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Recognition, Relationality and Wellbeing Amongst Youthreach Education Staff

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ABSTRACT: Wellbeing in education has become a priority issue internationally, yet the support of the staff working in education often remains limited. This article explores the unique contribution of the Youthreach early school leaving programme in Ireland in supporting positive learning outcomes for its learners. We contend that the person-centred approach, caring ethos and relational pedagogy used by Youthreach staff to re-engage young people is a vital part of learning. However, this person-centred relational pedagogy is not recognised by the education system, as evidenced by the significantly lower levels of recognition and resources held by the sector, and more challenging work and temporal conditions experienced by Youthreach staff than their colleagues in other education and youthwork sectors. This lack of recognition and resourcing is indicative of a broader misrespect for person-centred approaches in education, which has profound implications for learners already marginalised by the mainstream education system and for the wellbeing of staff who work with them.

Keywords: recognition, relationality, wellbeing, Youthreach, early school leaving

1. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the role of the Youthreach early school leavers service in the Republic of Ireland, which provides young people with positive learning experiences, personal development, vocational skills and educational qualifications. Similar to other early school leaving initiatives internationally (Brown *et al*., 2025; Cederberg and Hartsmar, 2013; Ross and Leathwood, 2013), Youthreach is a small programme amidst the larger Further Education and Training (FET) and the second level schooling sectors, provided in 100 centres nationally with over 1000 teaching staff and 6800 learners. Although the vital role of staff in supporting students in Youthreach is well-recognised in existing

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research (Gordon, 2017; Smyth *et al.*, 2019), their working conditions and wellbeing are aspects which have been neglected by researchers and national education agencies alike. This article examines the working conditions and wellbeing of Youthreach staff, analysing this in light of the systemic and temporal challenges facing Youthreach as a sector. The exploration is framed in an analysis of the type of recognition, respect and resourcing of different groupings of Youthreach staff from the perspective of theories of relational pedagogy, critical pedagogy and wellbeing.

2. Overview of Youthreach Programme

Youthreach was introduced in 1988 as the Irish government's response to early school leaving, providing a two-year programme of integrated education, training and work experience (DES, 2015). Participation is voluntary and is open to early school leavers between 15 and 20 years who are unemployed and without qualifications or vocational training (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science [DFHERIS], 2019). The programme has a strong emphasis on personal development and relationships, with an expansive view of learning that seeks to enhance people's core skills, supporting social and vocational learning, and allowing greater autonomy and agency to learners than typifies the school sector. Youthreach offers one of the few alternative education options in Ireland for young people outside of formal schooling. Youthreach is distinctive in the wider Further Education and Training system, working with

> children and young people who are, for the most part, the same age as the students in the upper part of secondary schooling. However, by being located in a Further Education and Training programme, these learners are not included in the service brief of most of the agencies and sections of the Department [of Education] that support mainstream [schooling]. (National Educational Psychological Service [NEPS], 2017, p. 6)

This unusual position of Youthreach – which include working with many younger learners of school-going age but located in the FET system – has significant implication for its staff and learners, especially in terms of working between the differing priorities and logics of the schooling and FET systems, as this article explores.

Reflecting this dual logic, Youthreach staff occupy two distinctive categories, i) Resource Person or Assistant Coordinator who manage the service, and ii) Teaching staff on part- or full-time contracts (as well as a small number of admin and other roles) (CHL, 2006; Smyth *et al.*, 2019, p. 88). These staff come through two different tracks – those on Teacher contracts, many of whom have trained and qualified as teachers in second-level schools before moving to Youthreach (with set working conditions), and those on Resource Person/ Assistant Coordinator contracts who come through diverse employment,

youthwork or community tracks to join Youthreach. Those in Resource Worker/Assistant Coordinator roles are more similar to youth workers (Coburn, 2010) in the multifaceted nature of their role definition, which includes working 'in a flexible manner that may include evenings and other times, in accordance with service needs' (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2008, p. 80). These distinctive backgrounds and positioning of staff have a significant impact on staff working conditions and wellbeing, as becomes apparent through this article.

3. Relational Engagement and Border Pedagogy

Smyth et al. identify the distinctive elements of Youthreach education in its learner-centred and responsive nature, small group size, wrap-around supports, vocational qualifications and progression, and focus on lifeskills (2019, pp. 100–102). The emphasis on holistic supports, personal development, and a learner-centred approach is similar to the ethos of cognate areas of community education and youthwork (Coburn, 2010; Davies, 2015). Youthreach's pedagogy is based on a relational approach where staff connect with young people 'trying to understand where they are coming from, managing their own reactions carefully, modelling emotional regulation, avoiding power struggles and being careful not to reinforce negative internal working models' (Gordon, 2017, p. 4).

