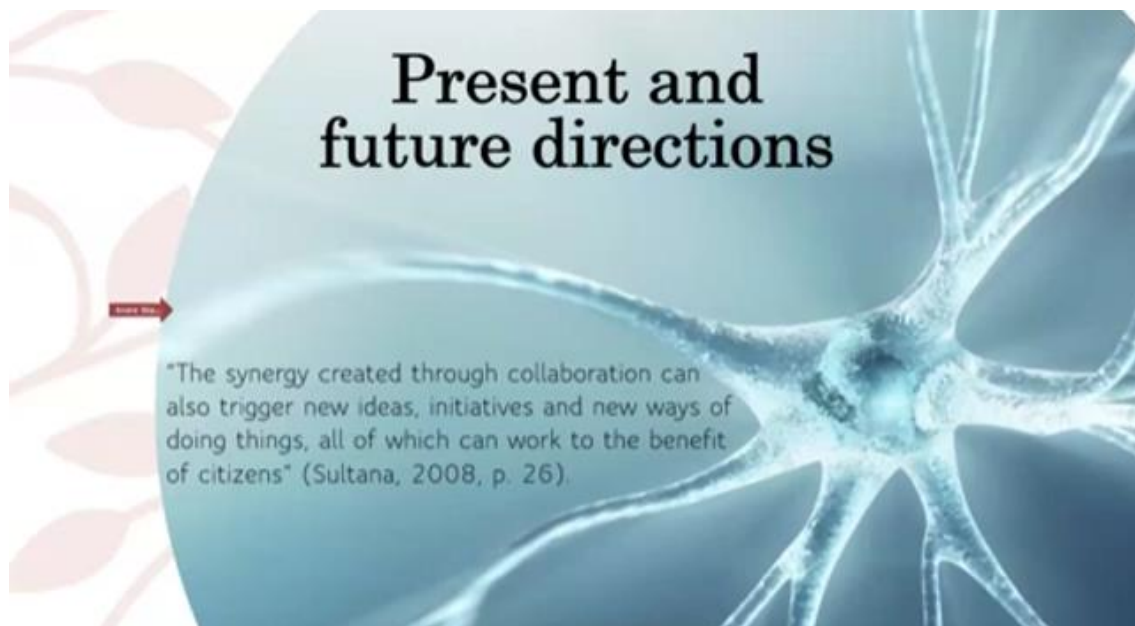
Figure 6.4   Synergy through collaboration (National Institute for Career Education and Counselling, 2024)

6.8 Collaborative responses in working with migrant clients

In reviewing how to respond effectively to working with migrant clients, collaboration is happening in a number of ways and contexts:

- Working with my Guidance Information Officer colleague to create a useful links resource initially developed for newly arrived Ukrainian clients to help them orientate to Ireland's education, training and qualifications recognition systems. There is also information on free online courses, library resources and organisations including Irish Refugee Council. This document is reviewed regularly to add in any new information. Available in both English and Ukrainian versions, we have found emailing it works best for recipients to use the clickable links.

- I deliver online group information sessions for newly arrived Ukrainian clients when needed which guides participants through many of the links in the useful

links resource whilst also linking clients with the guidance and information service. Stakeholders have attended these sessions also to upskill in rights and entitlements for cohorts that they work with.

-   As the number of International Protection Applicants arriving is increasing it is not feasible to meet everybody individually initially, so I have adapted by collaborating with the resource worker colleague to co-deliver group information sessions in the FET centre. These sessions are also evolving with a community youth group staff member attending the most recent one to upskill herself and also to let participants know about the meeting space, groups and support available through her service. A useful links resource has also been co-created with my Information Officer colleague tailored to the rights and entitlements of this cohort. This document has also been shared with guidance colleagues in other ETBs.

6.9 Collaboration to create innovative person-centred learner pathways for young male clients seeking apprenticeships

Sultana (2022) calls on guidance counsellors to not just work at individual level with clients, to also seek out opportunities to advocate and address structural barriers which will benefit more clients. Much research has been done on the impact of early school leaving and unemployment among young people including Robertson (2019) who links this cohort with experiencing poorer health outcomes and highlights the need for early intervention.   In my practice I had been noticing a trend over the last number of years of more young people presenting who had left school early, many mentioned they had disengaged during Covid times.

