

# **Challenging the stigma of Youthreach: Recognition, Interpersonal Relations and Narrative Stories**

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### **Dedication**

I wish to dedicate this thesis to two people who have had a huge impact on me personally.

The first is that of a lady called Rose Ryan, who when I was at crossroad in my life of whether to go into secondary school teaching or further education teaching, she gave me the guidance and confidence, to believe that further education was the path for me. She was also a great guidance to me throughout this thesis and gave me the belief that I could complete it.

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These two are the epitome of what educators are and they will be my guidance through my teaching career.

## Abstract

This research project investigates the area of Youthreach education, exploring its status as a sector in Irish education. Specifically, it argues that Youthreach is often perceived as a lower status form of education and hence holds stigmatizing effects for the sector and its learners. This research intends to use the concept of recognition to explore the issue, and to begin to turn the tide on it through an active case study approach which will explore the following questions;

1. What type of education is on offer in a Youthreach center?
2. Using the concept of recognition, what status does Youthreach have in the Irish education system? Is it stigmatized as a form of education?
3. How is the status of Youthreach education related to the early school leaving profile of its learners? How does the issue of class relate to this?
4. How can Youthreach respond to these challenges?
5. How do personal stories from Youthreach students transform attitudes of parents within these communities?

This research with Youthreach students, members of Two Parents Association of second level schools and a Youthreach coordinator highlighted the themes of i) interpersonal relationships and learning between teachers and students in Youthreach, ii) the role that social class plays in the misrecognition and stigma of education sectors such as Youthreach, iii) How recognition operates through the fear of the unknown and iv) the potential of individual stories about educational experiences to transform attitudes.

The research gives a platform through narrative research to three Youthreach students so that their voices, opinions and stories can be heard by parents within their communities. The research reveals the power of narratives for learning and attitudinal transformation based on discussion of their educational experiences. Their stories highlight the damaging effects of early school leaving and how they got their education back on track, with the assistance from the Youthreach programme. Such an initiative however also raises question about the scale of transformative learning and whether narratives can hold a longer – term impact.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Youthreach is a specific strand of education for early school leavers in the Irish education system. It

‘Offers a flexible and dynamic programme of integrated general education, vocational training and work experience. Learners set personal and educational goals that increase their self-esteem, skill and knowledge base and employability. Essential course elements include Personal and Social Development, Vocational Skills and Communications Skills. The Youthreach process involves personal development and exploration, identification of needs, interests and capacities, setting learning goals, sampling general vocational skills, development of specific aptitudes, work experience and literacy and numeracy development’ (Co. Meath VEC, Information on Youthreach).

More specifically it is

‘A Department of Education and Skills official education, training and work experience programme for early school leavers aged 15 – 20. It offers young people the opportunity to identify options within adult life, and provides them with opportunities to acquire certification. As it operates on a full-time, year-round basis, Youthreach has a continuous intake policy’ (Youthreach. A second chance education).

From this we can see that Youthreach is in existence because is it offering education to those who were excluded by the secondary school educational system. The mainstream second level school system do not cater or accommodate all of their learners with significant numbers exiting as early school leavers ‘

‘A Department of Education report out today found that 7,713 students left the country’s 730 second-level schools before making it to sixth year in 2010, with 4,300 leaving before fifth year. The data for the 2009-10 school year found: More than 1,500 students had only got as far as first or second year; A further 1,777 did not go beyond third year; 1,064 left during or after transition year’ (Irish Examiner, Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> May, 2010).

Second level schools accommodate the type of learners that are fast paced, and well behaved, learners and the students who do not fit into this system and culture can be ignored and as a result of this are left behind and many leave education early, which these statistics show.

The ethos of Youthreach education, is that they take in vulnerable young adults and try to help them achieve an education. They take a keen interest in every person that walks through their door both personally and academically, and as a result their staff focus on developing a personal relationship with each person. The young adults learn to trust them, and as result of

this they bring down their barriers and allow someone in, to help them deal with the problems they are facing. This interpersonal approach reveals the critical role that Youthreach is playing in the education of our young people today.

But why then is there a certain stigma associated with the area of Youthreach education and the students who attend it? Why are Youthreach students labeled and looked down upon? This does not occur in the same way to students who attend a secondary school. But both set of students are receiving an education, so why is secondary school education held in a higher regard than that of Youthreach? Why is it not recognized as delivering a high standard of education? Is this a factor of why is there a stigma towards it? These are the questions which prompted this research.

## **1.2. Personal Reflection**

Martin Luther King Jr stated that ‘the function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education’. Allan Bloom believed that education ‘is the movement from darkness to light, and that education in our times must try to find whatever there is in students that might yearn for completion, and to reconstruct the learning that would enable them autonomously to seek that completion. (Brainy Quotes, education quotes). These quotes by Martin Luther King Jr and Allan Bloom, highlight their belief that education should not just focus whole-heartedly on the academic side. Education is more than this. Education should also encompass teachers building a personal relationship with their students, get to know them, help them with certain personal problems and in the words of Allan Bloom, by doing this teachers are supporting students to move autonomously from darkness into light. The education system and teachers should enhance students’ autonomy, supporting students as they learn from their own experiences and knowledge. By doing this students will be able to think intensively and critically, exactly what Luther King Jr felt education should do.

I feel this holistic learner – centered view of education is in Youthreach, it is integrated into the very core foundations and ethos of what Youthreach education is. From the quotes about Youthreach above, we can see that their ethos of education is spilt fifty/fifty, the first half focuses on using the set syllabus to educate students and the other half is about the students and staff building a relationship together, to helping students’ autonomously deal with their issues, and build their capacity to cope in the world so that they are ready for it, when they face it on their own after they leave the space of Youthreach. Youthreach provides an

alternative progression route for early school leavers, those students left behind by secondary school education, and in the words of Bloom, help to reconstruct the learning that would enable them autonomously to seek that completion, of their education. Youthreach educates their students in a very different way to that of second level schools. They focus more on the interpersonal relationships between staff and students. It is an approach which builds capacity for their students, and as result, students are receiving a very high standard of education of like skills and education which will benefit them in the long term.

But then how come there is a public stigma associated towards Youthreach, and of its students? Why is Youthreach education looked down upon? Why is it not held in the same regard as that of the secondary school education? I wanted to explore the issue of recognition and stigma towards Youthreach in Irish education and society. In particular, I wanted to use the personal and experiential qualities of narrative stories of learners to challenge this stigma and see if this could be transformed.

At the start of this research I had the opinion that there was a huge stigma associated with Youthreach as a consequence of my own personal experience working in Youthreach on placement in the past year. I felt that this resulted in the general public looking down on the education on offer there, and having negative preconceptions about the students who attended a Youthreach Centre. However, over the course of doing the research for this thesis, I have come to the realization that the stigma towards Youthreach, is not as one-sided or straight forward as I had initially thought. However over the course of this thesis I found that while there was evidence of some stigma associated towards Youthreach and their learners, it is a complex process of recognition.

To explore this, I used a qualitative approach, following five methodological steps.

The first was that of finding a Youthreach center that I could use as my case study in my research. A center that would allow me full access to their center, classes, staff and students as a participant researcher. The case study center used in this research offered me a year's placement where I worked as a student teacher/researcher for the past year.

The second step was to identify the issues and assumptions that people in the community had about Youthreach. The best way for me to find this out I felt was to meet with a local group and discuss the area of Youthreach Education with them. For this I decided to meet with two different Parents Association's in the area. These Parents Associations represented those who



are actively involved in the local second level schools; the system from which these Youthreach students are early school leavers. I met with each Parents Association on two separate occasions, initially getting their opinions and views on Youthreach. This first meeting was a general meeting, where I asked a broad range of questions on both Youthreach and secondary school education. The second meeting was where I would follow up on the issues raised in our first meeting, using student stories from Youthreach to raise awareness of Youthreach and challenge any stigmas raised, hopefully changing their perception of Youthreach.

At the start of this thesis I felt it would be up to me to do this. But during the first few days of my observation in Youthreach it became clear to me that this should not be the case. It should be the students themselves to challenge it and show what Youthreach means to them. I invited students' in the centre to participate by sharing their experiences and stories with me. Three students from my case study center came forth to do this. So I sat down with each one of them individually and they wrote out their own personal stories of where they were as a person before they came to Youthreach, what Youthreach education was for them and where they are now just before leaving. I was humbled that they wanted to do this with me and I was honored to give them a platform where their voices could be heard. Their stories did in fact challenge the opinions and perceptions that these Parents Associations had towards Youthreach, in an extraordinary way, which will be discussed later on in the thesis.

### **1.3 Research Topic**

This research project investigates the recognition and stigma associated with the area of Youthreach education, exploring how one can challenge this stigma and turn the tide on it through personal stories. This research gave a platform for three Youthreach students so that their voices, opinions, and stories can be heard by parents within their communities. I feel by doing this it will reveal the power of narratives for learning transformation as these students discuss their educational experiences and how they have turned their lives around and got their education back on track, with the assistance of both the Youthreach program and the teachers there. This will show how powerful and moving these individual stories are for learning transformation. Through these means, this research aims to explore the nature of Youthreach education and learning relationships, challenging the recognition associated towards Youthreach education, examine the relationship between class, recognition and

Youthreach education. Therefore this research topic will use a case study approach to explore the following questions;

1. What type of education is on offer in a Youthreach center?
2. Using the concept of recognition, what status does Youthreach have in the Irish education system? Is it stigmatized as a form of education?
3. How is the status of Youthreach education related to the early school leaving profile of its learners? How does the issue of class relate to this?
4. How can Youthreach respond to these challenges?
5. Can the personal stories of three Youthreach students be used as learning transformation, to change the perceptions of two Parents Associations perception towards Youthreach?

#### **1.4 Thesis Outline**

This first chapter of my thesis has introduced the research topic in this thesis. It has introduced what Youthreach is, the education they offer, and gave a brief overview of the type of student who attends a Youthreach center. I have discussed why I selected the topic of challenging the stigma of Youthreach, and why this issue has struck a personal chord with me. I have also outlined five questions that I hope to address and answer over the course of this thesis.

Chapter Two will be that of the literature review. The literature review at the start will discuss an overview of Youthreach education and its history in the Irish education system, we will then discuss the themes recognition and stigma of Youthreach in three sections, and how the lack of recognition towards them is a key factor. The first section will be focusing on, insights from what professionals in the area of adult and further education, exploring if their views of education are evident in Youthreach.

The first part of this will be discussing the specific form of education evident in Youthreach, drawing on Jack's Mezirow's definition of transformative learning, on Peter Alheit's work on Biographical learning, and lastly Edward W Taylor's work on Identity, and transformative learning, and the second part will be discussing theorist views on adult and further education. We will be examining Malcolm Knowles and his theories of teaching and Paulo Freire's work on the nature of education.

The next section of this literature review will explore the meaning of these terms “recognition” and “stigma” and how the issue of class is a key part of it. For this section I will be looking at the work of Axel Honneth’s Theory of recognition, as well as insights from more contemporary research on recognition and stigma. In particular, I will explore the relationship between recognition, class and education by drawing on Irish class – based experiences documented in Cathleen O’Neill’s study *Telling It Like It Is* and more recent empirical studies to understand the relationship between class and recognition in Irish education.

In the final section I will be examining how individual stories can be such a powerful tool for communication and transformative learning as a way of turning the tide of stigma towards Youthreach and enhancing their recognition. For this I draw upon David McCormack’s article entitled ‘*A parcel of knowledge*’: *An autoethnographic exploration of the emotional dimension of teaching and learning in Adult Education*. The limits of narrative for transformative learning will also be assessed in the final part of this section.

Chapter Three will discuss the methodology behind the research in the thesis. I will be discussing the methodological approach for this research topic, the development of research questions and the research steps. I will discuss the methods that I will be adopting for this research question and this will be done in five steps. The first step will discuss how I went about acquiring a Youthreach center to be the case study for this thesis. The second step is that of interviews I carried out with two Youthreach teachers from my case study. The third step will show the three Youthreach students stories, and why I decided to go down this avenue and why I felt this was the way to challenge recognition of Youthreach. The fourth step is engaging with the two Parents Associations groups. The fifth and final step is that of interviews with a Youthreach coordinator to see if the recommendations on the improvement for Youthreach, to seek their responses to this narrative intervention with the Parents Associations.

Chapter four will present the findings and methods from the research. This will be done in five parts. I must acknowledge that is quite a long chapter but I feel it is quite an integral part of my research and if I was try to and separate them into parts it would have broken up the flow of the thesis. The first part will discuss the interviews with two teachers from my Youthreach center about Youthreach education. The second part will describe my first meeting with the two Parents Associations and what came out from these meetings. The third

will portray the three personal stories from the Youthreach students. I will discuss how the students created these stories, what I got from these stories and their potential power as narratives for learning transformation. The fourth part will show my second meeting with the two Parents Associations and will discuss how the stories from the Youthreach students transformed their opinions on Youthreach, challenging their views and highlighting the recognition and importance of Youthreach in the Irish education system. The fifth and final part will be discussing my interviews with a Youthreach coordinator and will be putting forward the recommendations from the Parents Associations on how Youthreach could improve and acquiring their opinion on it.

