Second chances: Want to meet the needs of early school-leavers? Focus on their mental health

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of research carried out with early school-leavers in four Youthreach centres in the West of Ireland[1]. It offers progressive perspectives on links between early school leaving and mental health related issues. In particular the participants' stories reveal that their mainstream schooling experiences had a damaging effect on their mental health. The findings highlight the necessity for the creation of educational provisions that have 'care' and 'respect' as central concepts, and for Youthreach centres to be recognised as a viable and valid alternative to mainstream schooling.

Introduction

The dynamics of society have altered; mental health awareness has become more prevalent, with issues emerging for the education sector. This article examines issues using a fresh lens which provides new concepts, from which our current education system could be developed for all students. Findings are also relevant for those working with adult learners in further education and students within mainstream schooling. The successful educational progression of many learners will be dependent upon how effectively both academic and personal needs are met by those working within the sector. Educationalists need to be mindful of the necessity of forming caring and supportive environments to enable learners to successfully progress through the educational process.

Overview of the Youthreach programme

Youthreach is a recognised second chance, national response education programme, particularly targeted at young people aged between 15–20 years of age,

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1   This qualitative investigative study was undertaken for a Doctorate in Education Degree in NUIM (McHugh, 2014).

who have left mainstream schooling early. The programme has been in existence since 1988. It is funded by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and managed by the local Education and Training Boards (ETBs). There are 103 ETB Youthreach centres located around the country, mostly in disadvantaged areas (DES, 2010). In 2004, Youthreach centres became designated as 'Centres for Education' under the Education Act, 1998 (DES, 2004a), and as such are recognised in terms of the current legislation, such as the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 and Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) 2004. In 2006, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) piloted a SEN Initiative (SENI), based on a mentoring process, in twenty Youthreach centres nationally (Gordon, 2007). Presently, these are the only centres that receive the SENI funding on an annual basis.

Each centre is unique as it reflects the social, economic and cultural environment from which it operates. The pedagogical approach of Youthreach is more closely aligned to adult education than mainstream schooling. The focus is on the young person with an emphasis on recognising and rewarding achievement rather than reinforcing failure (Stokes, 2003). The process used is both learner-centred and learner-led and the programmes reflect the learners' needs, as is visible in adult education programmes. The learners-to-tutor ratio in centres is generally not greater than 9:1 and seven is the average number of teaching staff in a centre that caters for twenty-five students (DES, 2010). Students attending Youthreach are entitled to an age-related weekly training allowance. Their allowances are linked to attendance and in order for students to receive full payment they are required to be in attendance for 35 hours each week. In recent times there has been a sharp increase in students who are presenting to the centres with varying amounts of personal problems that they find difficult to cope with on a daily basis. This has become an ever increasing issue in the day-to-day operations of centres.

The centres offer a wide variety of nationally certified programmes to cater for the needs of the individual learners. The main objectives of Youthreach programmes are to prepare the young people for working life, with an emphasis on core skills and the ability to transfer these skills into a variety of work and life situations (DES, 1995). The emphasis is placed on personal development, such as improving self confidence and self-esteem. Based on recent figures by the Department of Education and Skills (2013a), there were 3,313 students enrolled in the national Youthreach programme in 2012. Originally, the Youthreach programme was designed around a two year programme, with two distinct phases:

the foundation phase and the progression phase. In 2010, new draft guidelines for Youthreach centres were issued by the DES which specified an extended four-phase plan and did not stipulate a two-year timeframe for a participant enrolling on the programme (DES, 2010).

The Youthreach programme is positioned within the Further Education (FE) sector of the educational system. The DES (2004b, p.21) states that FE embraces education and training which occurs after second level schooling but which is not part of the third level system. The most current presentation of the Irish Education System DES (2004b) visibly positions the FE sector between these two levels, but the sector is not clearly defined and the range of programmes on offer are not evident. In particular, the Youthreach programme is invisible in the overall context of our Irish education system. In Youthreach the students gain accreditations that are on par with the levels achievable in mainstream schooling. However, Youthreach is not considered as a core element of the education system and is not identified as an alternative education programme for students who leave post-primary school early. This is a major problem for Youthreach centres, there are limited progression opportunities available to Youthreach learners and thus it has inferior recognition as a result. The positive development work that is being done with the students in Youthreach is short-lived as there is no continuity of provision in place for those who leave the centres. These students can for a second time, feel marginalised and isolated within education. At present Youthreach students are competing with Leaving Certificate students for limited places on Post Leaving Certificate (PLCs) courses and some students are not eligible to apply to Vocational Training Opportunities Schemes (VTOS)[2] as they are under the age requirement of twenty-one. It is imperative that the FE sector has mechanisms in place to enable harmonious transitions between the various sections.