In the past year or so, a new cohort were presenting. A colleague in the apprenticeship services when going to an employer to register an apprentice discovered that the young male would not have enough Junior Certificate subjects passed to meet the entry requirements for apprenticeships. She referred this young male to me to see if there were options for him. The existing pathways were to either attend a full-time pre-apprenticeship course or seek Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Neither of

these pathways would work as this young man didn't meet the criteria for RPL and he was not available to attend a full-time course as he was working, nor did he wish to return to full-time education.

I spoke with the ETB resource worker, and we chatted through what might be possible. Supporting him to achieve a QQI Level 3 Award (equivalent to a Junior Certificate) on a part-time basis was identified as the pathway which would help him achieve the required qualification in the shorter time frame. He was able to use his two Junior Certificate subjects to get exemptions towards the QQI Level 3 award provided he completed his Award within 6 months due to time limits. There was also the challenge that some of the required components weren't available in the centre in this time frame so I made initial contacts around National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) online learning which would allow him to complete some components online with support from the resource worker and attend classes to complete the other required components.

His determination to do it in a tight time frame whilst working was very impressive and he achieved it and is now registered as an apprentice. A second young man was then referred, he was living in a different ETB geographical area, so I linked with the literacy staff member there to refer him and share our learning from working with the first young man. She was able to work with him and a tutor to develop a tailored learning plan which enabled him to complete his QQI L3 Award, again getting exemptions for some of his Junior Certificate subjects. He too has now achieved his L3 award and is registered as an apprentice. Speaking with both these young men during an evaluation exercise they mentioned that there are many more young men like us out there. To date 6 young men have gone or are on a similar pathway all linked to one FET centre.

To capture and share the learning I was invited to co-author a case study with the literacy colleague in the other ETB (Cleary and McSweeney, 2024). I also wrote up a case study for adult guidance counsellors which was shared in the AGA's newsletter. I have also circulated to school guidance counsellors through the IGC branch and

have had contact with the National Apprenticeship Office to suggest including this pathway on the apprenticeships website (www.apprenticeships.ie).

This collaborative approach speaks to this recommendation in the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2021):

> 'The adult guidance and information service and the adult literacy service within ETBs will play an important role in supporting and linking people to the supports needed. Ongoing guidance and information will be key to ensuring responsive and flexible learning pathways that meet people's current and future needs and ambitions' (Government of Ireland, 2021, p.58).

Undertaking this inquiry has enabled me to reclaim my agency and linking back to identify that an important driver for me is to be visible, I have sought out opportunities to make practice visible. This inquiry has given me the confidence to submit a practice paper on the collaborative practice outlined above to AONTAS for publication in their journal, *The Adult Learner 2024* (McSweeney, 2024), which also includes feedback from learners on their experiences. This also links for me with Hughes (2024) identification of the need for guidance practitioners to make evidence-based practice visible, which can help with making the case for guidance counselling with policy makers and funders.

6.10 Conclusion

This chapter focused on how the storytelling narrative counselling approach (McMahon et al., 2012) lens of analysis gave me new knowledge about the personal impact of experiencing less connectedness and the hidden narrative of loneliness was made visible, a further 'thickening' of my landscape of identity (Mate et al., 2024). Reconnecting with connectedness as being of high importance to me in my role and for my wellbeing. Using the lens of the NTIA approach I have outlined how I have taken intentional action to increase connectedness in my practice in a range of areas. And how the experience of connectedness is further strengthened through collaborative practice and the making visible of this practice through publication is valued by me.

Chapter 7

Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

I came to this inquiry having found myself at a crossroads in my career narrative as an experienced adult guidance counsellor working in the field for twenty years.   As outlined in the introduction, working in the FET sector which is undergoing rapid transformations and significant external events including the Ukraine war have required rapid transformations of my practice. Coming to the realisation that these rapid transformations culminating in working with increasing numbers of migrant learners with existing resources was taking a cumulative toll on me to the extent that I was actively considering if I could continue to stay in the role.   Finding myself questioning if I should leave a role, which had been highly congruent for me and one I assumed that I would always do, was distressing. This brought to the fore for me the need to inquire into these difficult experiences to support myself in getting further insights into these experiences and identify how I might sustain myself in my practice.