Chapter Five will conclude my thesis. This will be done in three parts. The first focuses on the recognition of Youthreach education. The second is that of qualities of learning emphasized in Youthreach such as the interpersonal relationships of learning, learner-centredness and experience-based learning. The third and final part will be discussing the potential of narrative stories about learner experience to change attitudes. Lastly, in this section I will bring my thesis to an end with my conclusion and closing remarks.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

‘A few years ago my career had finally started to come together after many years of hard work, motivation and confidence. I had gained a full time lecturing position in Sligo Institute of Technology, my dream job, teaching social care practice, an area I loved working in and was very passionate about. Around this time and after graduating with my MA, I had also been accepted to do a PhD in Trinity College Dublin on an area I was passionate about, disability and rights. I reflected back to my experiences over the years and how I had got to where I am today. I immediately picked up the phone to call the Youthreach co-ordinator of the Ballina centre. Attending Youthreach was the best decision I ever made in my life, and I don’t think I would be where I am today otherwise. I had very bad experiences and attitudes towards education prior to this. I am aware of the stigmas attached to the Youthreach centres. Some believe that paying a child to attend may encourage school drop-out. But without the financial support how would I as a seventeen year old living alone have paid my rent and basic outgoings. Although many students that attend may have learning and behavioural difficulties, some may just not have fit into the education system like me. It is important to keep possible future prospects high, as I have proved that it was a pathway into third level education and to an academic career. I once had no confidence in my academic ability after it was shattered through my mainstream education. I have now spent the last eleven years studying in higher education in NUI Maynooth, IT Sligo, NUIG and TCD, and I know it won’t stop there, I now love education. I am happy to share my experiences and hope that I can motivate others both students and staff. I would like to thank the staff in Youthreach Ballina you have given me a gift for life, education. I am now passing on this gift and the student centred teaching methods you once used on me, to the students that I teach today. This major transformation is as a result of all the support from the positive educational experience in a school setting that I did fit in to, Youthreach’ (National Youthreach website).

This short narrative shows the story of Jessica Mannion and her experience of attending a Youthreach, and where she is now as a result of this education. Before entering Youthreach she had low confidence, she felt she wasn’t capable of achieving anything in education. This was because of her ‘very bad experiences and attitudes’ during her secondary school education. But as soon as she entered Youthreach education this all changed and started her on a new journey and made her fall in love with education for the first time. As a result of this it has had profound effects on her life as seen in her story. This highlights the potential of stories of educational experience to capture and express learning transformation.

In her story Jessica acknowledges that she knows there is a stigma towards the Youthreach education she received. I feel the reason for this is because the Youthreach education does not carry the same recognition to that of the second level education as I will explore in this chapter. Her story shows that the contribution of Youthreach education as it highlights the

broader role of education beyond the classroom or teaching context, to look after the welfare of the students, inform them of what is right and wrong, if they see a student skirting back and forward with the law, help them. The job of an educational setting and that of the teachers is not just to educate students on maths, history etc., but also to educate them on life and help them become better human beings. This holistic understanding of education is evident in the evolution of Youthreach as an education sector. This is followed by sections exploring how literature and concepts can help us understand the role of Youthreach education in three sections. Each section takes a mixed approach which reviews relevant literature to identify useful concepts and research which are then applied to a Youthreach context in a general discussion. The first section will be focusing on, insights from what professionals in the area of adult and further education, exploring how aspects of their views of education are evident in Youthreach. This draws on Jack's Mezirow's definition of transformative learning, Peter Alheit's work on Biographical learning, Edward W Taylor's work on Identity, and transformative learning, Malcolm Knowles and his theories of teaching and Paulo Freire's work on the nature of education.

The second section of this literature review will explore the meaning of the terms "recognition" and "stigma" and how the issue of class is a key part of this process for Youthreach education in Ireland. For this section I will be looking at the classic work of Axel Honneth's Theory of recognition, as well as insights from more contemporary research on recognition, stigma and class. In particular, I will draw on Irish class – based experiences documented in Cathleen O'Neill's study *Telling It Like It Is* and more recent empirical studies to understand the relationship between class and stigma in Irish education.

In the third and final section I will examine how individual stories can be such a powerful tool for communication and transformative learning as a way of turning the tide of stigma towards Youthreach and also enhancing their recognition. For this I will be discussing David McCormack's article entitled '*A parcel of knowledge*': *An autoethnographic exploration of the emotional dimension of teaching and learning in Adult Education*. The limits of narrative for transformative learning will also be assessed in the final part of this section.

## **2.2 An overview of Youthreach education and its history in the Irish education system**

Youthreach is a national provider in the Irish education and training continuum. Since its establishment in the 1980s, Youthreach has been a fundamental element of the response of the Department of Education and Skills to early school leaving and educational disadvantage in Ireland. It has provided a way in which young people and adults may return to, or complete their education in a non-threatening learner-centred environment. Youthreach caters for almost 6,000 learners annually in places funded by the Department of Education and Skills (Harold Hislop, Department of Education, 2010 an evaluation on Youthreach). Youthreach is a national second chance education and training programme for young people aged between 15 and 20 years who have left school with little or no qualifications. It seeks to provide young people with knowledge and skills to help them to reach their full potential and enable them the opportunity to progress to further education, training and employment. Learners are required to attend Youthreach every weekday. The academic year runs from the beginning of September until the end of May. From the beginning of June until the end of July the centre runs a Summer Programme which learners are required to attend. The centre is closed during the month of August. Learners receive a training allowance for attending Youthreach. The current training allowance rates are as follows: Learners aged 16 and 17 - €40.00 per week, learners aged 18 and over - €160 per week. Weekly training allowances are fully dependent on daily attendance and participation (Meath VEC, Information on Youthreach). Youthreach is positioned as form of training and hence linked to the world employment. This positioning between the world of education and employment is very important to learners, many of whom are disenfranchised from the educational system.

Youthreach is dedicated to ensuring that all those who pass through the doors receive the opportunity to educate themselves giving them the power to make informed and balanced decisions. Learners set personal and educational goals that increase their self-esteem, skill and knowledge base and employability. Learners attend daily classes in a variety of subjects Youthreach is all about helping their students become more human. They do this by equally splitting the syllabus fifty/fifty. The first half of the syllabus focuses on educating the students the set curriculum and other fifty per cent focuses on educating the students the curriculum of life. Essential course elements include Personal and Social Development, Vocational Skills and Communication Skills. In Youthreach the teachers don't ignore the problems the students have faced or are going through, or the difficult backgrounds they are coming from or came from, or the difficult issues they face every day. They talk about it and

use it as a core learning opportunity and a valued form of experiential learning. They discuss these issues both as a class group and on a one to one individual basis. This gives some insight into Youthreach's contribution to Irish education. However if Youthreach is carrying out this essential work, then why would there be a certain stigma associated towards this education? Why does this type of education not carry the same recognition to that of secondary school?

### **2.3 What professionals in the area of adult and further education believe the education should be in this area?**

As discussed in my introduction the key ethos of Youthreach is all about helping their students become more complete and interdependent human beings. Youthreach, attempts to reach beyond academic approaches to social development to acknowledge their students' past, something which many the students try to shy away from. Youthreach education values experiential and lifelong learning, helping the students open up about their past, show them that it is not something to be ashamed of, it has made them the strong person they are today and that their past is something to learn from. Jack Mezirow's concept of transformative learning portrays this well. For Mezirow transformative learning is defined 'as the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mind-sets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) - sets of assumptions and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change. Such frames are better because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action' (Crowther, and Sutherland, 2006, p. 26). I believe what Mezirow was saying here was that, transformative learning, is defined as learning that brings about a far more reaching change in the learner than any other kinds of learning, they have participated in before. In order for this to occur teachers and learners, must acknowledge their previous learning experiences, i.e. their own personal life experiences that have gone through either good or bad, allow them to share these experiences, and discuss them. They must be acknowledged and not cast to one to side. Teachers, I believe, must help their respective learners to recognise and problematize these life experiences as transformative learning processes. Before they do this, they must build a strong and trusting relationship with the learner. This gives a strong basis on which to discuss their life experiences with them, praise them for their good experiences, and discuss what they feel were their bad experiences, allow them to critically reflect on what was wrong in these experiences, and help them put in place steps so that they don't repeat those bad experiences again. I believe transformative learning



processes are key for these learners who left education early and who are now returning to education.

Alheit's work on Biographical learning and Taylor's work on Identity, and transformative learning, offers further insights on the issue of lifelong learning and transformative learning which are relevant for this research.

In the area of adult and further education Alheit emphasises how lifelong learning plays a major part in this area of education 'lifelong learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts' (Alheit, 2008, p. 116). He identified three key components in this area of lifelong learning. The first being a formal learning which takes place in the classical education and training institutions and which usually lead to recognised diploma's and qualifications. The second was non – formal learning, which usually takes place alongside the mainstream system of education and training at the workplace, in clubs and associations, in civil society initiatives and activities. The third and final component is informal learning, which is a type of leaning that is not necessarily intentional, but happens informally (Alheit, 2008, p.117).

In Youthreach I can see all of these components of lifelong learning taking place and the one example of that is the staff discussing with their students, either one on one, or in a group setting the problems they have faced or are facing with drugs. They are not ignoring that it was a key part of their students' life (as often occurs in the second level classroom as described by students in the findings chapter). For a majority of these students, they learned from the mistakes of their previous drug use and how it has helped put them back on a recovery track. They are trying to pass this onto the other students who are facing drug issues and so learning from their past experiences. Informal and non-formal means are key to this.

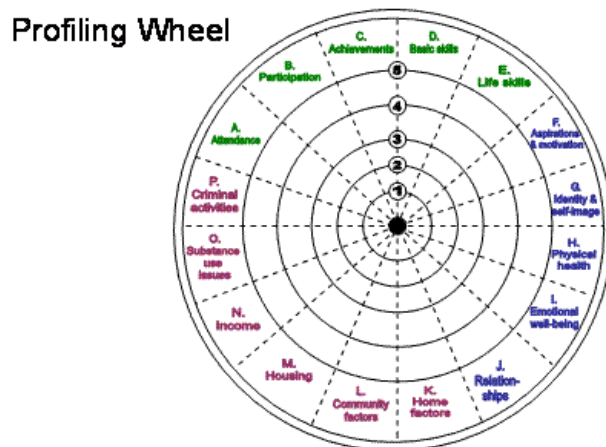
Many of these learning components are blended in a Youthreach setting. For example in Youthreach essential course elements include Personal and Social Development, Vocational Skills and Communications Skills. In these courses we can see the formal learning takes place in the class. However if we were to look to the course of communications we can see non – formal learning is taking place as well because one of the requirements on this course is for the students to organise a fundraising event for a charity. In the Youthreach in which I participated they did a cake sale, and by doing this they learned how to bake cakes and they also practiced there communication skills in an non – formal way by discussing with each

other how they wanted the event to run on the day. On the event day informal learning also occurred because they were practising their communication skills with the everyday public who attended their event. These were all valuable and recognised parts of the learning process in Youthreach.

Edward W Taylor focuses our attention on the stages of human development and identifies formation during which learning occurs. He states that during the last part of the prolonged age of youth that transformative learning to a greater extent becomes involved. Taylor feels 'there is a long and gradual transition from the typical search process to a situation in which attitudes, viewpoints, forms of interaction, emotional patterns and many other conditions and relations assume more stable forms, which allows them to be developed further, changed or replaced by learning processes of a transformative kind' (Taylor, p. 87). However Taylor does acknowledge that this type of transformation does not always happen so easily. For many young people today Taylor says 'the identity development in liquid modernity is considerably more uneven and problematic. On one hand there is an enormous and totally incalculable variety of what could be seen as identity to others, for example in the form of models appearing in commercials and mass media; activities and forms of behaviour that can contribute to the identity development' (Taylor, p.87).






For me, what Taylor emphasises is that this sense of identity development, and finding your own personal self is a huge part in the life of our young people. It is something that must not be ignored, but must be embraced in education, and that this is a key role that a teacher who interacts with these young people every day, must take on. This must be incorporated into our education system in a more explicit form and process of education that values social relationships and development. Teachers must incorporate this into their teaching to help their students find their own self-identity, help them when they are struggling with it and help them when their peers are challenging them on it. This type of lifelong learning is being incorporated into the education ethos in Youthreach. One example of this, is how the teachers in this setting are helping their students with finding their own identity is the Individual Learning Plans (ILP's) and the one on one meetings teachers have with certain students. The ILP's is a booklet of questions for each individual student. Each member of staff is given a list of students who they do the ILP's with. The questions asked in this pack vary across different types of learning and experiences, from what are the subjects you are good at, what subject you are finding hard, what's home life like, what would you like to do when you leave, are you staying off drugs etc.

Adult education and lifelong learning approaches such as those which Alheit and Taylor discuss, emphasise, how the common thread of experiential knowledge and the value of non- and informal learning that comes through is that the students' past must always be acknowledged, accepted and discussed if the learner wishes to do so. This has to be done before any formal learning occurs, and it must also be carried forward into all engagements by the learners and teachers throughout all processes. By doing this they are building both a personal and academic relationship between and within all students and teachers. By engaging in this broader learning process, students are re-finding their self – identity, restoring their confidence, building capacity to tackle the issues students face in their lives and learning from them. This demonstrates the importance of open and trusting relationships at the basis of all learning. One example of how this type of learning occurs in Youthreach stems back to that of the ILP's and a section entitled Web Wheel:



**Figure 1: Web Wheel**

## 5-point rating scale

	<b>5:</b> if you feel happy about the situation under consideration or it is an area of positive strength for you
	<b>4:</b> if you feel you have no particular problem in this factor area
	<b>3:</b> if you feel you have a bit of a problem in relation to this factor
	<b>2:</b> if you feel that you have quite a big problem with some or all aspects of the situation under consideration
	<b>1:</b> if you recognise that you have a very serious problem or feel that you are not coping generally in your life

**Figure 2: Instructions on how to complete Web Wheel**

These figures show the Web Wheel from the ILP's and how the learner and teacher go about completing it one on one. But most importantly what the Web Wheel shows is that of how important relationship building is in Youthreach. The teachers who work with students to complete the ILP's get to know students as people, learning about their past and how they are coping in the present. One must note that this task is not just done once, it is done several times over the academic year, so that the teacher can see the areas where the students are coping with and the areas of which they need assistance and guidance with. By doing all of this the teacher and student are building both a personal and academic relationship with each other. The teachers do this as a core part of the caring relationship of learning that is key in Youthreach. Jessica's story at the start of this literature review highlights this.