Mental Health and Young People

The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2012) predicts that by 2030 depression will be the main global health problem, with 20% of children and teenagers experiencing a disabling mental illness. Similarly, according to a European Commission report (2012b) mental health difficulties are considered to be one of the predominant health related problems among school children in the European Union. In today's society where young people are dealing with eco-

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2   VTOS is funded by the Department of Education and Skills. The Scheme is operated through the Education and Training Boards and provides a special range of courses designed to meet the education and training needs of unemployed people.

nomic deprivation, family difficulties, bullying, academic struggles and other stressors in their lives, it is more important than ever to consider mental health issues. Within the education sector the question must be asked as to whether there are enough resources dedicated to those who are experiencing difficult challenges in their lives. Governments have been slow to respond to the issues and nine years after the publication of the Department of Health and Children (DOHC) report (2006) *A Vision for Change* policy framework for mental health services, few provisions have been implemented. This is particularly significant in terms of early school-leavers as the risk factors for mental disorders are exacerbated by social exclusion, peer rejection, poverty, isolation and low levels of family support (WHO, 2003). Mental health issues have not to date been identified in research as a possible basis for early school-leaving. The term 'mental health' has only started to appear in educational research in the past six years.

Anecdotal evidence from the Youthreach sector would suggest that there has been a significant increase in recent years in the number of students enrolling on programmes who display symptoms of mental health related problems. The problems highlighted by various Youthreach coordinators include varying levels of depression; self-esteem and body image issues; aggression and anger management issues; anxiety; substance abuse; self-harm; relationship difficulty; lack of personal care and coping skills for dealing with life events. Students who leave mainstream schooling early have a difficult choice to make; they become detached from their peers and societal norms, their sense of identity is diminished and their mental health perturbed. These issues have significant implications for their mental health, both how they are judged by others and by themselves.

In society, discussions surrounding mental health are invariably considered in the negative and the term mental health is used to stigmatise people. However, mental health is a vital factor in every person's health and should be considered as important as their physical health. Mental wellness is not a consistent factor in any person's life and some issues can have a negative impact on their overall well-being. Many effects are hard to overcome, especially in the absence of support. This can be especially true for young students, who may not have a deep understanding of mental health or how to deal with particular issues that impact upon it. O'Brien's (2008) research on well-being and post-primary schooling clearly illustrates that the challenges faced by young people are ever increasing, and school systems need to respond to these issues as a matter of priority. She contends that emotional dimensions of education are equally as

important as academic elements and schools are prime settings for nurturing students' self-esteem and mental health. It is imperative that mental health issues become a key focus of education and training. A recent report by the HSE (2014) indicates that the current services that are available nationally for children and adolescents are not meeting the demand levels. Students who are currently waiting for over a year for professional help need to feel supported.

The emphasis on mental health is essential to understanding the phenomenon of early school-leaving and should be considered through a broader lens than a sociological approach, a lens that incorporates a psychological perspective. This is crucial now more than ever as market-driven ideals come to dominate the field of education. We cannot develop healthy and well-rounded young people if we solely focus on the outputs of education and forget about the processes involved.

Care as a core concept within education

A contemporary notion of care in education is evident in the recent publication *'New Managerialism in Education'* by Lynch, Grummell and Devine (2012). This book presents the changing landscape of the Irish education system. It highlights that education is now more readily defined by a business model than that of a caring profession and is strongly propelled by neo-liberalism. The education system has adopted a market driven ideology where education has become a measurable commodity that is based on performance indicators and management. The impact of such marketisation of education is clearly illustrated by Lynch *et al.* (2012, p. 199) as they describe the issue of "a conflict of values regarding the governance and purpose of education and the role of relational beings within this process". The focus on measurable outputs means that there is limited focus on inputs or process and the student gets lost in the system; they are not regarded as important and only the measurable outputs are of significance. This type of education system breeds competitiveness and breaks down solidarity as students and schools are continually measured and appraised against each other. In essence, it is simple economics, education is becoming a commodity that can be bought and sold and those with the ability to pay will inevitably succeed, which will lead to rising inequality. This is a foremost concern, particularly for students with limited financial means: what will become of them if they do not have the resources to progress? Presently, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who have succeeded in mainstream education have been posed with new obstacles that hinder their progression, by the removal of free third level tuition fees. This book provides a clear view as to

why the voices of those on the margins need to be presented and heard, as currently they are being drowned out by an economic-driven education system. Lynch *et al.* (2012) strongly contends that a focus on love, care and solidarity, as opposed to competition and self-interest, is vital for the well-being of society. The research of Lynch *et al.* (2012) delivers a compelling theory on the importance of care within education, highlighting that students are relational beings who need to learn to care and be part of a caring society that recognises and respects them.