This is what brought me back to postgraduate research to the same University where I had completed my initial Higher Diploma qualification in adult guidance counselling some twenty years earlier with the hope that 'exposure to theory, policy and opportunities for reflection' would enable me to become a 'more confident and empowered practitioner' (Neary, 2019, p. 67). I chose narrative inquiry self-study as my methodology as 'narrative inquiry is first and foremost a way of understanding experience' (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000, p.20) and this brought awareness to the problematic stories I had constructed about my experiences in relational contexts to make meaning of those experiences. Narrative inquiry brought my awareness to the possibility of constructing alternative more hopeful narratives.

7.2 Analysis of themes emerging

In positioning myself as 'client' at a career's crossroads and in congruence with the narrative inquiry methodology I chose narrative career approaches as a framework of

analysis to identify themes emerging from my research. This framework drew on System Theory Framework (McMahon and Patton, 2016) which underpins many narrative career approaches, storytelling narrative career counselling approach (McMahon et al., 2012) and Narrative Therapy Informed Approach (Mate et al., 2024, p.8) and recognises that the emerging themes are dynamic and recursive (McMahon and Patton, 2016).

7.2.1 Changing context and its impact

Beginning to 'thicken' (Mate et al, 2024, p.14) my insight into understanding my problematic experiences in my practice, I engaged with the concept of identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011). This brought awareness of how having to rapidly adapt my practice from in-depth guidance counselling to more signposting and information provision to meet the increase in demand for the guidance service was negatively impacting on my professional identity, leading to feelings of inauthenticity. Engaging in this inquiry also brought attention to the concept of moral distress (Olcoń & Gulbas, 2021) which further thickened my understanding of the toll of having to work in this way with one of the most marginalised groups. This brought further knowledge of self, bringing to light a hidden narrative in me of hopelessness which runs completely counter to my belief in guidance counselling as hope and struggling with how can I offer hope when I am losing hope myself. Engaging with moral distress also brought a shift in my focus to structural barriers including lack of investment in additional guidance counselling resources having dual impact for client and practitioner, limiting my capacity to deliver a quality service.

7.2.2 Reconnecting with Social Justice

Engaging with moral capacity through this inquiry had also reconnected me with social justice as a core value in my work and the toll of having to adapt my practice in ways which run counter to my belief in adult guidance counselling as working in solidarity with clients. Through the System Theory Framework (McMahon and Patton, 2016) lens of analysis also bringing attention to the impact of working in an increasingly neoliberalised FET system. The NTIA lens through landscape of identity provided

space to reflect back on the origins of social justice in my life and connecting with the early days of my practice, a time where I felt my work was more congruent. Also reconnecting with Sultana who would have been influential in my working in adult guidance counselling through a social justice lens. Reconnecting with these experiences regrounded me by reconnecting with social justice in this way and also brought new knowledge about how to work with migrants in socially just ways including responding to broader anti-migrant narratives. These experiences have been significant in the reauthoring of my narrative towards hope and agency.

7.2.3. Recommitting to self-care

Through this inquiry I have come to awareness of the increasing toll of the recent rapid transformations of practice were taking on me and needing to re-connect with self-care in 'protecting and preserving yourself in the face of challenging work' (BACP, 2018). The BACP (2018) definition also speaks to 'making a conscious effort to do things that maintain, improve and repair your mental, physical and spiritual wellness'. Experiencing mindfulness practice again as part of group supervision on this course reconnected me with intentionally seeking out ways to bring mindfulness into my daily life as an intentional act of self-care. This created an agentic shift in prioritising self-care and intentionally seeking out CDP which gave further insight into my problematic experiences as compassion fatigue (Oberg et al., 2023) and also learning how self-care can help with flipping the switch to experiencing compassion satisfaction (Raday and Figley, 2007) in practice. New insights into self-care in 'high stakes' (Chant and Sundelin, 2022) work with migrant cohorts were also gained through learning about trauma wise care approach (Bath, 2015) as a way to work with clients without having to feel responsible for changing everything. Intentional connecting with a former colleague who had chosen to leave this work which reframed for me that choosing to leave can be an agentic act of self-care. Reconnecting with self-care brings movement to landscape of action (Mate et al., 2024) and further strengthens my narrative of hope and agency.