The majority of people would have never experienced this type of teaching or type of learning relationships, from either their days in school or that of their sons or daughters. They don't recognise or understand this type of learning relationship. As a result of not experiencing it, many question it, challenge it, don't want it, because it is taking them out of their comfort zones, they are afraid of a new way of teaching. It stems back to the fear of the unknown and emphasises the lack of recognition towards Youthreach education. Hence as a result of all of this a stigma starts to form.

This leads us onto the second part of this section examining the theories of teaching in the area of adult and further education. It is different to that of the teaching style and relationships in our secondary schools.

For me personally, I feel Malcolm Knowles theories of teaching clearly lays out the principles for educators in this area. In relation to the theories of teaching Knowles uses the andragogical model to outline how he sees an educator should teach. Knowles calls them the principles of teaching, of which there are sixteen of them. Knowles' criteria can be divided into different groupings which are relevant for the learning that is encouraged in Youthreach.

#### Knowles' Principles of Teaching – self-fulfilment and aspirations:

The first principle states that the teachers 'exposes the learners to new possibilities for self – fulfilment' (Knowles, 1991, p.57). The second states that the teacher helps the learners clarify their own aspirations for improved behaviour. The third principle is about the teacher helping the learner 'diagnose the gap between their aspirations and their present level of performance' (Knowles, 1991, p.57). The fourth principle is to make sure that the teacher helps the learners identify life problems they experience 'because of the gaps in their personal equipment' (Knowles, 1991, p.57). The four principles highlight the basis for a process to identify learning and self – fulfilment opportunities, gaps between these aspirations and current behaviours and to begin to problematize their life experiences. We can see how this operates in terms of the ILP's in Youthreach education.

The next grouping of principles focus on recognition – through the physical environment that facilitates equal participation, recognition of people's worth.

#### Knowles' Principles of Teaching –recognition:

The fifth principle states that teachers provide comfortable room, seating etc. for the class and that everyone is sitting in a way where the teacher can see everyone and no one is hidden. The sixth principle states that the teacher accepts the learners as persons of worth and respects their feelings and ideas. These principles which are evident in the Youthreach setting and in the relationships between teachers and students.

The following two principles focus on emotional capacity and the building of trusting relationship that are emotionally open on the part of the learners and teachers.

#### Knowles' Principles of Teaching – emotional aspects and trust:

The seventh is about encouraging teachers to build relationships of mutual trust and helpfulness among the learners by encouraging cooperative activities 'and refraining from inducing competitiveness and judgmentalness' (Knowles, 1991, p.57). The eighth principal

encourages the teacher to expose his or her own feelings and again these are evident in the interpersonal learning relationships which are evident in Youthreach.

The final set of principles all focus on different aspect of the pedagogical engagement between teachers and learners, with an emphasis on encouraging active participation and co-creation of learning objectives, assessments.

#### Knowles' Principles of Teaching – pedagogical aspects:

The ninth encourages the learners to play a part in setting out the learning objectives. The tenth states the teacher should inform the learners of why they are covering a certain topic or material. The eleventh principle 'encourages the teacher to help there learners to organise themselves to share responsibility in the process of mutual inquiry' (Knowles, 1991, p.58). The twelfth principle states that the teacher must help the learners exploit their own experiences as resources for learning through the use of such techniques as discussion, role play etc. The thirteenth is informing the teacher to gear the 'presentation of his or her own resources to the levels of experience of particular learners' (Knowles, 1991, p.58). The fourteenth principle is about helping the learners to apply 'new learning's to their experience, and thus to make the learning's more meaningful and integrated' (Knowles, 1991, p.58). The fifteenth principle is telling teachers to involve the learners in developing mutually acceptable criteria and methods for measuring progress toward the learning objectives (Knowles, 1991, p.58). The sixteenth and final principle says that the teacher helps the learners develop and apply procedures for self – evaluation according to these criteria.

While Youthreach does not attain or aspire to all of these pedagogical principles fully (as it follows a set formal curriculum to a large extent), it does encourage learners to reflect and learning from their own experiences and they promote meaningful and active models of pedagogical engagement throughout the centre, especially in individual learning plans agreed between learners and teacher and the informal and non-formal learning that accompanies learning activities.

While Knowles' presents the seminal thinking on andragogy as a specific teaching methodology for adult education, Paula Allman's work, presents more contemporary thinking about adult education based on Paulo Freire's style of education.

Allman states that Freire proposed that learning must take place within a revolutionary form of communication, namely dialogue. He classes it as the ‘seal of the transformed relations’, but it is also the process which enables these transformations to take place:

‘Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no (real) communication, and without communication there can be no true education. Education which is able to resolve the contradiction between teacher and student takes place in a situation in which both address their act of cognition (understanding) to the object by which they are mediated (Allman, 2009, p.425)

‘While in education for domestication one cannot speak of a knowledge object but only of a knowledge which is complete, which the educator possesses and transfers to the educatee; in education for liberation there is no complete knowledge possessed by the educator, but a knowable object which mediates educator and educatee as subjects in the knowing process. Dialogue is established as the seal of the epistemological relationships between subjects in the knowing process’ (Ibid, p. 426).

Allman and Freire emphasises how the learning relationship and engagement in adult and further education, is completely different to that of the teachers in secondary school. Adult education models emphasise greater equality and learner –centred approaches, and highlights the value of experiential learning that is political and critical in nature. The view of equality shines through also in the learning relationship, because in these teaching methods it is all about the teacher and the students working as one. The teacher is helping the students find their confidence and power again, which was lost or damaged during the secondary school education from which these Youthreach students are early school leavers. As a consequence of the adult education processes and relationship put forward by Freire and also that of Knowles, students can emerge with strengthened self – confidence. This way of education encourages the students to never hide their opinion and experiences, to share it through critical dialogue and reflection.

The participative and cooperative aspects of education are evident in Youthreach. While I was there during the year of observing of this thesis research, I saw the staff and students working as one to finish their respective modules on time and to the highest of standards. Cooperation between teachers and students was core to Youthreach relationships, along with an emphasis on participation, learner – centeredness and group-based work. However, this is set within the constraints of being part of the formal education system with set curricular material assessment under FETAC (mainly levels 3, 4 and 5) and LCA programmes to complete. This tension between the requirement and pedagogical approaches of the formal education and the learner- centred approaches more typical of adult education are evident in

Youthreach. During my field research I came across this, when the teachers consistently made remarks that they were unhappy that assessment was just about ticking a box at the end of the module. There was little room for anything else. They also said the curriculum was out of date, and hard for students to relate to in terms of their experiences and background. This is reflected in the literature which acknowledges how curricular material is often out-of-date by the time of publication (due to the lengthy process of developing, approving and printing curricular material) and tends to gravitate towards the middle class orientation of the education system.

Equality between the students and staff was evident in the Youthreach setting as well as there was no staff room, there was a common room where all staff and students sat and ate meals together, and students addressed the teachers by their first name, not by sir or miss. As outlined earlier building both personal and academic relationship with each other was in practice with the Individual Learning Plans (ILP's), where staff were paired with a certain amount of students, and they would meet up with each other once a week, one on one, to see how the student was doing and coping both academically and personally as seen above with the Web Wheel. Hence from this they are teaching the students both an educational curriculum and the curriculum of life i.e. they are helping their students become better human beings. All of this incorporates how the essence of Knowles and Freire views of teaching should be delivered in this area.

This approach can be compared to the banking model of which Freire (1970) speaks. This is evident in our schooling system where 'our schools are in a sense factories, in which raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned to meet the demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing came from the demands of 20th century civilization, and it is the business of the school to build its pupils according to the specifications laid down' (Combat Poverty, 2008, p.21). For me this quote sums up the entire six years of my secondary school education, where there was no equality, it was the school/teachers way or the high way.

Knowles and Freire's views of how education should occur in this area is evident in much of Youthreach's work. If we were to look at Jessica's story for example, it shows how much these student-centred methods worked for her 'I would like to thank the staff in Youthreach Ballina you have given me a gift for life, education. I am now passing on this gift and the student centred teaching methods you once used on me, to the students that I teach today'. In



*'A Road Less Spoken' The experiences of Youthreach participants* by Kathriona McHugh, she shares the stories of several Youthreach students. There were two which stood out for me.

The first was Laura;

'Who is 17 years old and in first year of the LCA programme. She lives with her mother and has eight younger siblings. Primary and secondary were difficult for Laura, she felt that she did not fit in and was constantly bullied by others. She was rarely in attendance at school and missed 52 days in one school year. Laura explained the difficulty in keeping up in class at school after such poor attendance and the embarrassment she felt in class when asked a question. Laura is happier in Youthreach as she doesn't feel like she is being judged and finds the programme less stressful'. (Mc Hugh, 2014 p.140).

The next story comes from Michelle;

'Who is 19 years old and a member of the Travelling community. Both her parents had very little schooling and are deemed illiterate. She has been attending Youthreach for the past three years and is currently completing second year of her LCA. Michelle had a very frustrating educational experience as her dyslexia went undiagnosed and unrecognised for many years. She found it difficult to cope in school and resolved that expulsion was her only option as her parents would not let her leave school. Michelle has found Youthreach to be suitable to her needs and is constantly working on her numeracy and literacy skills. She is now more confident in her ability and is looking forward to continuing her education'. (McHugh, 2014 p.141).

From these quotes we can see how much Youthreach education has helped these two students, and just like that of Jessica restored their confidence in education, which had been shattered by secondary school education. From these two stories the view of greater equality between students and teachers shines through, they are working together as one, as a unit and both are learning from one another. Appreciating this aspect of interpersonal relationships and its impact on the learning process is key to Youthreach's educational approach. These stories also show how Youthreach did not ignore their students' past, it drew on their life experiences and helped them come to terms with it and develop coping strategies. This can be related back to that of Knowles and Freire's views on teaching, especially the early stages and principles which they outline about learning experience and adopting a student-centred, participative approach.

So far we have discussed the area of Youthreach education, its evolution and how the way its learning process and relationships operate. There is a clear lack of recognition towards this model of education in the Irish system, especially in the hierarchical model of primary-secondary and tertiary education. This leads us onto the second part of the literature review

discussing the meaning of the terms “stigma” and “recognition” and how the issue of class is a key part of it.

## **2.4 The meaning of the terms stigma and recognition and how the issue of class plays a key part**

So far we have discussed the education that is on offer in Youthreach Centres and outlined at the outset of the thesis how this education is often positioned as a second chance and has been stigmatised within Irish society and education. I wanted to explore the claim being made in this research question, that Youthreach education and its learners are experiencing stigma. But where does the word stigma stem from? Does the lack of recognition towards Youthreach education play a part in it? But first what does this term recognition mean? According to the Oxford Dictionary recognition means the action or process of recognizing or being recognized, in particular: acknowledgement of the existence, validity, or legality of something. This latter point of acknowledging validity is key for Youthreach students and their learning process. In Tom O’Brien’s work entitled *‘Awakening to Recovery and Axel Honneth's Theory of Recognition’*, he highlights the impact of dis-recognition

‘Honneth (1996) describes struggles for recognition as social processes in which certain groups resist forms of unequal treatment, and demeaning labels ascribed to them (e.g., Junkies, Scumbags) by dominant and powerful elite groups. Disrespect can occur when recognition is denied at either stage of personal or social development within family/friends, civil society or by the state. These correspond to the experience of physical/emotional abuse, denial of rights and the denial of social value’ (O’Brien, 2011 p. 66).

Further difficulties are caused by the silo effect of Irish education, where each sector stays in its own silo with those outside Youthreach having little knowledge of it. Consequently, students are expected to make the transition between the very different structures, cultures, curricular and values of different education sectors. Maeve O’Brien talks about this in her research about the transition from primary to second level as

‘scant attention has been paid in Ireland to students’ transitions from first- to second-level education (see Department of Education, 1981; Naughton,1998) and it has largely been regarded as unproblematic (O’Brien, 2001). There has been an astonishing silence on the subject of the classed and gendered experiences of students at the transfer to second level in Ireland.’ (O’Brien, 2003: 250).

From these quote we can see how the impact that a lack or denial of recognition carries, it is a form of abuse which makes peoples feel quite alone and makes them feels they are not a part of society. One could note that this is what happened to Youthreach and their learners as a

result of dis-recognition from society. Youthreach education is not highly recognised. This is evident in the latter findings of this research as Parents Associations know little about Youthreach, with some questioning if it is a valid form of education. Similarly in Maria Lally's work, entitled '*Working with early school leavers*', Lally also highlights this misrecognition

'Many young people who have left school early feel that they are viewed as 'wasters' or 'losers' by the community at large. Paradoxically however, for many people leaving mainstream education is the bravest and the most positive course of action to take. With ever-decreasing support in schools and ever-increasing class sizes, many young people fall through the cracks and are isolated in mainstream schools. 53% of young early school leavers will continue their education in facilities such as Youthreach where they can receive necessary support and continue a more participant-centred form of education. We must appreciate the right of a young person to receive their education in the medium that they feel is most appropriate. Mainstream education may not be the most appropriate form of education for all' (Lally, 2012, p.5).