This relational approach is key in building learners' wellbeing, with previous research documenting how Youthreach learners often have experienced high level of adverse socio-economic conditions, with significant impact of ongoing social, emotional, and health issues (NEPS, 2017; Smyth *et al*., 2019). While difficult relationships with school systems and a gradual process of exclusion may be the trigger for early school leaving, this is often based on wider societal and economic inequalities that are reproduced through the school system and culture (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Lynch and Baker, 2005; McLean, 2022).

Previous research has found that Youthreach staff explicitly try to transform these educational inequalities by building relationships with their learners based on an '[in-depth] knowledge of the histories and family circumstances [of learners]' (Smyth *et al*., 2019, p. 52). This approach can be characterised by what Coburn (2010) conceptualises in Youthwork as border pedagogy

> where collaborations between young people and youth workers facilitate the creation of new knowledge and ideas … in work that improves young people's social, emotional and physical well-being … examining power relationships or in fostering participation that enhances understanding and creates new ways of thinking about, or understanding, difference … [and] working across communities and political interests to facilitate taking individual and collective action for social change. (2010, p. 34)

A social justice approach to education highlights the transformative potential of learning experiences and relationships where young people become more agentic, developing capacities to transform their lives and futures. This relational approach emphasises an equitable dynamic between young people and staff, which subverts the 'distribution of power typical of adult- and institution-young person dynamics, where young people are invariably bound by rules, schedules and discipline' (McPherson, 2020, p. 3). These types of relationships require extensive time, attunement and care to cultivate (Noddings, 1984).

This orientation towards a more relational ethos and equitable relationships stands in contrast to the greater distance and formal relationships held in traditional schooling and higher education between teacher/lecturer and students, with boundaries maintained through school rules, classroom activities, ways of knowing and being in school (Ball and Collet-Sabé, 2025). Crucially for these young people who have been excluded from school, participation in Youthreach is grounded in voluntary principles of participation (Davies, 2015). While young people sign up for the Youthreach programme, participation is characterised by a far greater autonomy than previous schooling experiences, with control and decision-making about participation and activities negotiated with the young person. While this results in more equitable power dynamics and interrelationships between staff and students, there are curricular and assessment requirements to be met for programme completion, which Youthreach learners and staff have to navigate together. These boundaries between the formal educational and vocational requirements of the programme and its learner-centred and youth development ethos are also shaped by the wider landscape and values underpinning a changing education system.

4. Maintaining an Education of Care and Relationality in a Neoliberal System

The conceptual framework of this research is concerned with how the differing status and conditions in education sectors impact on the working life of its staff. The rise of neoliberal logics in Irish public services has demanded growing levels and evidence of efficiency and performativity across Irish education (Lynch *et al*., 2012; Murray *et al*., 2014; Manley and Farren, 2024). This is part of a wider shift in education systems globally to forms of new managerial cultures which prioritise the tracking of teaching and learning through performance indicators, the recognition and reward of effective and lean measurement, and the growth of market-driven logics across the public sector (Clarke *et al*., 2000; Glanton, 2023; Lynch *et al*., 2012). These echo similar changes occurring internationally where a human capital approach has grown exponentially in education and other sectors (Giroux, 2022; Lynch, 2022).

Of concern is that the focus on measurable outcomes in contemporary systems renders relational and wellbeing aspects of education invisible. Baines

et al. highlight the 'increasing concern that social justice-oriented practices have been reduced or removed through NPM metrics, while the boundless capacity to care' continues to be expected of those in caring professions (Baines *et al*., 2014, p. 435). For education systems, individual achievement, competition and measurable learning outputs are increasingly prioritised over the less easily measured caring and relational aspects of learning (Lynch et al., 2012, 2022). Education systems instead often retrospectively attempt to develop targeted initiatives to increase care and wellbeing where it has declined – such as specialised initiatives like Youthreach (Gordon, 2017). These initiatives respond to the consequences of early school leaving in a targeted way rather than addressing system-level neglect of the care and relational aspects of young people's learning.