7.2.4. Connectedness and collaborative practice

Using the storytelling narrative career counselling lens (McMahon et al, 2012) brought attention to the importance of connectedness for me in my role. Engaging with this construct and the key factors influencing learning and identify development at work (Brimrose and Brown, 2019) brought to light a hidden narrative of increased isolation, a consequence of changing structures leading to lessening of connection with guidance colleagues. Using the NTIA lens of landscape of identity reconnected me with past positive experiences of being the sole guidance counsellor in other teams and reconnected me with strengths including a collaborative approach to agentically create new experiences of team with non-guidance FET colleagues. Further intentional connecting with the guidance counselling community was acted on to change this narrative of isolation through connecting with individual colleagues and attending IGC conference, AGA events as well as the recent inaugural networking event for the National Lifelong Guidance strategy where I experienced strong connectedness with the broader guidance counselling tribe. Being more active on LinkedIn also increased connectedness with the virtual guidance counselling community.

Engaging in collaborative practice with FET colleagues I experienced the 'synergy created through collaboration can also trigger new ideas, initiatives and new ways of doing things which can work to the benefit of citizens' (Sultana, 2008, p.26). This has led to co-creation of resources and approaches to working with migrant cohorts as well as innovating a person-centred pathway for young male early school leavers giving them access to apprenticeships. This has all further strengthened my narrative of hope and agency.

7.3 Limitations and strengths of the research

As mentioned in Chapter 2, a limitation of a narrative self-study approach to research is that is hard to argue for generalisability based on one person's experience. Research based on one person's experience in practice also has strengths including

what Hearne et al. (2022) describe as making a contribution to providing 'a richer and more nuanced interpretation of the contexts and issues' (Hearne et al., 2022, p.136).

Doing this research through narrative inquiry and using the lens of narrative therapy and guidance counselling theories together with System Theory Framework have given me personal experience of their effectiveness in engaging with career transition dilemmas. Through this inquiry I have also become more narrative 'competent' (McMahon et al, 2012) in using these approaches with clients which I have experienced as a more congruent way of working. Using this narrative inquiry approach has also brought about shifts in my understanding of how research is done, the value of experiential knowledge *my claim to knowledge is that I have changed my practice to sustain myself*.

7.4 Implications for practice

This inquiry of one practitioner's experience brings attention to the impacts on professional identity and wellbeing of having to make rapid transformations in response to working in changing structures and external chance events. This is likely to be an ongoing feature of work environments in the context of emerging issues including increasingly neoliberal work contexts, Artificial Intelligence and global warming impacts. Therefore, these issues are of relevance to the wider guidance counselling community. As is how to resource practitioners to manage these transitions effectively. This inquiry can offer some areas to consider including working congruently with values, attending to self-care and connectedness and working collaboratively. This inquiry also points to the need to provide 'places' and 'spaces' for experienced practitioners to reflect on their career and process career transition decisions. This inquiry also draws attention to structural issues such as investment in additional resources and CPD for practitioners.

The narrative theories used in this inquiry also point to a way of working with clients who also experience more complex work environments and possibly having to consider multiple career transitions through their lifetime. NTIA approach speaks to the:

development of a client's identity as a capable and resourceful career decision-maker and, as a result, provide them with a greater sense of agency in relation to an evolving career identity over the lifespan (Mate et al., 2024, p.8).

7.5 Recommendations for further research

As identified earlier, a limitation of this research is the inquiry was a self-study of one practitioner's experience. There is potential to extend this study with bigger cohorts of practitioners to identify if similar themes emerge and what additional themes might emerge from other practitioners' experience.   I encountered difficulty in finding research on moral distress in the field of guidance counselling which could also point to a further area for research. There is also potential to inquire further into what career adaptability skills are relevant in the emergence of increasing neoliberal work contexts for both practitioners and clients.

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