This quote highlights how second level is assumed to be the norm and often held in a higher regard than that of Youthreach education, this type of education carries a huge recognition from society. But how is this the case if they don't recognise all of their students' needs? It fails to acknowledge the rights of young people to decide their own education preferences and chose an alternative form of duration such as Youthreach

As discussed Youthreach education provides more of a focus on interpersonal relationships and experiential learning in a learner-centred participative approach. This acknowledgement of a wider sense of learning relationships and approaches, as well as the right of students to choose an alternative forms of education points to the importance of recognition. Axel Honneth's theory of recognition can be usefully applied here, as Honneth stresses the importance of social relationships to the development and maintenance of a person's identity. To develop as human beings we are dependent on specific sorts of relationships that promote the development of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem (O'Brien, 2011, p.66). In Honneth's theory of recognition there is three key parts; self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem.

The first part is that of self-confidence and states that

'An individual's self-confidence is established within the relations of friendship and love. Love and friendship are the forms of recognition by which family members and friends create basic trust. Individuals learn to express themselves without fear of abandonment. The self emerges and recognizes its right to exist. This is the starting

point of one's existential self-recognition, the right to exist, to stand out from the crowd and exist in your own unique skin. Lack of recognition affects the individuals' integrity. When recognition is absent at this stage and there is a greater risk, that a negative self-concept will find expression through negative emotional responses e.g., addiction' (O'Brien, 2011, p.64)

Next was that of self-respect where Honneth stated

'Self-Respect is the second form of recognition required to achieve full recognition as a citizen and member of society. The individual is accepted as an autonomous person with legal rights to participate in the shaping of the world around them. Self-respect is established by a person's position as a legal subject with civil, political and social rights. Civil society is the domain where self-respect is achieved. Civil society offers wider possibilities for individual self-realization than the family domain. Civil, political and social rights required for every individual to achieve recognition in the form of self-respect. The absence of self-respect leads to the denial of people's civil, social and political rights. Their autonomy as a person can be undermined and they risk being stigmatized and isolated within society' (O'Brien, 2011, p.64).

Lastly the third form of recognition is self-esteem, which

'Is confirmed by being valued in a social community. According to Honneth (1996) self-esteem is realized in social solidarity where values are shared and valued by others. Here he links the notion of solidarity and the sphere of social esteem. Solidarity is shared esteem that creates social stability. Social esteem is dependent on collectively shared values and goals' (O'Brien, 2011, p.65).

Each form of recognition has a reciprocal relationship with the other. The three areas of recognition represent different ways that the individual employs to develop personal and social relations (O'Brien, 2011, p.65). In particular, the three forms of recognition highlight the individual aspect of recognition, but also how it is social constructed and mediate through self-respect and self-esteem. Youthreach's education processes and structures enables aspects of self-respect and self-esteem to be recognised. An example of this is Youthreach use of ILP's which includes different aspects of recognition in its model. It is also evident in the interpersonal relations of learning encouraged by Youthreach and through the recognition of students' backgrounds and experiences, as well as the adult educational processes used.

However, the theory of recognition also highlights the limitations of Youthreach's achievements as it is set within a wider educational and social context which does not necessarily recognise or appreciate these aspects. This raises the broader issue of recognition by others. Youthreach is meeting the needs of their students, then why isn't this recognised by society? In part, the dis-recognition or stigma towards Youthreach education would seem to stem from the lack of knowledge of those outside Youthreach. Society doesn't know as much about Youthreach as they do of that of the secondary school education. It is the fear of

the unknown. This is a factor of why Youthreach is not recognised or acknowledge and why a stigma is associated towards them. Society isn't fully aware of their importance in our education system. But what does this term stigma mean?

According to the Oxford Dictionary stigma means a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person. Gates (2014:359) describe how 'Labeling theory suggests that stigmatization is not inherent to any particular social identity...but is a social process: those in power label the less powerful as "deviant" from existing social norms (Link, 1987).' For the perspective of the early school leavers in Youthreach, they are stigmatised or 'linked to a devalued social position' (ibid: 360) in a two-fold process – rejected from the second level system as early school leavers (often after difficult experiences) and then stigmatized for being Youthreach students.

Such stigmatising experiences from second level schooling are also evident in previous research and highlight the class dynamics which is often present. Diane Reay's work on *Shaun's Story: Troubling discourses of white working-class masculinities*, uses the story of Shaun and the trouble he has of choosing of where to go for secondary school to explore this issue

'In 1998, when Shaun was in Year 5, he was very clear not only about the secondary school he wanted to attend but also about the schools that he considered unacceptable: I'm gonna go to Westbury because my mate Mark's going there and my girlfriend. Sutton Boys' is like one of the worst schools around here, only tramps go there. However, by the middle of the first term of his final year in primary school, Shaun's certainties were dissolving. Confronted with the headteacher's advice that Westbury would be far too risky a choice as he lived on the edge of its catchment area, and having been warned that other popular schools in the borough were even more remote possibilities, Shaun and his mother resigned themselves to applying to Sutton Boys': I might not get into Westbury cos it's siblings and how far away you live and I haven't got any siblings there and I live a little way out so I might have to go on a waiting list I might go to Sutton Boys' instead cos al my mates are going there. I could have wept at the thought of him going to Sutton but what choice did we have cos Mrs Whitticker said we didn't have any. (Maura, Shaun's mother)' (Reay, pgs. 224 – 225).

From this story we can see how Shaun had his sights set on a better secondary school than the one near him, which doesn't have the best reputation. But because of the area he comes from he was told he would not get into this school, don't even try just go to the bad school near you. Basically because of the area he comes that is why he is being stigmatised against, instead of giving him the chance to show that he is different from these in the areas, he is being stigmatised into staying there. His needs where not being given the recognition they

deserved by his school. Reay argues that this ‘school and its predominantly working-class, ethnic minority intake are demonised both locally and within the wider public imagination’ (2002: 232). A similar process of stigma and demonization is evident about early school leavers and Youthreach in Ireland as discussed below. As Reay points out, to ensure transformation,

‘We must ensure that the material conditions of the schools we offer, their values, social organisation, forms of control and pedagogy, the skills and sensitivities of the teachers are refracted through an understanding of the culture the children bring to the school. (Bernstein, 1973, p. 175)’ (in Reay 2002: 233).

Youthreach is able to create a safe and supportive learning space where students’ background and culture is recognised, they can build their self - confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. However the students who attend Youthreach are well aware that outside of the comfort zone of Youthreach they are stigmatised against, and looked down upon, and sometimes looked over for jobs just because they went to Youthreach. Their education is not held in the same regard to that of secondary school education. If we were to refer back to Jessica’s story at the start of this chapter, she described how she was stigmatised by people because her education came from a Youthreach centre ‘I am aware of the stigmas attached to the Youthreach centres. Although many students that attend may have learning and behavioural difficulties, some may just not have fit into the education system like me’. In Kathriona McHugh work *A Road Less Spoken’ The experiences of Youthreach participants’*, one of the students outlines his personal experience of facing this stigma

‘Brian is 17 he is currently completing a FETAC level 4 programme. Brian is originally from Poland and has been living in Ireland for the past seven years. He found the transition difficult, as he could not speak the language and was bullied by the other students. He felt he had no support from the school, he was unable to communicate and often he felt angry and retaliated against the bullies. He was in constant trouble in secondary school, for what he describes as sticking up for himself against bullies and in certain circumstances against teachers. He felt the teachers did not care about him and that he was always getting into trouble for small things and did not learn from his mistakes. He now feels he is making progress in Youthreach and looks upon it as his last chance to succeed’ (McHugh, 2004 p. 142).

From this story we can see how Brian was stigmatised in secondary school because of his nationality and he was given no support from the school. In fact he was in constant trouble with the school for standing up to the bullies. He was being labelled, stigmatised and bullied because of his background, which in turn was not being recognised by the school officials. As a result of this his confidence was at rock bottom but thanks to the Youthreach he is attending



this has changed. Similar to that of Jessica, Brian could not cope in secondary school because of the bullying by students and the lack of redress or support from the school officials. The stories of Jessica and Brian highlight how their self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem was first, recognised in Youthreach, and secondly, grew more over there time in Youthreach. This again is another example of how Honneth's theory of recognition is visible in Youthreach. So why does society not hold it in the same echelon to that of secondary school? Why is it not recognised as delivering a high standard of education? Why are Youthreach leaners shunned and stigmatised by society? In my research findings section I will be delving more into this issue.

As notes above this is connected to the complex issue of class in our society. A quote from Bourdieu highlights how

‘Schools set such a store on the seemingly most insignificant details of dress, earing physical and verbal manners. The principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the gasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit. The whole trick of pedagogic reason lies precisely in the way it extorts the essential while seeming to demand the insignificant: in obtaining respect for forms and forms of respect which constitute the mos visible and at the same time the best hidden manifestation to the established order’ (Bourdeiu 1997) in (Giroux, 2009, p.49).

From this Bourdieu reveals how secondary schools ‘demand the insignificant’ as part of the ‘hidden manifestation to the established order’ (Ibid). They want students who will follow their rules and procedures and if you can't there is the door. Again highlights the issue of how they don't recognise all of their students' needs and stigmatise on the basis of class background.

Kathleen Lynch stated that

‘education is essentially a competition for advantage in an unequal society. Those who have most resources and wealth, outside of education, can and will use it to gain advantage for their children within schools and colleges. Under-resourced public services like education, services on which those with lowest incomes depend heavily, cannot guarantee equality of opportunity for all. Wealthier parents can afford to, and are enabled to, subsidise their children privately. Their private annual expenditures on education through fees, grinds, tutoring, trips, summer camps, IT supports, etc often far exceed total state expenditure on a given child per annum. As Michael Marsh noted in his book *Class Dismissed* (2011), economic inequality is at the root of educational inequality, and enabling economic inequality to rise annually is a way of actively promoting educational inequality’ ( Village Magazine, Kathleen Lynch.).

Like Bourdeiu, Lynch highlights how education can reproduce inequalities in society, with those with ‘the most resources and wealth...can and will use it to gain advantage for their children within schools’ (ibid). Those who are already disadvantaged and lack resources are often further disadvantaged within the education system.

Cathleen O’Neill’s research from the early 1990s in *Telling It Like it is* address the area of class in a very astute manner, giving voice to working class women’s experiences in North Dublin.

O’Neill stated that

‘Poor children are penalised because of their poverty. Participants describe how schools in poorer areas could not afford decent equipment, remedial teachers or other specialised help because so much of their budget went into maintaining the schools against vandalism and so on. Half the time the schools have difficulty paying for oil to heat the class rooms. These same schools were then less able to help poorer children with books and exam fees’ (O’Neill p. 94).

O’Neill also believed that it was not enough for the Department of Education to build and provide schools, they should make sure that every school child has an equal chance in the system by providing books, equipment and special help from remedial teachers where needed (O’Neill, p. 94). O’Neill’s research highlights how resources impact on all areas of education. If you are from a privileged or decent area you will tend to do better in education and go further than that of those from disadvantaged areas. Her research also highlights the role of cultural recognition in education, with many of the working class participants in her research describing disrespect and stigmatising experiences in school.

These issues are relevant for Youthreach students. Many Youthreach students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, with parents who either had very little income and who often have poor experiences of education and consequently low opinion of education. As a result of this, many of these students fell through the cracks. In McHugh’s work two of the participant’s highlight this issue of the class dynamics in education very well

‘Cian is 17 years old. He lives with his parents; they are in receipt of social welfare. He has an older brother and a younger sister. He states that his family struggles financially and are finding it tough to pay for the upcoming state examinations fees. He has attended eight primary schools and two secondary schools before joining Youthreach. Cian attended his first secondary school for about a year and a half. He was expelled at the age of 14. He attended a second school for four months, where he was allowed to sit his Junior Certificate exams, his results were poor. He is currently finishing his LCA and aims to achieve good results; on completion, it will be the



longest engagement that Cian will have had, with one educational institution. Cian proclaims that he will be the first ever member of his whole family to have completed education to a Leaving Certificate standard' (McHugh 2004, p.140)

'Alan has just turned 18. He lives in a small town with his mother and his eldest brother. His parents are separated and his other older brother lives with his father in the town. Both of his brothers attended Youthreach and completed their LCA. Both of his parents are unemployed and his father is in receipt of disability benefit. Alan hated school and left immediately after his Junior Certificate exams. He is now in his second year of the LCA and has full attendance on the programme. He has no immediate plans for the future; he is content with the fact that he will obtain good results in his LCA' (McHugh 2004, p. 139).

These quotes show both of these students came from difficult financial backgrounds, struggled in the second level system but are now doing really well in Youthreach. If they are doing well in Youthreach then how come they couldn't do well in secondary school? The complex social and cultural reproduction described by Lynch is evident.

As discussed in the findings chapter, this issue of class in education was a common factor when I meet with both Parents Associations, because most of the parents were members from more secure socio – economic areas, parents were very motivated about education, their kids were engaging well in secondary school and had not come into contact with Youthreach. As a result they stigmatised and feared the unknown; basically these parents have never had contact with Youthreach, hearing negative things about it. As a result of this, they criticise Youthreach and look down upon it, and don't hold in the same recognition to that of secondary school education. Hence from this, we can see from where the stigma stems towards Youthreach, with the issue of class playing a key role in this.