Relational Pedagogy, Care and Wellbeing

Insights from the distinctive but complementary theories of relational pedagogy, care and wellbeing are used here to enable an analysis of how the education facilitated by Youthreach builds resilience and positive capacities. Relational pedagogy brings the material aspects of the relationships at the heart of learning to the fore (Gravett, 2023), informed by philosophies of care in education (Noddings, 1984) and post-human approaches that position humans and their relationality as an integral part of a wider ecosystem of the world (Bozalek *et al*., 2019; Gravett *et al*., 2021). Relational pedagogy brings a socio-political focus to analyse learning relationships and practices that are oriented towards caring relations in education as sites of recognition and reciprocity, as well as power in and through education (Noddings, 1984; Nussbaum, 1995). Care theorists emphasise the importance of the time and conditions needed to cultivate trusting and caring relations (Cantillon and Lynch, 2017). They explore how care and interdependency are essential for human development, based on an approach that highlights how education 'cultivates the ability to see full and equal humanity in another person' (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 3).

A Positive Psychological approach to wellbeing was used in this research as a means to make visible the material impact of care in learning relationships (Coulombe *et al*., 2020). Positive Psychology's basis in the scientific study of optimal human functioning and its conditions (Gable and Haidt, 2005), gives clear measurement of individual experience of wellbeing and illbeing (Burke and Minton, 2019; Huppert and Whittington, 2003), through its capacity to represent wellbeing in a range of outcomes and symptoms of psychological, emotional and social health (Burke *et al.*, 2023). Positive Psychology is valuable – in this instance – in its ability to give expression to staff perceptions and experiences of their work, enabling an analysis in terms of the impact on how working conditions and temporal aspects impact on wellbeing and illbeing.

Youthreach as a Form of Border Pedagogy

Bringing a relational and care lens to analysing Youthreach's approach to education highlights how it operates as a form of border pedagogy (Giroux, 2005), attempting to bring transformative change and empowerment for learners through more relational and empowering forms of education. Giroux's concept of border pedagogy (2005) recognises educators as 'cultural workers who engage in the construction of socially contextualised knowledge – that is, knowledge that starts within the context of young people's lives and is constructed through problem-posing dialogue' (Coburn, 2010, p. 36).

This Freirean-based approach notes the distinctive role of staff in creating pedagogical conditions with learners where oppressive structures and inherited social relations are made visible and actively critiqued so that new identities can be formed and other possibilities can be made possible (Giroux, 2005). While the transformative impact of this for learners is often emphasised, the context and impact for staff and their wellbeing is less often considered and is the focus of this article.

5. Methodology – Approach and Profile of Respondents

The research was based on an online survey conducted nationally with Youthreach staff to explore their work conditions and wellbeing. Ethical approval was sought and granted by our university research ethics subcommittee. Ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of respondents and Youthreach centres was a key consideration, given the small local contexts of Youthreach centres where people are potentially identifiable. Given that this was an anonymised online survey, the focus and purpose of the research was clearly framed in the introduction to the online survey, highlighting its exploration of wellbeing and illbeing in people's work context, with support agency contact details given for follow-up supports. Care was taken in the design of the survey questions to ensure that questions and topics were phrased and analysed appropriately. We were guided throughout the research by a research advisory group (with representatives from Youthreach, psychology, guidance counselling, education and social research).

The other key element in the research was a systemic literature review of research about early school leaving initiatives (Synder, 2019). Systemic searches of online databases were conducted (based on keywords of early school leaving, staff, employment, and wellbeing) through the university's online database review of peer-reviewed journals, books, dissertations and newspaper articles to identify existing literature and research on early school leaving in an education context. This was synthesised from a broad mapping of the education landscape to a more targeted and systematic search about staff, employment and wellbeing in education in relation to early school leaving in Ireland. An iterative approach was used throughout this to critically review and refine this literature to identify and map the emergent themes (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). This desk-based analysis informed the analysis of the

education system, culture and conditions in which Youthreach and its staff are positioned.

An introductory email about the research and a link to the survey was circulated to all Youthreach centres nationally, asking staff to voluntarily self-select to complete the survey to provide information about their working conditions and sense of wellbeing. A total of 325 respondents completed the survey, which represented approximately a third of all Youthreach staff nationally in this year. This is a relatively high response rate for a voluntary online survey emailed to Youthreach centres though publicly available general mailing lists.