The notion of care in education is also imbued in the works of Noddings (1995). She emphasises that caring "is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling that makes people kind and likable" nor does she consider it to be "anti-intellectual" but rather an ideal of education that would "demonstrate respect for the full range of human talents" (Noddings, 1995, p. 676). Noddings' approach to care in education is 'organic' in form; she implies that good mental health arises when the overall conditions are right. If a school has an overall ethos and practice that respects the full array of human talents, good mental health is only one of the beneficial outcomes. The importance of being cared for also resonates with the work of Lynch and Baker (2005): focusing on the affective domain, the work discusses the significance of love, care and solidarity becoming an integrated part of the educational experience. The authors consider the importance of creating caring environments and teaching young people to become more caring and relational beings. Additionally, Lynch (2008) asserts that it is vitally important to recognise all human potential in education, not just academic, and acknowledge the diversity of human capabilities. In an ideal scenario all human capabilities would be respected and education would be much more than economic prosperity, it would involve social inclusion, personal fulfilment and better health. This idea should encompass the concept of recognising Youthreach programmes and FE in general as a viable alternative to mainstream. A system where a student's path is based on their requirements, and not just viewed as a second best alternative to the mainstream schooling structure, all of which would have a more positive effect on student well-being.

Early school-leavers becoming somebody without school
The school setting is the main outlet for students to form their identity. Reay (2004) indicates that students from lower socio-economic groupings have to lose a part of 'who they are' if they want to be academically successful as they have to conform to the ideals of the dominant group. Although their identity formation may be affected in school, their decision to leave will have a criti-

cal impact on their identity. Early school-leaving creates a crisis in relation to a young person's identity. They will be looked upon differently in the eyes of their peers and by society in general. They will be removed from the main route to occupational prospects. Even if school was particularly difficult for the student, or if they felt they could not succeed, they are suddenly alone without a future plan or daily structure. Depending on what has led to their decision to leave school they will no doubt be dealing with mental distress in terms of their identity, both who are they now and who they will become. Much of the distress can lead to various mental health related issues. Their issue as an early school-leaver will be trying to form a different identity, ultimately an identity which will deliver acceptance. Smyth and Hattam (2004) define this as 'becoming somebody without school'. They utilise Wexler's (1992) 'becoming somebody' as a means of presenting the process of identity formation that young people go through when they leave school early. Wexler (1992) suggests that the struggle of the young person to form an identity is not that they become nobody, but is a struggle in order to be 'somebody'. If this is the case, there can be greater pressure on an early school-leaver to succeed and this can be difficult as they have left the main route to both identity and prosperity. Struggling with trying to become someone and having limited options can impact negatively on the young person. Those who join Youthreach programmes struggle with identity issues as they continue their education without the sense of normality that is associated with mainstream schooling.

Ireland is lagging behind in its approach to identifying mental health as a major determining factor of early school-leaving. Currently, the government budget spending on mental health is 3% less than the recommended 8.2% (Oireachtas, 2012). Although in the DOHC report (2006) *A Vision for Change,* schools were recognised as the ideal setting for the promotion of mental health, there are still no specific compulsory measures in place. However, O'Brien's (2008) study on wellbeing and capabilities gives useful theoretical insight for understanding the issues of mental health and the importance of inclusion within educational discourse. The works of O'Brien, Noddings, Lynch and Baker are examples of the type of progressive research and approaches that is needed within education and is a move towards creating a more integrated caring environment. Also, in 2013 the DES launched guidelines for post-primary schools for mental health promotion and suicide prevention (DES, 2013b). These guidelines offer schools a method of approaching mental health through a whole school process. However, it may be difficult for schools to fit these methods into their programmes. At senior level the programmes would be additional to the exam-

inable subjects and time constraints may give health promotion less importance than the compulsory subjects. Reports by the HSE (2014) indicate that the current services that are available nationally for children and adolescents are not meeting the demand levels. There needs to be a community-wide, integrated approach to dealing with mental health issues and schools and centres need to become part of the response plan. Curriculum reform and school system structures need to change in order to deal effectively with mental health issues. Students who are currently waiting for over a year for professional help need to feel supported and schools and centres are ideal spaces for providing such needed assistance.