O'Neill's research very powerfully uses personal narrative to highlight the intersection of class and education. She presents the story of Lorraine

'Who has four children still at school, at both primary and second level, said that "not all of mine are able for school. My two boys can't wait to leave school. They are always in some kind of bother with the teachers. I feel they are singled out, for things like the way their hair is cut, for not wearing the grey school trousers or wearing trainers instead of shoes. When the teachers call them aside – or shout them aside in front of everybody – a situation develops and the boys become cheeky. Then they are put on a complaint sheet which has to be signed by every single teacher in every single class, the sheet lists how well they did or did not behave in class and so on. If too many complaints are made about them the boys end up getting suspended for a while. It has happened to them both at different times. I spend more time in that school listening to complaints, complaints about nothing. What they are doing is harmless really, just trying out different styles and fashions. The eldest boy has been suspended twice this year for cheeking the teachers. When questioned by his parents

about this the boy states that the teachers never give us a chance, they only have time for the swots. His mother feels that teachers send for parents far too often over trivial things and expect them to drop family responsibilities at the drop of a hat. She also felt that teachers and schools have little notion of the troubles that some families have to face' (Ibid pgs. 98 -99).

As discussed earlier, this reveals how schools 'demand the insignificant' as part of the 'hidden manifestation to the established order' (Bourdieu 1977n in Girouz, 2009, p.49). Lorraine's case this school pre judged her kids from where they were from, they didn't bother to get know them they already had their opinion formed.

Up to now, we have discussed the complex relationship between social class and education. The essence of this thesis is to challenge the stigma and to highlight the recognition that Youthreach plays in our education system. But how do we do that? Nelson Mandela stated that 'education is the most powerful weapon which we can use to change the world'. I feel the stigma is challenged by using education as a tool for transformation i.e Youthreach education and the students who attend it. Let them show what they have learned from being a student in a Youthreach Centre. Let them challenge and change the stigma towards Youthreach. This draws on the experiential learning and the learner-centred approach that is core to Youthreach's educational approaches, by facilitating students to tell their stories and educational experiences. But how do you get to students to share their personal stories, and in particular students from Youthreach, whose confidence is low as result of education? And how can individual stories be such a powerful tool to get a message across? The answer to this lies with narrative research approaches

## **2.5 The power of stories and narratives for transformation**

Narrative research approaches highlight the power of story and narrative in our culture and meaning-making. Narrative research have been used to great effect in educational research where meaning-making and reflection on experience is core. Connelly and Clandinin contend that 'the main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways human experience the world' (1990:2). Given the focus in Youthreach on the experiences of their students, appreciating the voice of students and acknowledging the interpersonal relations in learning, it seemed a suitable research method to adopt.

McCormack article entitled '*A parcel of knowledge: An autoethnographic exploration of the emotional dimension of teaching and learning in Adult Education*' tells the story of how he is preparing a workshop session for adult educators. McCormack throughout this article relayed how nervous he was for this session questioning what he could offer these professionals. After reading the poem *Literacy class, South Inner city*, McCormack had an awakening moment. As a result of this he went into his session and delivered a completely different talk than he first had intended to. McCormack spoke from his experiences and heart, telling the audience of adult educators about how nervous he was and in turn they shared their emotions with him. McCormack's story attempts to model a way to consider to our own process of individuation and thereby heightening our awareness of that process in learner's lives. Attuning to his emotional and affective awareness in ourselves and others will result in education for both parties flourishing. This attuning on the relational aspects of learning is encouraged in Youthreach. It draws on the learner-centred and relational aspects of education which adult education theories such as Knowles, Freire, Alheit and Taylor emphasise. A common thread in all of these theories is the belief in adult and further education as a learning relationship between students and teachers. This has to be created and actively sustained on a personal and academic relationship level.

McCormack's article struck a chord with me was because of how genuine, open and honest he was being. This honesty is central to educational relationship and is clearly illustrated through narrative research approaches such as this. Through autoethnography, McCormack found a medium to explore his learning about the impact of sharing his emotions with the group. This approach reassured me to be honest with your learners and people in general and it is the orientation I adopted at the outset of this research. I attempted to be honest with the students, told them exactly why I hoped to do this research project. I explained my intent to challenge the stigma of Youthreach by facilitating learners to tell their stories to others outside Youthreach. Similar to that of In Kathriona McHugh work on *A Road Less Spoken' The experiences of Youthreach participants*. I hope my stories would carry the same weight her ones did.

In a piece entitled '*Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry*' by Connelly and Clandinin, they sum up the issue of the constructed nature and process of the narrative and sum up one challenge that arises from using this narrative approach

‘A particular danger in narrative is what we have called "the Hollywood plot," the plot where everything works out well in the end. "Wellness" may be a thorough and unbending censure, such as is sometimes found in critical ethnographies, or a distillation of drops of honey, such as is sometimes found in program evaluations and implementations. Spence (1986) called this process "narrative smoothing." It is a process that goes on all the time in narrative both during data collection and writing. The problem, therefore, is a judicial one in which the smoothing contained in the plot is properly balanced with what is obscured in the smoothing for narrative purposes. To acknowledge narrative smoothing is to open another door for the reader. It is a question of being as alert to the stories not told as to those that are. Kermode (1981) called the untold stories "narrative secrets" to which a careful reader will attend. Unlike the case in fiction, which is Kermode's topic, the empirical narrativist helps his or her reader by self-consciously discussing the selections made, the possible alternative stories, and other limitations seen from the vantage point of "I the critic' (Ibid, 10).

This raises the broader issue of the constructed nature of narratives and highlights the need to acknowledge the meaning-making and creative processes involved in structuring these narratives. It also raises the issue of how these narratives are then presented and decoded or read as texts by their audience (Hall 1980) – in this case members of the Parents Associations. As explored in the following chapters, the transformative power and limits of such narratives must be acknowledged through the research process. Of particular concern in this case, is the scope of transformative learning enabled through narrative research – does the emotive and symbolic power of stories focus on immediate responses to the neglect of longer-term sustainable transformation?

## **2.6 Conclusion**

This literature review presented an overview of the Youthreach sector in Irish education, locating it as an alternative educational route for those who left the formal second level system early. As such, Youthreach emphasises very different qualities and relationships of learning. This is followed by a discussion what theorists in the area of adult and further education believe the education should be, highlighting the importance of a teacher – student relationship, experimental learning and underlying conditions of equality and reproduction in education (especially the issues of early school leaving and class-based experiences of education) We discussed the meaning of the terms recognition and stigma and how these are useful concepts to explore attitudes towards early school leavers and the Youthreach sector in Irish educational and society. We explored how individual stories can be a powerful tool to get a message across drawing on the insights from narrative research and the limitations and implications of this research.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **3.1 Overview**

‘The Youthreach programme offers a second-chance education and training to young people who have dropped out of school early. It is directed at young, unemployed, early school-leavers aged fifteen to twenty years and operates on a full-time, year-round basis. Youthreach seeks to provide early school-leavers with the knowledge, skills and confidence required to participate fully in society and to progress to further education, training, and employment. The objectives for its participants, termed learners, may be summarised as follows: personal and social development and increased self-esteem, second-chance education and introductory-level training, the promotion of independence, personal autonomy, active citizenship, and a pattern of lifelong, learning, integration in further education, training opportunities or the labour market and the promotion of social inclusion’ (Department of Education, Inspectorate Evaluation Studies (2010). *An Evaluation of Youthreach*).

I decided to complete my master’s research and thesis on the area of Youthreach education because I personally feel that the education on offer there is very valuable for certain groups of young people in Ireland. However, from my experience on placement in Youthreach, I realised that it is perceived differently to other sectors of education, placed at a lower status and stigmatised. Hence this research was prompted by this question; If Youthreach is successfully educating young people, then why is there a certain amount of stigma associated towards it? Why is it not viewed in the same echelon of second level school education?

### **3.2 Research Question**

This research project explores the type of education offered by the Youthreach sector. It is particularly interested in the recognition of this area of Youthreach education, its perceived lower status and how one can challenge this stigma. One way of addressing this emerged from the value placed on learner centered and experiential learning in Youthreach. This thesis aim to give a platform for the stories of three Youthreach students so that their voices, opinions, and experiences can be heard through an active case study approach, by parents within their communities. I feel by doing this it will reveal the power of narratives for learning transformation as these students discuss their educational experiences and how they have turned their lives around and got their educational experiences back on track, with the assistance of both the Youthreach program and the teachers there. This enables an investigation of the power of these individual stories for learning transformation as key ingredients to changing the stigma associated towards Youthreach education and will work with members of two Parents Associations in this local area. This study also acknowledges

the broader context within which this is set, in particular the relationship between socio-economic class, and Youthreach is important. Therefore this research topic will use a case study approach to explore the following questions;

1. What type of education is on offer in a Youthreach center?
2. Using the concept of recognition, what status does Youthreach have in the Irish education system? Is it stigmatized as a form of education?
3. How is the status of Youthreach education related to the early school leaving profile of its learners? How does the issue of class relate to this?
4. How can Youthreach respond to these challenges?
5. Can the personal stories of three Youthreach students be used as learning transformation, to change the perceptions of two Parents Associations perception towards Youthreach?

### **3.3 The Qualitative Approach**

Research is described as ‘seeking through methodical process to add one’s body of knowledge and hopefully to that of others by the discovery of no-trivial facts and insights’ (Bell, 1997, p .2). This I what I hope my thesis will achieve. That it will bring the area of Youthreach education out in the public domain more and make people more aware of the nature of Youthreach education. In order for me to achieve this, I felt that the methodological approach for my research question, must be that of qualitative research. Qualitative research is

‘based on methods of analysis, explanation and argument building which involve understanding of complexity detail and context. Qualitative research aims to produce rounded and contextual understandings on the basis of rich, nuanced and detailed data. There is more emphasis on holistic form of analysis and explanation in this sense, than on charting surface patterns, trends and correlations. Qualitative research often does use some form of quantification, but statistical forms of analysis are not seen as central’ (Mason, 2002, pgs. 3- 4).

This capacity of qualitative research is to produce rounded and contextual understandings of the education offered in Youthreach is key to my research. Masons explains that through

‘Qualitative research we can explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world including the texture and the wave of everyday life, the understandings, experience and imaginings of our research participants. Instead of editing these elements out in

search of the general picture or the average, qualitative research factors them directly into the analyses and explanations' (Ibid, p.1).

Qualitative research approach is about doing the research that is relevant in the world of today, and bring you into the world to meet people who play a key part in shaping and forming your research question. This is what my research has done, as I have been in the frontline on a year's placement spending time with staff and students in my Youthreach centre and learning from them what Youthreach education is all about. I have engaged with two local Parents Associations and learnt from them about their respective views on our educational system at the moment. Through the narrative research approach of stories created by Youthreach students' we have challenged them about their conception of Youthreach education.

Mason believes that qualitative research should 'involve critical self – scrutiny by the researcher, or active reflexivity. This means that researchers should constantly take stock of their actions and their role in the research process, and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their data' (Ibid, p. 7). This reflexivity was important for my research given the sensitivities of this topic and my role as an insider who was on placement for a year in this Youthreach centre. Mason also states that qualitative research 'should produce explanations or arguments, rather than claiming to offer more descriptions' (Ibid, p.7). This again shows why qualitative research is the best approach for my research, because this approach enabled me to always have an open mind and critically examine everything, and to also produce explanations or arguments throughout my thesis, which I hope to do.

### **3.4 The Research Process**

Qualitative research explores a wide array of dimensions of the social world. My research questions will critically reflect on Youthreach education, by drawing on the experiences of those in this area, and exploring public perceptions and values of this type of education to examine how a stigma could stem from this. I will challenge the perceptions towards Youthreach by showing how personal stories from Youthreach students about their experiences can impact on attitudes towards Youthreach. I will be showing how this form of action came about in my thesis, as a result of my placement in the Youthreach centre, my growing realisation about the negative attitudes and stigma towards Youthreach to the decision to engage with the Parents Associations of local second level schools and to use the Youthreach students' stories, to challenge their views and opinions.



My research used is a mixture of both desk and field research. The desk research is of my literature review of policy and practice in the area of Youthreach education, adult education theories as well as a variety of sociological and psychological theories of recognition and stigma. Policy and previous research was used to create a profile or overview of Youthreach as a part of the Irish education system. The literature review is a key component of my research, which has reviewed previous research and thinking on these topics and addressed the themes that will be discussed in this thesis. The first theme explored the views of the professionals in the area of adult and further education to identify, aspects of the education on offer by Youthreach. Theories of adult education provide a framework to explore the type of learning which occurs in Youthreach education, as well as giving an insight into why this is given lower recognition and status than mainstream school-based education, hence leading to stigmatisation for the early school leavers who are now in Youthreach. This leads onto the next theme of the meaning of the terms recognition and stigma, and how the issue of class is a key part of the recognition and stigmatisation context for Youthreach learners. The last theme that was evident was the potential of individual stories of learner's experiences and how they can work as a form of action to enhance awareness and challenge the stigma towards Youthreach.

The qualitative research which forms the basis of my field research was conducted in five steps. The first step was finding a Youthreach centre that I could use as my case study in my research; a centre that fulfilled the research criteria of allowing me full access to their centre, classes, staff and students as a participant researcher for the year. Initially I thought that it would be quite difficult to find a Youthreach centre that would provide me with all of this. Thankfully I found a centre that was willing to give me a year's placement, and allowed me to use them as my case study for my research question. For the purpose of this thesis and that of the ethical consideration to this respective Youthreach centre, I will not be naming this centre, I will just be referring to it as a Youthreach centre in this thesis. For my field research and for the purpose of this research question, I spent eight months of the academic year in this Youthreach centre, observing the education on offer here and acting as a participant researcher assisting with activities where requested by staff and students, by co teaching with some of the teachers, assisting students with personal issues, and teaching some of the students Irish history. By using the method of participant observation, I felt I got an abundance of information that helped me analyse the area of Youthreach education throughout this thesis both positively and critically. I recorded an ongoing journal which



recorded my experiences, thoughts and responses throughout the year. Participating to this extent for the year also enabled me to build up trusting relationships with staff and students which was vital for the research stories and interviews as discussed later on.