In terms of profile, nearly half (49%) of the respondents worked in small Youthreach centres with 10 to 25 learners, while a third (35%) worked in centres with 26–40 learners and the remainder in larger Youthreach centres. Two thirds of respondents were female (66%, $n = 214$), and one third male (33%, $n = 108$), with 78% of the respondents aged over 40 years. Almost half of the respondents worked as a Youthreach Resource Person (47%), followed by Teacher (31%), Youthreach Centre Coordinators (15%), and other roles (8%). This is broadly similar to the profile of Youthreach staff nationally, with 536 Youthreach Resource Persons (54%), 339 Youthreach Teachers (34%) and 113 Youthreach Coordinators (12%) employed in the sector in 2024 (Oireachtas, 2024). As such, snowball sampling through self-selection gave a broadly representative sample of approximately one third of the Youthreach workforce at this time. The majority of respondents had been in their role for over 10 years (71%), 26% worked in Youthreach between 1–9 years, and 3% were employed by Youthreach for less than a year.

Research Questions and Survey Measures

Cognisant of the dichotomy of supporting care-filled and relational education whilst working in an education context increasingly dominated by market-driven imperatives, we explored two research questions based on experiences of Youthreach staff:

(1) What are the work conditions and experiences of Youthreach staff?, and
(2) What is the wellbeing of Youthreach staff?

The wellbeing question was divided into two subquestions which further analysed wellbeing in relation to its component elements, namely

(a) what is the prevalence of wellbeing across all variables, and
(b) to what extent does the length of service, frequency of working in the evening, over the weekend or during the centre closed times predict wellbeing.

The wellbeing aspect of the participant questionnaire comprised three sections on Wellbeing and illbeing; Covid, wellbeing and illbeing; and Looking ahead (see Kenny *et al*., 2022 for details), with participants completing five validated psychological scales as outlined in Table 1.

The quantitative data in the survey was analysed using SPSS (version 27), using descriptive and inferential statistics to assess participants' wellbeing, resilience and mental health. In addition, respondents also answered a series of open-ended questions about their work roles and experiences in Youthreach. These open-ended answers were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) in MAXqda qualitative software analysis package, with the emergent themes presented in the following sections: Values and pedagogical commitments, Staff role and service recognition and Sectoral working conditions.

Findings – Work Commitment, Conditions and Recognition of Youthreach Staff

The three core themes emerging from the analysis of the online survey are discussed below (see Figure 1 below), before exploring the implications for the wellbeing of Youthreach Staff.

Values and Pedagogical Commitment

Analysis of the qualitative data found that Youthreach staff expressed a strong sense of commitment to the young people with whom they work and valued the

Table 1. Psychological scales used to measure staff wellbeing

The Workplace PERMA Profiler (Butler and Kern, 2015) is a 23-item measure, on a11-point Likert scale, which ranges from "always" to "never", "not at all" to "completely", or "terrible" to "excellent". This scale measures the presence of wellbeing factors, such as positive emotions, engagement, meaning in life, accomplishment.
The Brief Resilience Scale (Smith *et al*., 2008) is a 6-item measure, on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". It measures individuals' resilience.
The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995) is a 21-item measure on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "almost always". It assesses participants illbeing, i.e., symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress.
The Mental Health Continuum Scale (MHC: Keyes, 2002) is a 14-item measure, on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "every day". It assesses psychological levels of languishing (poor mental health), moderate health and flourishing (optimal functioning).
The Compassion Fatigue Short-Scale (Adams *et al*., 2006) is a 30-item measure on a 10-point Likert scale ranging from rarely/never = 1 to very often = 10. It measures compassion fatigue by combining scores relating to job burnout and vicarious trauma.

Figure 1. Key themes - Youthreach staff working Experiences

potential of learning for transforming young people's lives. This person-centred approach led them to a distinctive learner-centred ethos and relational pedagogy which some respondents described as having positive implications for their own wellbeing and resilience. Staff describe a responsive pedagogy that uses diverse teaching methods according to what they felt works best for each learner and group, scaffolding learning into small manageable components, using continuous assessment and formative feedback to build a positive sense of achievement in learning in a progressive way. This responsive pedagogy is based on Youthwork and adult education philosophies that prioritise a Freirean sense of learner-centredness (Connolly, 2014; Grummell, 2023). Respondents described prioritising experiential and people-centred learning which allows learners and staff to get to know each other, build trust and learn together in a caring and respectful environment. Staff give voice to an expansive view of learning as a lifelong biographical journey that is present and mindful of learners' past schooling experiences, current interests and focuses on building capacities for positive learning relationships in the future. One teacher, for instance, reported:

> My role is to welcome, be non-judgmental, accept, understand and be mindful of past situations, encourage each student to attend every day, empower each student, regain their confidence and belief. (YR Teacher, R187)