The research findings

This research was a small-scale, qualitative investigation used to explore the participants' educational experience and perspectives of early school leaving. In 2013, forty participants partook in an arts-based method of participant collage creation and eleven of those participated in extended individual interviews. The findings in this research are powerful expressions by the participants and provide rich insights into the experiences of early school-leavers as they endeavour to progress their education through the Youthreach programme. The key findings are based on the themes of care, respect and recognition. Overviews of the research findings are presented using three significant categories.

Mainstream unrest

All of the participants had difficulty in second level school and many had challenging primary school experiences. Bullying was highlighted as a major feature of the participants' everyday experiences of school. The bullying contained physical, psychological and racial elements which had a detrimental impact on the participants' well-being. Sandra said that "it makes you a different person… you are just so vulnerable" and Jodie claimed that it has made her aggressive. It is evident from the findings that being bullied created many knock-on effects of absenteeism, skipping classes, missing out on schoolwork to ultimately deciding to leave school.

The participants stated that they did not receive enough attention in school, equating this with an absence of care in schools. They were often 'bored' as a result and ended up getting into trouble as they did not have their work completed. Jodie maintained that teachers were not interested in her, "they have a schedule, and they know what they have to do, and they do that to get their money out of the day and like they don't care if you understand or not". Jodie

identified this as her reason for leaving school early. Sandra felt that teachers should have had more compassion and understanding for students, "teachers should ask them the reasons…they are in a certain mood or why they didn't do something…instead of saying you are on detention, you didn't do your homework". Sandra maintained that if the schools had a more caring environment she may have been able to stay on at school. Brian, felt constantly stressed about school and stated that he was not cared for in school or given the chance to show his true self.

The participants highlighted that their own personal issues and mental health problems made school life difficult. Jodie and Sandra claimed that the stress at home was one of the main reasons they couldn't deal with school life and the everyday turmoil of having teachers give out to them. Many of the participants stated that they found it difficult to mix their schoolwork with their home environment and were unable to keep up with homework. Similarly, Cian stated that his past attributes to his current state of mind "it would sort of screw you up…I have a really short temper…" Three participants disclosed that they considered suicide as a means of escaping their unrest. The findings clearly showed that the participants did not feel supported within mainstream school, their issues were not prioritised or understood and a result they were unable to form any meaningful attachment to the school environment.

Last chance – Youthreach as an alternative

There is a sense that mainstream school was too strict and standardised for the participants, they found the rules and regulations stifling and that everyone had to conform and be the same. Cian referred to this as being 'treated like robots' and being 'forced to do work'. Youthreach became an inviting option that was more tailored to their individual needs. Many of the participants revealed that the positive relationships between the students and the tutors were fundamental to their sense of ease within the Youthreach setting. Neven identified "the fact that you are able to go to class and call the teacher by their first name" as of notable importance to him, as he "can relate to them on a one to one level" and that "everyone is treated the same" in Youthreach. Similarly, many other participants provided notable accounts of how they felt accepted and respected within Youthreach and did not feel that they were being judged or compared to others within the centres. Laura claimed that it was 'nice and homely'. All of the participants felt that they were supported within the programme, for Sandra "it is nice to know that someone cares…" and for Jodie, Neven and Elaine it was important to know that the staff "don't judge" and "just help you".

Missing out on being 'normal'

All of the participants in this study have left mainstream education: no longer following the standard educational route. For many, there is a sense of regret about not feeling able to stay on in school; depicting how they have lost some normality as a result and no longer feel affiliated to their school going peers. The consistent use of the term 'normal' school is interesting as it implies that in some way that Youthreach is 'abnormal'. The participants revealed that their own positive impression of Youthreach was undermined by the perceived negative view from the general public about the programme. The participants painted a rather grim picture in describing how they believed that the general public portrayed the centres, they used words like: "gangsters", "junkies", "down and outs", "gobshites", "pure wasters" "hooligans", and a place for "stupid people or where Travellers go". It appears that the participants' contentment with the Youthreach programme is rather notional and contained within a cocoon. This creates a major life contradiction for the participants which intensifies their mental health issues and makes it more difficult for them to progress.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Mental health issues lead to negative effects for the individual and society. Understanding the causes of mental ill health in young people is therefore essential in developing effective preventive systems and programmes. Foremost, this research demonstrates the importance of investigating mental health issues as a possible link to early school-leaving. Also, it highlights that the decision to leave school can exacerbate mental health problems as the students become isolated from their peers and socially disadvantaged (Smyth and Hattam, 2004). This research assists in the development of the current literature in relation to reasons for early school-leaving. It incorporates mental health into the educational conversation in order to express the critical need to wholly integrate mental health policies (DES, 2013b) into the education system. Young people need to be informed about mental health; they need to know how to deal with problems, what supports are available and that they should not feel afraid or stigmatised about seeking help. The negative culture surrounding mental health needs to be changed.