The second step for my field research was that of in-depth interviews with two teachers in the Youthreach centre, focusing on the following questions; What is the education on offer in a Secondary School? What is the education on offer in a Youthreach Centre? Who would attend a Youthreach Centre? What do you think is the purpose of a Youthreach Centre? And lastly Is there anything you would question about the education on offer in a Secondary School and in a Youthreach Centre? The reason I decided to use qualitative in-depth interviews as a research method, was because I felt it would provide me with information from people who are working in this educational sector to garner their insights about what is working and what is not. They can give insights based on their position within this system. As Denscombe (2003, p.164) points out that interviews are used to obtain ‘material which provides more of an in-depth insight into the topic, drawing on information provided by fewer informants’. ‘Fontana and Frey (1994) also adopt this view, stating that interviewing is the most common means by which we can gain insight into the minds of participants’ (Mc Hugh 2014, p.148). I feel this method was extremely appropriate for my research because it would provide me with relevant insights and information to examine the area of Youthreach education. It would facilitate a discussion about what type of learners attend Youthreach, why they left secondary school, why Youthreach works better for them, opening up discussion about their insights about Youthreach and its students. For reasons of ethical consideration I will not be naming my interviewees in the findings chapter, I will be calling them Lucy and Harry.

The third step of my research method was that of individual stories from Youthreach students. Two males and one female agreed to participate in the creation of these stories and together we wrote their respective responses to the following questions; What was Secondary School like for you? Why did you come to Youthreach? What is Youthreach for you? What do you think outsiders see Youthreach as? Where are you now since you have been in Youthreach? And lastly would you recommend Youthreach? The students came up with these questions themselves and over a couple of hours with myself we sat together and wrote their responses to these questions. For both of us, it was quite an emotional experience. Again taking into mind the ethical considerations of these learners their respective names will not be used and they will be referred to as Jake, Jack and Lisa. Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2006, p.84)

claim that ‘by inviting participants to create things as part of the research process, it is a different way into a research question...and engages the brain in a different way, drawing on different kinds of response’ (cited in Mc Hugh, p.149). This is the reason I decided to go with individual stories because it could draw on the passion of the students since it is their own personal story. Another reason I decided to go with this method was the transformative power of education, captured in Nelson Mandela’s statement that education ‘education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world’.

These Youthreach students self-selected to participate in this research in response to my open call for stories in the Youthreach centre. They are highly motivated learners who agreed to participate because they felt that the Youthreach education has changed their world, it gave them an awakening and a belief they can achieve education and go far in life. Youthreach has given them the belief to believe in themselves more, and that their opinions, views and stories are important and carry weight. I wanted to give voice to their experiences and use their stories from Youthreach in my thesis. This sampling strategy form an obvious limitation of this research, as other less positive experiences of Youthreach are not likely to feature.

These personal stories in the original written format were presented to the Parents Associations as a form of action to raise awareness about Youthreach education. I wanted to explore if this would challenge recognition of and change the stigma associated towards Youthreach. This explores the potential of narrative stories based on personal experience to prompt transformative learning. The emotive power of narrative and personal experience is highlighted in narrative research literature (Connelly and Clandinan 2000). As discussed later, one issue that does arise is the extent of such change that can emerge from such personal stories - is it an immediate emotionally - driven response or can it sustain a longer – term attitudinal transformation. This is a key methodological issue for narrative research and is explored later in the discussion chapter.

That next step was to form the focus groups to explore the attitudes and awareness of those outside of Youthreach education. For this, I approached two local Parents Associations meetings of those who have children in local mainstream secondary school. The reason I decided to go down this avenue was because these parents have a keen interest in education and would not be afraid to voice their opinions on matters. Their children are participating in the mainstream second level system from which Youthreach students have been excluded. I wanted to explore what these parents knew about Youthreach. In choosing to sample from

those who are engaging successfully in the mainstream school system I was conscious that this is a very selective group whose children are successfully participating in second level schooling and whose parents – mothers in all cases – are highly motivated about education (as only a minority of parents volunteer to serve on Parents Associations). They were purposively sampled for this reason and I was interested in exploring their knowledge and preconceptions of Youthreach education and learners. Most of these parents were middle class mothers, mirroring the tendency of middle class parents to be more involved in their children's education (Lynch and Moran 2006, p.85). As explored in the literature review, the typical profile of Youthreach students are those who have been excluded from the mainstream school system. Many are from a working class, background, with low levels of participation in education in previous generations.

Hence the choice of focus group participant will also highlight the issue that class plays in educational participation and preconceptions towards Youthreach. I am particularly interested in seeing if the Youthreach student's stories can challenge and change their views and stigma towards Youthreach. This explores the potential of narrative stories based on personal experience to prompt transformative learning. The emotive power of narrative and personal experience is highlighted in narrative research literature

‘Although narrative inquiry has a long intellectual history both in and out of education, it is increasingly used in studies of educational experience. One theory in educational research holds that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general concept is refined into the view that education and educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; learners, teachers, and researchers are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories’ (Connelly and Clandinin, 2010, p.2)

As discussed later, one issue that does arise is the extent of such change that can emerge from such personal stores – is it an immediate emotionally driven response or a longer – term attitudinal transformation. This is a key methodological issue for narrative research and is explored later in the conclusion chapter.

For the purpose of this thesis and that of the ethical consideration to the respective Parent's Associations, I will not be naming the Parents Association's or any of their members, I will refer to them as Parents Association one and two. In my meeting with these Parents Associations I will use the same questions that I used when interviewing the teachers from the Youthreach centre, before sharing with them the individual stories written by the three

Youthreach students and asking about their responses. I feel this method of using a focus group, will be beneficial to my research, because the findings from this gave an insight into how parents who are very involved in mainstream school respond to and ask them to give recommendations of change for Youthreach. All of this will be aiding me in answering the research question.

The fifth and final step I will be adopting is one final interview, with a Youthreach coordinator. Again for the purpose of this thesis and that of the ethical consideration to the respective coordinators, the person will not be named and will be referred to as coordinator Susan. Interviewing this coordinator will give an insight into her perspectives of public awareness and attitudes toward Youthreach. I will be able to put forward the responses and recommendations of change by the Parents Associations to ascertain if they are feasible, and to explore her thoughts on the use of personal narratives to raise awareness and challenge the stigma.

### **3.5 Ethical Aspects**

The essence of my thesis is to explore awareness and attitudes towards Youthreach education, and to begin to challenge attitudes towards Youthreach in an ethical manner and sensitive manner. I was very conscious of the potential vulnerability of students involved in this research, especially given their previous difficult experiences of education. I was also conscious of need to ensure full informed consent and to protect the confidentiality of all participants and centres. As discussed throughout this methodology I will not be naming my Youthreach centre, the teachers, the Parents Associations, the students or the coordinator to ensure anonymity.

All participants have given their informed consent to participate in this research project and provide the crucial information in order for me to conduct and write this research project. Flick (2009) ascertains that it is necessary to document and incorporate the researcher's thoughts, feelings, positions and observations, into the study. This is regarded as researcher reflexivity; where the researcher mindfully engages in reflecting on her influence on the research process (Hennick et al., 2011). In this research, I need to understand that I am part of the social world that I am researching and to be attentive to my management of the study (Mc Hugh, 153).

### **3.6 Analysis of Data**

In relation to the analysis of my data, majority of my data will be presented in an unedited fashion using quotations from the interview transcripts and the entire stories as written by the students. The findings of these different research steps were then analysed through a process of open coding ‘which is the breaking down of data into discrete parts, which is closely inspected, compared and contrasted and from which concepts are identified’ (McHugh, 2014, p149). Guided by the research questions, I went through each transcript and story line – by – line to identify the key themes emerging. These were then rechecked and categorised under the general themes merging which are also the headings used in the findings chapter below

### **3.7 Conclusion**

In this section I have discussed the methodological approach I have adopted for this research, which is that of qualitative approach. We have seen how this approach will be used in this research. We have also discussed how the data will be presented in this research question and the ethical considerations that must be taken into consideration.

## **Chapter Four: Reflective Findings**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter will present and reflect on the findings and methods from the research in four parts. Each section presents the key findings of the research and then offers a personal reflection on their significance, before being analysed in the final chapter. The first part will discuss the interviews with two teachers from the Youthreach centre and will explore what they feel Youthreach education is. The second part will lay out my first meeting with the two Parents Associations and what occurred in these meetings. The third will portray the three personal stories from the Youthreach students and my personal reflections on the stories. The fourth part will show my second meeting with the two Parents Associations and will discuss how the stories from the Youthreach students transformed their opinions on Youthreach. Also in this section I will outline the recommendations that came from these Parents Associations on the areas in which Youthreach could improve.

### **4.2 Interview's with two teachers from the Youthreach Centre**

I interviewed two teachers individually from the Youthreach centre, named Lucy and Harry. I focused on the following five questions; What is the education on offer in a Secondary School? What is the education on offer in a Youthreach Centre? Who would attend a Youthreach Centre? What do you think is the purpose of a Youthreach Centre? And lastly Is there anything you would question about the education on offer in a Secondary School and in a Youthreach Centre? Three common themes came out from the analysis of both of these interviews, and show what Youthreach education is all about.

The first viewpoint that shone through in both interviews was the importance of the interpersonal aspects of education. They felt that building a relationship with your students was at the heart of the ethos that underpins Youthreach education. Lucy stated that

‘We do Individual Learning Plans, where we sit down with students at the start of the year and plan what they want to achieve over the year, and keep discussing this over the year. This should be done in secondary schools. Too much focused on exams. In Youthreach we are empowering students to take control of their lives, because of relationships with students we know about their lives outside of school, as result of this come and talk to us the staff, because of this it helps more with the educational side of things. We are helping them have a trusting relationships with an adult which they may never have had before, showing them they can trust someone, and empowering them to take control of their lives and their education’.

Harry summed it up as follows ‘that in Youthreach we are in a very privileged position we to get to know the students very well, a lot more time to build relationship with students, and build and develop trust between student and teacher’. From these quotes we can see that building both a personal and academic relationship with their students is very important to them and a key part of the Youthreach programme. They were doing it because they cared deeply about the young people who walked through the doors of Youthreach, and through the doors of their classrooms. They wanted to get to know their students as people, learn about their lives both past and present, and build a trusting relationship with them.

When I asked these teachers how do you build this kind of relationship with your students Harry summed it up by saying if ‘you ask students and they will tell you they love the teachers who are human with them, share themselves with their students, build a relationship’. These views of getting to know your students and learning about their lives past and present and building a relationship with them is a huge part of what Youthreach is all about. This also reflects to that of the literature we discussed earlier. Alheit and Taylor discussed the importance of lifelong learning, and put emphasis on acknowledging your students past and talking about it with them. From these interviews we can see how this occurs in Youthreach. Knowles and Freire’s views on teaching is also relevant, where equality is at the heart of the learning relationship, where teachers and students open themselves up as people in a co-learning relationship As a result of this, an academic and personal relationship is being built. These interviews show that these types of relationships and learning are happening in this Youthreach centre.

This leads us onto the second commonality/viewpoint that comes from both Lucy and Harry interview. That was, that they both agreed that outsiders’ views on Youthreach isn’t the best ‘when they hear the word Youthreach they would not think of an educational setting they would think of a Youth group maybe. Or they might stereotype and say they are delinquents or dropouts is what Lucy had to say. Harry said ‘very little people know about us first and foremost and that’s after 25 years in existence that’s not a great legacy’. From this quotes we can see that both teachers are conscious that Youthreach doesn’t have a very high level of public perception or opinion. They don’t hold it in a very high regard. I feel this is where some of the stigmatising attitudes towards Youthreach stem. Harry said ‘the public don’t see us like (as an educational setting) that, (they) refer to us a ‘drugreach’ our PR isn’t great, but locally our image is good, centres do it locally. Educationally and societally we are not held in the same high regard as secondary school’. From this quote we can see how Youthreach

learners are viewed and what public perception is of them; with associations and assumptions made between Youthreach and drugs misuse. His comment does point to the key issues about stigmas, knowledge and distance. On a local level where people have more direct knowledge and experience of the centre, their image is good. The more distant people are from Youthreach, the less knowledge and greater their assumptions and stigma becomes. This again highlights the literature we discussed earlier, in particular when Honneth said ‘disrespect can occur when recognition is denied at either stage of personal or social development within family/friends, civil society or by the state’. From Harry’s quotes we can see there is a disrespect towards Youthreach and their learners. This is because people don’t recognise this education in a positive manner and as a result this lack of recognition does have an effect on both parties. I feel this judging of Youthreach also reflects the issue of class, and this will be seen more when we discuss the findings from the first Parents Associations meetings.

Lastly, the third viewpoint that came from these interviews was that, both Lucy and Harry agreed Youthreach needed to come out into the community more and educate people more and who they are. Lucy stated ‘People are confused by FETAC and QQI, they are not as well-known as the junior and leaving cert. The Youthreach centres could go out and into the community more’. Harry stated that ‘Youthreach should be open and transparent, inclusive, relevant and accessible to the community not just to the student’. These comments demonstrate the teachers’ awareness of the lack of knowledge which people have about Youthreach and the education system and processes they use. They are conscious that Youthreach is good at creating open and inclusive relationships with their students, but need to expand this openness outwards to the wider community as well. I feel this is good for them to acknowledge and shows that they are open and willing to come out and share the story of Youthreach. I feel this strategies to support and enhance this openness should be developed by Youthreach and is a key way of how the stigma towards Youthreach can be challenged and changed. This will aid with enhancing the recognition of Youthreach and the importance they play in the Irish education system. Part of this is to share the story of Youthreach and the participants of Youthreach are key to this. It is evident in terms of willingness and openness of staff and students of Youthreach to participate in my research.