Staff also described how their role in Youthreach requires a distinctive approach to pedagogy as relational, person-centred and wellbeing-focused, as in the following response:

> Youthreach is totally different to mainstream [schooling] … It is very hard to cover class work as students have so many issues. Time is taken to always look after their concerns and wellbeing. (YR Teacher, R266)

Echoing Freirean approaches, Youthreach educators described how they created a curricular design and content responding directly to young people's experiences and interests. They were conscious that this results in a greater workload for them than in other education sectors, with one respondent recounting how they 'formulate our own modules through QQI [Quality & Qualifications Ireland] whereas secondary school teachers get handed textbooks.' (YR Resource Person, R288). The intense nature of this role required being attuned to learners not only in academic ways, but in an expansive mode across all aspects of learners' social, personal and learning lives. Hence, the pedagogical scope in Youthreach for Teachers and Recourse Workers was much wider and more holistic than schooling – and in line with youthwork (Coburn, 2010) and community education approaches where a 'person-centred approach … enables participants to create their own knowledge and value systems, as a tool in creating their worlds" (Connolly, 2003, p. 12). As well as the learning aspects of their role, Youthreach staff identified a range of additional lifeskills which they support. This included work placement, career guidance, personal counselling, and informal support to re-engage young people. Similar to youthwork, the following respondent recognised that

> Learners needs are complex and therefore extends my role to be a coach, drugs/sexual and mental health counsellor, carer, loco parentis, adviser, link in with social workers and case conferences, work experience supervisor, maintain attendance records, administration, and, most importantly, to champion young people. (YR Resource Person, R53)

Staff Roles and Service Recognition

Respondents highlighted a sense of misrecognition of their role and the contribution of Youthreach provision in the lives of young people. This misrecognition, we argue, is historically rooted in Youthreach's establishment on the border of two systems – as an early school leavers initiative with a youth development ethos in the FET system, but which works with young people of school-going age with educational and vocational intents. While those in teacher roles in Youthreach defined themselves firstly as teachers, Resource Workers describes how their role is often referred to as 'teacher plus' due to the wide range of other duties and skills involved in their role. This is similar to the expansive care, and personal and social development role described by Youth workers (Coburn, 2010; McPherson, 2020). Respondents recounted how they juggle the learning aspects with a wider range of other tasks that are part of their expansive service needs role as Resource Person (DES, 2008, p. 80), as in the following response:

> I am also the health and safety representative, cleaner (at times), key holder, develop timetables, cover classes when staff are sick, supervise breaks, support the coordinator in the daily running of the centre, monitor student behaviour,

> support staff, lead worker representative, and be prepared for class. (YR Resource Person, R53)

Youthreach staff described how a lack of parity within their sector between those employed on Resource Persons and Teacher Contracts, despite both having similar level of qualifications, role and experience, led to a sense of a two-tier system which 'causes huge "them and us" mentality among staff' in Youthreach centres (YR Teacher, R40), where staff on Resource Person and Teacher contracts work side-by-side with the same learners, but with 'less recognition and pay than our teaching colleagues' (YR Resource Person, R158). Operational Guidelines for Youthreach outline how those holding Resource Persons and Coordinator contracts are required to have direct contact hours in the classroom, and to fulfil numerous other management and support aspects, thereby giving them an expansive range of teaching, management and support aspects in their roles.

Like other educators in FET, respondents described how their unique educational role in Youthreach is not recognised by the wider education system, with one respondent recounting how

> I am not recognised for my teaching as I am a Resource Person; yet I had an inspector from the Department of Education sit in my class recently and inspect my teaching but I'm not recognised as a teacher. I don't get the teacher pay, the recognition, or the holidays. (YR Resource Person, R24)

Despite working with the same cohort of learners, Resource Workers noted how they worked alongside and with teacher colleagues who were on contracts with very different working conditions, entitlements and scope of responsibilities, which was a major source of tension and frustration for many.

Respondents were critical of the broader lack of recognition of Youthreach as a service for young people for whom the formal school system has failed. They argued that this stems from Youthreach provision being treated as an anomaly in the hegemonic culture and structures of the mainstream schooling and FET systems, with one participant describing how 'Youthreach is effectively a mainstream intervention in an out-of-mainstream setting' (YR Coordinator, R27). Youthreach staff also expressed strong frustration at not being able to capture the value of their pedagogical approach in enhancing the personal and social skills of young people within the current FET reporting metrics they were required to use, which focus predominantly on progression to education, training and employment (Smyth *et al*., 2019, p. xii).