Youthreach coordinators in the Western Area Network indicated that they have witnessed a considerable shift in the nature of their duties; with a large proportion of each day being spent on mental health related issues. This has been particularly challenging for many of them who claim that they are trained as teachers and do not have expertise in the area of mental health, and especially

to the level that is now required within centres. Many indicated that they have taken the initiative to up-skill in the areas of suicide prevention and frontline counselling. It is clear that specific training is needed by all staff members working in centres. There is a need for a holistic approach to dealing with mental health issues and it cannot be achieved by a select few who carry out the mandatory social development programmes. There needs to be a community-wide, integrated approach to dealing with mental health issues, and education centres and schools are ideal spaces to form part of the response plan. An evaluation of the SENI mentoring process, operational in twenty centres for the past nine years, suggests that it is very successful. The research (Gordon, 2013) indicates that the learners are more self-aware and better able to manage emotions and to seek help. This highlights the need for the implementation of the SENI initiative across all centres as those students not attending these particular centres are at a discernible disadvantage. Mental health promotion should be regarded as one of the core functions and priorities of all education programmes. NEPS have responded to this by piloting a soft-skills framework in six centres in County Meath (Gordon, 2011). This type of holistic approach is what is needed to help focus on key concerns of low self-esteem, depression, anger management and suicidal ideation.

These elements need to become an integral part of the daily timetables and be recognised as such; by granting dedicated teaching hours to these areas. Although, the aim of the programme is to prepare students for working life and certification, it seems pointless focusing on credentials and priming students for assessment and participation in the workforce when they are trying to deal with such challenging life situations. As Lynch (2008) indicates, there is need to focus on the core issues first before we can start thinking about academic content. This would be in keeping with the vision and ethos of FE, where the development of the person as a whole, is paramount. There is an urgent need for greater funding to be dedicated to soft-skills development within centres.

Currently, student cases are primarily dealt with in an ad-hoc manner and that there are no precise guidelines in place. Although each student's case is different, it would be beneficial for staff to have clear guidelines and procedures in place. The development of a mental health policy and procedural guidelines may go some way toward creating a consistent approach that could be adopted across all education programmes. This would help to ensure that no errors are made in dealing with the mental health of the vulnerable students who attend the programmes. It would also be particularly important for the staff members'

own sense of wellbeing, by being able to feel reassured that they followed the best course of action available and that they have helped the students to the best of their ability. The mental wellbeing of those who are dealing with mental health related problems is also an important consideration. There is a need for adequate supports to be in place, not only for the programme participants, but also for those who are dealing with the mental health related issues on a daily basis.

As presented by Noddings (1995) and Lynch (2008) care needs to become an essential element within education. Care must be enabled in education so that students can form attachments, and feel like they belong. We need to care for those who could be regarded as some of society's most vulnerable people. They need support, resources and progression opportunities. Overall, we should be striving for what is best for the young people so that they can participate fully in society and that they can reach their full potential. We as educators need to reconsider the purpose of schooling, and provide a more holistic educational experience, in order that students can become more caring individuals within society and have a sense of solidarity (Lynch and Baker, 2005). There is an urgent need for adequate tracking systems to be put in place, where young people can be monitored and supported after leaving school or other programmes. Currently, there is no way of knowing whether the young people that join the Youthreach centres have the greatest needs in relation to mental health and social development or if there are others who are left on the margins who are similar or in greater need of care and support. We should be greatly concerned for those who leave school and do not take part in any employment or training programmes. These young people are our adults of tomorrow, they need continually support and guidance. It is clear that policy makers, government and educationalists need to move forward and create learning environments that will make a real difference to society's most vulnerable groups. Finally, no learner should feel like a failure or have diminished well-being because the school system did not suit their needs. The Youthreach programmes deserve to be recognised as viable alternative to mainstream education.

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