So far we have seen what Lucy and Harry’s view’s, as teachers, on what Youthreach is. I also wanted to gain an insight into the public opinion on Youthreach, and that will come in the form of the research engagement with the Parents Associations. The following sections



describe my first meeting with the Parents Association A, and B the questions I put forward to them and the summary of findings that come from these questions.

#### **4.3. Findings from Parents Association A: First meeting with them on Youthreach**

##### **Q1: What is the education on offer in a Secondary School?**

- Mostly academic working towards third level education.
- Results orientated – points college.
- Planning and structure is learnt by the pupils which helps in life skills e.g. preparing to go into the workforce: getting up on time, smartly dressed, homework, time planning responsibility for themselves, respecting others and opinions and fitting in with a team/teamwork.
- Subject options are very broad so suits all academic abilities, cater for those who are sport, artistic, musical and good with their friends.
- L.C.A. (Leaving Cert Applied programme) is another option for pupils.
- S.P.H.E. (Social Personal Health Education subject) life skills and respect.

##### **Q2: What is the education on offer in a Youthreach Centre?**

- To provide a platform to encourage further education.
- Re-educate young offenders that have left school early.
- Various courses that would give opportunities that otherwise would not be available.
- Learn IT skills.
- Learn to value your family friends and peers.
- Learn cooking and food nutrition.
- Learn to value oneself.
- Chance to do Junior Cert.
- Learn life skills.
- Support and help both at home and in school. Encouragement to get back into the education system.
- To learn a basic level of different subjects.
- Giving people a second chance to get on the education ladder.
- To be educated in an environment that is relaxed and encourages motivating and rewarding.

### **Q3. Who would attend a Youthreach Centre?**

- Children without parental support for their education.
- Children from juvenile detention centre.
- Teenagers dependent on drink.
- Teen parents with very little support.
- Recommend Youthreach for children with academic difficulties.
- Reforming/reformed drug addicts.
- Early school leavers.

### **Q4. What do you think is the purpose of a Youthreach Centre?**

- Second Chance at education.
- Income helps motivate
- No uniform easier
- Individuality develops.
- Approach more practical.
- Socialisation skills from friendships.
- Confidence building
- Allows time away from family issues/community issues.
- Small groups means safer environment
- Help troubled children.
- Make content more suitable.
- Education at a different pace/time (different styles).

### **Q5. Is there anything you would question about the education on offer in a secondary school and in a Youthreach centre?**

- Why is there not more diversity and different pathways for different student's needs?
- Secondary school: What links do the local schools have with Youthreach? Why are the parameters for children with special needs/ educational needs so narrow?
- Gifted children not supported.
- Teachers.
- Youthreach: Why has it got the stigma when you hear Youthreach? What links do Youthreach have with the community? Why is there not more known about it? How is it promoted? What are the ratio of the boys/girls?

#### **4.4 Findings from Parents Association B: First meeting with them on Youthreach**

##### **Q1: What is the education on offer in a Secondary School?**

- Leaving Certificate
- Junior Certificate
- Leaving Cert Applied (LCA)
- Personal development
- Transition Year
- Sports
- Working as a team
- Leadership skills
- Holistic approach
- Too focused on exam doesn't allow students to show all sides of themselves. Too academic

##### **Q2: What is the education on offer in a Youthreach Centre?**

- Getting people skills they missed out in school like personal skills, life skills, social skills.
- Trying to cover everything i.e. the curriculum and the academic side isn't the most important the person is.
- Literacy and numeracy is key in Youthreach
- Offers life skills
- One parent said strange sitting here saying Youthreach offers life skills, but why isn't secondary school offering this as well? It should be a key part to it. It is obvious that Youthreach is offering it, not obvious that is being done in secondary school.
- Youthreach picks up where the parents didn't. These parents said how lucky their children are and how privileged they are.
- They said kids in Youthreach are from disadvantaged areas and are being let down by secondary school and scoitey.
- But Youthreach has a skill to help them.
- Parents said they don't what Youthreach is because they are privileged enough that they haven't had to deal with it.

**Q3: Who would attend a Youthreach Centre?**

- Kids who dropped out of school
- Students who could not cope in secondary school
- Kids from disadvantaged areas.

**Q4: What do you think is the purpose of a Youthreach Centre?**

- Kids who feel through the crack in secondary school.
- To help students rebuild their confidence.
- To get them back into education
- To build them back up as a person
- To get them ready for the world of work.
- To get them ready for college.

**Q5: Is there anything you question about the education on offer in a Secondary School and in a Youthreach Centre?**

- In secondary school it is all about rote learning
- It is all about how much you can afford i.e the best grinds best school all enhances you in education
- Privileged kids do better than disadvantaged kids like the Youthreach students
- Money has a key part to play in education pitting kids against each other, education is not as free as you think
- Education is not free
- Youthreach teachers are all about the mindfulness and they pass this onto their students of how to be mindfulness. This should be done in secondary school
- Youthreach is a safe place for their students more than their home is. Secondary schools could do more to show students they are safe.
- One parent said that if a student said they would go to a Youthreach centre they would be stigmatised against. You cannot get rid of that. This parent said that as result of this secondary school students would be ahead of Youthreach students. This parent questioned why people go to Youthreach. This parent said when people hear that they went to a Youthreach centre they think dropout and don't think of other issues like bullying etc. I asked this parent do you think this is fair, and this parent said it is just the society we live in. Just the way society is.

#### **4.5 Reflection on the first meetings with both Parents Association**

These two sections show the findings that come from my first meeting with the Parents Association. All of the members for both Associations were women, and based on their involvement in the Parents Associations, we can assume that they had a high level of motivation and involvement in their child's second level education. This reflects the profile of middle class investment in education which was discussed in the literature chapter. In particular when Lynch stated that

‘Education is essentially a competition for advantage in an unequal society. Those who have most resources and wealth, outside of education, can and will use it to gain advantage for their children within schools and colleges. Under-resourced public services like education, services on which those with lowest incomes depend heavily, cannot guarantee equality of opportunity for all’ (Village Magazine, Kathleen Lynch.).

This does become relevant as discussed later in terms of the class-based association, biases and investments in education.

In terms of the process, the meetings with both Associations' followed the same general patterns with some variation. I was quite nervous before my first meeting with these parents, because I was unsure how these parents would welcome me, I was worried that not all of them would engage with me, and I was worried if I could answer the questions they put forward to me. At the start of my meeting with them I informed them about my research. Then for my meeting with Parents Association A, I split them up into five groups and gave each of the group one of the five questions to answer. I was met with a quite few interesting looks when I asked them to do it, but they did this, which put me at ease. Due to time constraints I had only one meeting with Parents Association B, so I did not split them into groups. Instead we sat in a circle and discussed the questions instead. Reflecting on these two processes now, I think splitting them into groups provided me with more information, and some members I felt participated better because of this. It would match the findings on group learning (Connolly 2008). Reflecting on my first encounter with these members I felt there was three common dominators that shone through.

The first was their view on Youthreach. As discussed in my introduction I thought there would have been a huge stigma towards Youthreach from the outset, however these Parents

Association should me it was not this clear. Parents Association A' believed Youthreach was there to provide a platform to encourage further education, to re-educate young offenders that have left school early'. They felt the students of Youthreach would fall into the following categories of vulnerable youth: Children without parental support for their education, children from juvenile detention centres, teenagers dependent on drink, teen parents with very little support, and children with academic difficulties, reforming/reformed drug addicts and early school leavers. There was a sense of social classification, with Youthreach catering for the vulnerable and disadvantaged youth with lower levels of family and social supports.

Parents Association B echo this by stating that 'Youthreach picks up where the parents didn't. These parents said how lucky their children are and how privileged they are. They said kids in Youthreach are from disadvantaged areas and are being let down by secondary school and society'. These quotes show that these members have a good general perception of the background of participants and the type education on offer in Youthreach, and aren't as critical as I thought they would be. However, even though the stigma propelled towards Youthreach isn't as huge as I first presumed, there still is a certain amount of misconceptions and assumptions towards Youthreach from the Associations. Their perceptions tend to classify Youthreach students into disadvantaged categories and create categories of us and them in a process of othering.

The implications of this is evident in comments from Parents about Youthreach being there to re-educate people from disadvantaged areas, with some from Parents Association B asking 'why does Youthreach have to be like this, can't students from all areas not attended?' This implies a lack of recognition of the middle class bias to our second level system which has failed these students. It is an individualised view of educational reproduction that the individual student fails rather than the system or community. However, the findings are quite complex, with other comments revealing a keen awareness of the class dynamics in comments such as 'Money has a key part to play in education pitting kids against each other, education is not as free as you think from member of Parents Association B. Generally the members of Parents Association B show a keen sense of the class dimensions of education whereas the members of Parents Association A focus on the individual learning and social role of education.

These quotes show how class plays a factor in the stigma towards Youthreach. These members used the word ‘disadvantage’ numerous times, which gives out the indication of the process of othering that is occurring as Youthreach students are assumed to be disadvantaged as compared to their own middle class bracket. This can be related back to O’Neill’s literature when she used the story of Lorraine who said her kids were signalled out and stigmatised because of their background, and as result of this they left school.

These findings reveal the status difference with secondary school education held in a much higher regard by the members than that of Youthreach. A member of Parents Association B describes how ‘if a student said they would go to a Youthreach centre they would be stigmatised against. You cannot get rid of that’ This parent said that as result of this ‘secondary school students would be ahead of Youthreach students’ These parents admitted they don’t know very much about Youthreach, but they do know a significant amount about secondary school education, because it is the only education they have interacted with. They accept this apparent tried and trusted method of education, and fear this somewhat unknown type of education that is Youthreach, even though it has been around for twenty –five years. This lack of knowledge is a point that was also in the interviews with the teachers from Youthreach Lucy and Harry. This lack of knowledge is a factor of why Youthreach education is not held in a high regard.

This leads onto the second common viewpoint, their views on who would attend a Youthreach centre. Parents Association A felt it was ‘children without parental support for their education, children from juvenile detention centres, and teenagers’ dependent on drink. Parents B said ‘kids who dropped out of school, students who could not cope in secondary school, and kids from disadvantaged areas. These quotes reveal who these members feel would attend Youthreach. They reveal a tendency to problematize the Youthreach students as students with problems who could not keep in up in secondary school. They are giving out the message to students that you go to Youthreach because you failed in secondary school. This positions Youthreach as a second chance education, and not as alternative education.

I wanted to explore if I could begin to change their attitudes on this and their views on Youthreach students with the help of the individual stories. I wanted them to see that Youthreach education is an alternative type of education.

This is something I feel the stories will challenge and change.

However as acknowledged earlier the Parents Associations discussion of Youthreach was quite complex and reveals a mixture of positive and negative commentary. This was third common viewpoint between these two Associations'; positive views on Youthreach. Parents Association A in particular focused on the positive social contribution of Youthreach education which helps 'individuality develops. Their approach (is) more practical, they help with confidence building'. Parents Association B also stated that 'Youthreach teachers are all about the mindfulness and they pass this onto their students of how to be mindfulness. This should be done in secondary school Youthreach is a safe place for their students more than their home is. Secondary schools could do more to show students they are safe'. These quotes show that these Associations perceive and give credit to Youthreach for the work they are doing.



## **4.6 The personal stories of the three Youthreach Students**

The next part of my research findings presents the stories from the three Youthreach students, from my Youthreach centre. These are the stories of Jake, Lisa and Jack and in the words of Allan Bloom show how Youthreach education was the movement from darkness to light for these students. As described in the methodology chapter, these written stories created by the three Youthreach students in a facilitative process guided by my questions. They are presented here in the language and expression written by the students.

### **Youthreach student Jake and his story**

#### **What was Secondary School like for you?**

It was good at the start. But then hung around with the wrong crowd and got in trouble. Teachers extremely judgemental, didn't help me. Some teachers where nice. But a lot didn't care who you were, more concerned with getting there job done, didn't care who you where as a person. They didn't care about your outside life. Would have liked it to be a friendlier environment. School system is a disgrace, only looking to see how you do in tests, when you ask for help they won't help, make remarks and won't go over work, leave you behind, and they lower your confidence. Don't get to know me as a person.

#### **Why did you come to Youthreach?**

I was kicked out of school, for disruptive behaviour and a bad attitude. I taught Youthreach would be easy, when I got here I was shocked I saw they did work, it wasn't a dose. Even though I wasn't getting paid I liked it. It was my second chance at education. They have improved my attitude and behaviour. Put manners on me.

#### **What is Youthreach for you?**

It was my second chance. The teachers here are nicer, caring, if you have a problem they are always there to help you, they are always there to talk to, they are a second family. They want to get to know me as person. Feel more comfortable with them, they would not give up on me, always give me a second chance, teachers more friendly. It is nothing like school, it is well better, I am enjoying education more. I am getting more here than in school. Whenever I am upset they always ask is everything ok, is everything ok at home, they don't ignore what is going on at home, they let me talk about it. My opinion didn't matter in secondary school. But here it does matter they value it.

**What do you think outsiders see Youthreach as?**

See it as a joke. They would not have a good opinion on it. Get slagged over going here. Most of my friends would be from Youthreach, other people my age would say Youthreach is for stupid people. Some adults would look twice at me when they hear I am in Youthreach doing a course. Employers would do the same. Would like to talk to people to show them what Youthreach is.