Sectoral Working Conditions

The misrecognition of Youthreach as a sector and its staff was evident across different aspects of their work and positioning within the organisational

structure. Youthreach staff reported feeling that there was limited awareness or consideration of the specificity of Youthreach as a sector from colleagues in statutory agencies due to the normative assumption and focus on the progression of students through mainstream schooling, with little consideration or support of those who do not follow this mainstream learning pathway. The misrecognition was echoed through different organisational aspects – for example, the lack of visibility through the growing emphasis on performance measurement criteria across education which relegates relational and responsive aspects of their work as invisible. Several respondents highlighted their specific commitment to working in Youthreach because of its approach, pedagogy and relationships with young people, describing how 'I love Youthreach, the idea of the course, the dynamic and flexibility of it. It is a great programme for vulnerable young people' (YR Resource Person). Similar frustrations are expressed by other caring professions such as social workers, with Baines describing the complex interplay of growing levels of reporting, lean staffing models, flexible employment conditions, lower budgets, increased standardisation, use of just-in-time deliverables and close monitoring of all aspects of work on the caring roles of social care workers (Baines, 2004; Powell, 2023).

Temporal misrecognition also renders aspects of the work of Youthreach Resource Workers and Coordinators invisible as they described how they have to work throughout the full calendar year to cater for the ongoing needs of young people, in contrast to the shorter term-based school calendar of their teaching colleagues. They recounted how this resulted in additional work and pressures on Youthreach Resource Person and Assistant Coordinators over the summer and midterms when their teacher colleagues were on holidays. Our analysis highlighted significant implications for ongoing wellbeing and resilience of Youthreach staff who are doing the same work as teachers with less time off and lower resources. This inequity has a practical organisational impact in terms of the running of activities in Youthreach centres during midterms and summers when second-level teaching staff are off. One co-ordinator explained:

> How learners are expected to attend a centre in summer months with no teaching staff. It is an extremely stressful time in those months … There are weeks also when I complete more than 22 hours of class contact due to staff absences. (YR Coordinator, R22)

The remaining Youthreach staff have to be available during this time to fill the hours and activities that those on teacher contracts had, as well as being stretched to cover any additional staff absences and illnesses, in addition to the existing responsibilities they hold in their Coordinator roles.

The consequences of this expansive role held by Youthreach staff are very practical , with 80% of survey respondents noting that they deal with heavy workloads, with 39% working regularly in evenings and 23% working regularly over weekends. Compared to their colleagues in primary and post-primary

schools (Burke and Dempsey, 2021a, 2021b), Youthreach staff report taking significantly less time off over weekend and holiday periods. Annual leave and working conditions over holidays and midterms were highlighted as an issue, not only in terms of the disparity of conditions with second-level teaching colleagues who are off during these months but on Youthreach staff's sense of wellbeing, with survey respondents recounting how 'staff feel quite burnt-out during midterms, etc., when teaching staff are off and Resource People are still in work.' (YR Resource Person, R144). One person described how 'having less holidays than our colleagues in mainstream [schooling] is the hardest thing for us to deal with. It is soul destroying and unfair – we work as hard/if not harder than them.' (YR Resource Person, R.178)

Wellbeing of Youthreach Staff

Despite the lack of recognition of Youthreach sector and staff conditions, Youthreach staff's self-reported levels of wellbeing using the five psychological scales in this research were very good (see Table 1). Survey respondents showed high prevalence of psychological flourishing (55%) with particularly low levels of languishing (2.5%)(see Table 2). Flourishing was measured using Mental Health Continuum Scale (Keyes, 2002) by assessing the highest scores (4,5) and languishing indicated the lowest scores (0,1) across all three subscales of wellbeing

Table 2. Youthreach staff self-reported levels of wellbeing

Scale	Condition	N	%
MHC	Languishing	8	2.5
	Moderate	138	42.5
	Flourishing	179	55.1
Resilience	Low	66	20.3
	Moderate	178	54.8
	High	81	24.9
Depression	Normal	272	83.7
	Mild	39	12.0
	Moderate	13	4.0
	Severe	1	.3
Anxiety	Normal	266	81.8
	Mild	17	5.2
	Moderate	30	9.2
	Severe	11	3.4
	Extremely Severe	1	.3
Stress	Normal	304	93.5
	Mild	15	4.6
	Moderate	6	1.8
Compassion Fatigue	Low	241	74.2
	Moderate	61	18.8
	High	23	7.1

(emotional, social and psychological). Furthermore, using the Brief Resilient Coping Scale (Sinclair and Wallston, 2004) the majority of participants reported scored between 14 and 16 out of 20, therefore reported moderate resilience (55%) with a further quarter of participants reporting high resilience levels (scores of 17 and higher). Using the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995), the vast majority of participants reported scores between 0–9 out of 42, thus indicating normal levels of depression (84%), scores 0–7, indicating normal levels of anxiety (82%), and scores 0–14 indicating normal levels of stress (94%). At the same time the majority of participants reported low levels of compassion fatigue (74%), meaning their scores were below 34 out of 130, as measured by the Compassion Fatigue Scale (Adams *et al*., 2006). Overall, participants' self-reported wellbeing was very good.

To explore to what extent variables relate to some of the working conditions of their roles, including length of service, frequency of working in the evening, over the weekend or during the centre closed times explains levels of wellbeing, self-compassion and illbeing, a multiple regression was conducted. For wellbeing, the variance explained only 3% of wellbeing and the correlation was not statistically significant, $F(4, 239) = 2$, $p > .05$. For self-compassion, it showed that 13% of compassion fatigue can be predicted by the model $F(4,324) = 11.74$, $p < .001$. The three variables showing statistically significant variability were the length of service (beta = .15) with those with longer service experiencing higher levels of compassion fatigue; working over the weekend (beta = −.17) and during the centre closed times (beta = −.23), with those engaging in extra work experiencing lower levels of self-compassion. In relation to depression, 6% of the variance is explained by the model $F(4,324) = 4.83$, <.001. One variable was statistically significant, i.e., working over the weekend (beta = −.17). Regarding anxiety, 6% of variance was explained by the model $F(4, 324) = 4.7$, $p < .001$. The only statistical variable was the frequency of working during the time when the centre was closed (beta = −.18).

Discussion: Consequences for the Wellbeing of Youthreach Staff

Over half of Youthreach respondents to this survey recount flourishing psychologically, meaning that they experienced high levels of emotional wellbeing, psychological wellbeing and social wellbeing. Youthreach staff on all contract positions report higher levels of happiness compared to results of similar research with primary and second-level school staff in Ireland (Burke and Dempsey, 2021a, 2021b; Dempsey and Burke, 2021). Illustrative of the material impact of interdependency and caring relationships (Noddings, 2005), staff also reveal higher levels of psychological resources such as experiences of positive emotions, engagement at work, or finding their work meaningful than colleagues in equivalent school sector studies (Burke and Dempsey, 2021a, 2021b; Dempsey and Burke, 2021).

All these aspects support Youthreach staff to cope more effectively with challenging situations and help them bounce back faster after experiencing adverse situations (Coulombe *et al*., 2020). Echoing findings from cognate sectors in youthwork and adult education (McPherson, 2020; Grummell, 2023), the learner-centred ethos, expansive learning mode and relational pedagogy at the heart of Youthreach education require high levels of positive emotions, affective and relational capacities (Lynch *et al*., 2007), which in turn may account for the high wellbeing levels amongst staff.

However, Gordon reminds us that a strong emphasis on learners' care and on their emotional and social development requires 'sufficient time for relationship-based approaches to be implemented' (2017, p. 48). The temporal inequalities of the long work hours and extended calendar worked by Youthreach Resource Workers and Assistant Coordinators combine to lower the relational positivity outlined above. The lack of attention to the link between temporal and structural conditions of work and wellbeing is indicative of a wider carelessness of what relational care and humanising education truly entail (Lynch *et al*., 2007).

The lack of recognition of relational care in the system is evident in the levels of burnout and vicarious trauma, and moderate or high levels of compassion fatigue reported by a quarter of respondents. Temporal inequalities are clearly evident in the high levels of Youthreach staff working during holiday times, frequent evening or weekend work and those having a longer length of service in Youthreach. Manley and Farren's (2024) research with Youthreach staff also identifies burnout, role equity and work commitment as key factors prompting staff to leave the profession. These findings demonstrate that the longer Youthreach staff have worked, the higher the risk of job burnout or vicarious trauma, as respondents with longer service were more susceptible to coping with adversities, stress, anxiety, depression, and compassion fatigue. Hickey et al. cite Craig's research (Craig, 2017) which demonstrates how compassion fatigue and burnout can accumulate over time, negatively impacting on 'educators and their ability to develop and maintain appropriately supportive relationships with their students' (Hickey *et al*., 2020, p. 29). This points to the importance of ensuring conditions that sustain caring relationships in education for staff as well as students.

Reflective of the tension between the intense demands of their relational role and the challenging nature of their working conditions, the research revealed that one of the strongest predictors of higher levels of anxiety, depression and compassion fatigue among Youthreach staff was not taking adequate respite during centre's holidays. Furthermore, not taking time out during weekend predicted compassion fatigue. Many Youthreach Resource Workers work throughout the year, including weekend and holidays, when their colleagues on teacher contracts are off. This is in contrast with research conducted with primary and post-primary school leaders in Ireland at a similar time (Burke and Dempsey, 2021a, 2021b) that report higher numbers of school leaders taking

weekends off and time off during school holidays. Therefore, compared to their colleagues in primary and post-primary schools, Youthreach Resource and Coordinator staff are taking significantly less time off during rest periods. This is indicative of how temporal aspects – both a long working calendar and length of service – impact negatively on staff wellbeing. Lack of adequate respite from work leads to fatigue, burnout, depression, and a range of mental and physical health issues (Toker and Melamed, 2017).

In addition, the findings document the systemic inadequacies, as Youthreach staff with longer service recounted how they do not have structures of additional support to help them cope with adversities, prevent stress, anxiety, depression and compassion fatigue. Schools as institutions are positioned within a long-established and well-developed public system that holds more extensive structures of support which the smaller Youthreach services do not have, illustrative of the consequences of the differing levels of resourcing, recognition and positioning of different sectors in the education system.

Interestingly, previous research with therapists and counsellors identified the opposite trend; the longer therapists served, the higher was their wellbeing (Burke and Hackett, 2017). The increase of wellbeing among therapists may be due to their initial training, continuous personal development and structures put in place to support their wellbeing that prevents a systematic accumulation of negative thoughts and emotions that may ultimately result in negative outcomes. This is pertinent for Youthreach staff who lack these types of structural supports or recognition in their work contexts, and indicative of the need for recognition and support for educators who hold these expansive visions of care and commitment through relational pedagogies in their work (Gravett, 2023).

Conclusion: Significance of the Working Experiences and Conditions of Youthreach Staff

In an era of increasing pressures of performativity, outputs-driven approaches and measurement across education (Clarke *et al*., 2000; Lynch *et al*., 2012), this research gives voice to the relational ethos and learner-centred pedagogy of Youthreach that provides vital spaces for a caring and inclusive ethos for young people to re-engage with education. The implications of these findings are two-fold. The significance of these caring relationships and recognition of young people is materially evident through the expansive vision of care, person-centred and relational pedagogy of Youthreach staff, and springs from their values and commitment to supporting young people. The material and embodied benefits of care and relationality for staff are evident in the relatively high levels of wellbeing, resilience and coping exhibited by Youthreach staff.

However, the cost of this care for young people's education in an education system which lacks recognition of such values is the other side of these findings, starkly evident in the systemic impact of misrecognition of staff and their

relational work, as manifested through different work contracts and the temporal inequalities of working conditions. The border pedagogy (Coburn, 2010) and position held by Youthreach staff bring both positive and negative effects, enabling staff to work responsively with deep commitment and connection with young people, but also holds complex personal and professional impacts in terms of lack of recognition, compassion fatigue and burnout for staff.

In a dialectic between care and control, the neoliberal ethos of performativity increasingly drives measurable processes and outputs in education that do not recognise relational aspects of learning and work. As Baines et al. contend 'mutual care, equity and social justice [become an] afterthought to cost saving, efficiency and the individualising mantras of NPM and neoliberalism' (Baines *et al*., 2014, p. 448). The expansive and relational pedagogies of Youthreach are based on a small group of approaches that enable more individualised support, peer-centred interdependency, a pace of learning tailored to learners' capacities, and expansive pedagogical approaches (McHugh, 2014; Sheridan, 2018). These qualities all support learning as a relational and human development process rather than the outcomes-orientated approach that currently dominates the outputs and examination-orientated system of the schooling system (Lynch, 2022). Given the lack of power many young people experience in other compulsory settings, such as schooling, the caring relationships and mutuality formed between Youthreach staff and students is vital and the consequent impact on the agency and sense of empowerment amongst young people is striking. However, its impact on staff wellbeing also needs to be acknowledged as a core part of the learning relationship and recognised in the education system.

6. Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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