**Where are you now since you have been in Youthreach three years?**

When I started here I was the same as I was in school, bad attitude behaviour issues, didn't know how to fit in. I am now taller, behaviour issues have calmed down, no more bad attitude better person now. Was done here in Youthreach, because people cared, people listened, everyone had a voice and an opinion. At the start I got in trouble a few times, but they didn't give up they never do, this showed me they cared.

**Would you recommend Youthreach?**

I would highly recommend Youthreach, because I feel that they are more understanding of people and what they have going on. They want to help you as a person. They gave me confidence to come back to education and continue on, they let you work at your own pace.

**Jake's definition on Youthreach:**

'Youthreach is a second chance for people with behaviour issues bad attitudes or for people who didn't like school. With staff who are very warming and who don't look down on you'

## **Youthreach student Lisa and her story**

### **What was Secondary School like for you?**

I didn't like it all. It was too strict I was put out of class all the time. If I didn't understand anything they would not help me, they would send me out of class. The teachers where strangers they didn't get to know me, gave me homework that was it. They didn't care about my outside life. At the time I had social workers, they would let them come and see me in school rather than at my house, they would not listen to me.

### **Why did you come to Youthreach?**

I left school in fifth year, I was 16 I stopped going I just left. Came here to get my leaving cert. Two of my sisters went to Youthreach, they said it was lot better, more support, teachers were more understanding.

### **What is Youthreach for you?**

Somewhere safe to come and learn where you have support. The teachers we call them by their first name, we get to know them, and you become a family. We are a family, like we have a Christmas dinner, go on trips, and not just work the whole time. They know about my life outside of Youthreach, they help me with my problems they are very supportive. The education here is more project based rather than exams, its course work. The teachers here have more time for you, they want you to get an education, secondary school teachers only cared about the money.

### **What do you think outsiders see Youthreach as?**

They think we come here for money, but is not that, we come for an education. People my age think I left school because they I taught I was bad in secondary school. Adults would think this the same way as well. Was hard trying to get work experience, because when they hear you are from a Youthreach centre, they think you would shop lift, they had an impression we would do something wrong. Just give us a chance to change the name of Youthreach let us show you what it is all about and what we are about.

### **Where are you now since you have been in Youthreach two years?**

I am more confident I trust teachers more. I got help with my maths and English, I was kicked out of these classes in school, confidence brought back in the subjects. Supported me

with stuff at home, counselling in Youthreach helped with this. Staff have helped me big time.

**Would you recommend Youthreach?**

Yes, gives you a chance of education, they don't give up on you here like secondary school do.

**Lisa's definition on Youthreach**

'Youthreach is somewhere you can come to learn, where you have support and is safe'. But you still have fun, like health and beauty'.

## **Youthreach Student Jack and his story.**

### **What was Secondary School like for you?**

It was tough. They looked at you as a student rather than as a person. There was no support from teachers, they were too focused on the work. It was too strict. Every little thing you did wrong they would send you home for it. From this I would miss out on work. They would never listen to you, my opinion was not valid, it was their way. Their opinion was always right. I would change the attitude of the teachers. Once you walk into the building you were there to do work, what happened outside in your own life did not matter, they did not care. However one person who helped me the most was the Chaplain. The work was good but the structure was bad. i.e the way they control the students.

### **Why did you come to Youthreach?**

To get an education. Hopefully get to college. I knew very little about Youthreach before I came, except it was like a school, but more understanding.

### **What is Youthreach for you?**

It is your school, your way of education. More stable programme with better work which is more beneficial for college. The teachers here in Youthreach are friends we see eye to eye. They are very understanding. They treat you the way, you would want to be treated (with respect), and they are very supportive. They deal with issues in my life, we talk them out and they help me. Youthreach is more understanding, they give you more chances than secondary school, they are more favourable and fair in their decisions. If I have a disagreement with a teacher I can talk to them after class, I can speak with them, like adults, and if there are in the wrong they say so.

### **What do you think outsiders see Youthreach as?**

They see Youthreach as a bad programme. Youthreach would have lots of people who dropped out or got kicked out of school, who have no education. Therefore they don't see what Youthreach has to offer. Older people look down on me because I go to Youthreach, where as teenagers don't. Employers don't. Youthreach sets you up more for life, like work experience, personal effectiveness, etc. You are learning about life. Where as in school, it offers the basics. Youthreach it is a second chance and a greater opportunity with better teachers and staff.

**Where are you now since you have been in Youthreach two years?**

When I started in Youthreach I was aggressive, and a messer, and did not care about education when I started here. Youthreach opened my eyes. Showed me if I put my mind too it I can do it. Anything is achievable. They dealt with my aggression, offered me huge support to help me with it, with anger management, time out and able to talk to any of the teachers if anything is wrong, and a willingness to listen. When I got aggressive here they didn't give up, they understood about my life. They also looked into my background to help me with the past more. They had an interest in me as a person and not just as a student. Helped me speak for myself. Showed me my opinion matters. Gave me my confidence back in education. Gave me my confidence to express my opinion in a reasonable manner.

**Would you recommend Youthreach?**

Yes. I think Youthreach is for everyone. You become a family staff and students, we all get to know each other and learn about each other.

**'Jack's' definition on Youthreach:**

'Youthreach helps you look at the real world and to look at reality. With very fair and respectable staff, who never give up, and are completely honest'.

#### **4.7. Reflections on Jake's, Lisa's and Jack's stories**

Here I have shown Jake's, Lisa's and Jack's stories. I was honoured and humbled that these students wanted to take part in my research, wanted to share their personal stories with me and trusted me to share these. I was really touched by this. I sat down with these students as a group first of all and explained to them what my research was about, and informed them it was completely up to them how they wanted to get their stories across. It is their story and I am honoured to give these stories a platform to be heard. All of the students decided to go with the same questions. So over the course of a few weeks we sat down one and one with my laptop and they wrote their stories. They all said they wanted to do this because they wanted to show outsiders what Youthreach education had done for them, and wanted to change their opinion of it. I have read these stories countless of times now and every time I read them, they move me. They show me what amazing young people these students are and how much obstacles they have overcome in their short lives. It shows how they have learned from these problems and are now getting their education back on track thanks to Youthreach and the teachers there. These stories highlight again the pivotal role that Youthreach is playing in the education of our young people. These three stories echoed three common dominators. The first one is that of the issues they had with secondary school. Secondly, what Youthreach education has done for them. Lastly, how they are fully aware of the stigma that is facing them and Youthreach.

In these three stories the students' didn't reflect back kindly in their secondary school education. They all said that it was too controlling, it was the school and teacher's way, and if you didn't follow this, then there was the door. Both the school and the teachers didn't care too much about their lives outside of school. These students knew that some of their teachers were not their biggest fan, and as result of this it put them off their learning in that particular subject. In secondary school all of these students pointed out that they had no voice, no opinion, and that some teachers were not bothered in getting to know them as person. The teacher also kept their barriers up so that the students could not get to know them. So basically there was no academic and personal relationship being built these students felt. Yes one could note that these stories tell only one sides. However when I read these students' account of their time in secondary school, I do agree with them on certain aspects, because things that were happening them also happened to me when I was in secondary school. I was told countless of times when doing my work leave out your opinion it is irrelevant. Or when teachers would give out to me, if I tried to explain myself or even question it, I was in more

trouble. In all of my six years in secondary school I knew what teachers liked me and what ones didn't, they made it very clear. I would also say I only built a relationship with a max of three teachers in all my time there. This echoes by the findings of many empirical research studies. In particular that of McHugh literature and the story of a Youthreach student named Brian, where he stated he;

‘Was bullied by the other students. He felt he had no support from the school, he was unable to communicate and often he felt angry and retaliated against the bullies. He was in constant trouble in secondary school, for what he describes as sticking up for himself against bullies and in certain circumstances against teachers. He felt the teachers did not care about him’ (McHugh, 2004 p. 142)

It must be acknowledged that this gives the story from the perspective of students only, leaving the perceptions of second level teachers unspoken in this case.

The second commonality from these stories was what Youthreach education has done for them. All of these stories spoke so highly of Youthreach and the teachers. They all said that when they came to Youthreach their confidence was low, and that they had a lot of personal problems going on. The Youthreach coordinator and teachers didn't ignore these problems, instead they talked with them about them and integrate this interpersonal aspect as core part of the learning process. They helped them deal with these situations and learn from them. When they made mistakes they didn't give up on them, they were always there for them. The teachers also opened up to the students about themselves and entered into a two-way relationship. This echoes that of the literature of Knowles and Freire of teachers and students' being one, being equal. As a result Jake, Lisa and Jack all said this helped in building a relationship, they knew the teachers liked them and wanted to get to know them as person. In Youthreach all of the students said they were like a family, everyone respected one another, everyone was equal, and everyone had an opinion. I have been in Youthreach both on my H Dip and for this research observation and I have seen extensive evidence of this type of relationship building. The students view on Youthreach echoes the literature of Alheit and Taylor, when they discussed the importance of lifelong learning. They put huge emphasis on acknowledging your students past experiences and talking about it with them. From these stories we can see they do just that in Youthreach.

The second way it reflects back to the literature is that of Knowles and Freire views on teaching, where relationships of equality are at the heart of it, that teachers open themselves up to their students, bring down their barriers and the students will do the same. In these



stories we have seen just that being expressed. This brings greater equality into the learning relationship and educational experience.

The last common viewpoint from these stories was the issue of (mis)recognition and stigma. All of these student were well aware that their education was misrecognised and stigmatised against. They knew that many groups looked down upon them because they attended Youthreach. They knew that adults and employers looked down upon them even their fellow peers did it as well perceiving Youthreach as a 'lesser' rather than an alternative process of education. All of the students said to me this is why they wanted to share their stories because as Nelson Mandela stated education is the most powerful weapon that change the world. These Youthreach students were using their own Youthreach education to do just that. They wanted to use their education to challenge the stigma of Youthreach. In the next section we will see if they did just that. This is presented in two separate sections outlining the responses of Parents Associations A following by Parents Association B.

#### **4.8 Findings from Parents Council A Second meeting: Presenting the students stories.**

**An issue that come across in these stories was that there was too much control in Secondary School and from the teachers would you agree with this?**

- If you are going to run a secondary school you need to have control.
- They felt in Youtheach class sizes were smaller and they could lighten the control. Where as in Secondary school, they can't class sizes are far too big.
- The curriculum is far too much. Secondary school should have smaller classes and as result of this, the teachers could pin point the students who need extra help.
- Teachers clash with certain students which is wrong.
- Parents said that their son or daughter comes home from school and said they don't get along with a certain, and ask them why doesn't that teacher like me? This is wrong they felt.
- It upsets them. They can't understand why.
- They said this is where Youthreach ahead of Secondary School. Students in Youthreach don't have issues with the teachers, they know the teachers like them and are there for them, as said in the stories they are a family.
- They say fault for Secondary school teachers having this problem is the fault of Department of Education because of class sizes, and not the fault of the teachers.
- Also in Youthreach you could get bad teachers as well. There is no control over this once you get bad teachers in both setting, very hard to get rid of them. This is wrong. Department of Education needs to do more on this.

**Do you think a teacher should be called Sir or Miss, or should it be done like it is in Youthreach where teachers are called by their first name?**

- Parents feel jury is out on this. Don't know if this makes a difference. But they do see how it can help back done barriers.
- However they felt in order for respect and control you need sir or miss.

**Do you think a Secondary school ignores what is going in a student's outside life?**

- They would not say ignore, but they feel that teachers and school don't have awful lot of time to deal with it.
- No fault of their own they have a syllabus to get through, school terms, very short, they don't have the luxury to do to. Again class sizes an issue of why this isn't done.

- They felt it something that should be tried to be worked into as Secondary school.
- There should be a section in the school to deal with this.
- However when the parents go to parent teacher meeting the teacher does have a great understanding of who their son or daughter is.
- They feel parents is the first person who should be helping their son or daughter with these issues.
- Not all school's fault.
- One parent does think sir or miss has to be there for respect they won't respect a teacher if they call them by their first name.

**In these stories the students from Youthreach said their opinion didn't matter in Secondary school and their confidence was low as a result of Secondary school, could you see how this could happen and would agree with them when they say it?**

- Yes they all agreed with 100 per cent.
- They feel Secondary school needs to do more on this, not enough classes where we express our opinion or classes that improve our confidence.
- They said in their school days this was the same.
- They said problem with this again falls on the Dep of Education, they need to do more on this.
- They should use Transition Year more to improve students on these issues.
- More needs to be done on transition from Secondary school to college.

**Did these stories help you learn more on Youthreach?**

- Yes totally. These stories show that not all Youthreach students are bad.
- They felt more needs to be done to show students you are not falling when you go to a Youthreach, it is an alternative education.
- Showed them all Youthreach doesn't have a bad name and should not be looked at like this.
- Youthreach needs to do more to show people who they are, they need to come out into the community and show their positive image.

**Any recommendations you as a Parents Council would make to a Youthreach Centre?**

- They should do a TV programme allow cameras in to see the wonderful work they do.
- Publish more of what they do in Newspapers.

- Have leaflets in schools for students who are unhappy in school, so that can see they don't need to feel like this there is alternative.
- They need to come out into the community more they do more fundraisers or events in the community to show who they are.
- They need to come out more.
- The Parents Council did have an issue with students getting paid. They see why the need of why they get paid. They feel the issue of pay needs to be looked at more.
- Are the student's only there to get paid are they using the money for drugs etc.
- They feel the payment needs to be mean tested.
- They feel a secondary school and Youthreach should work more together.
- There needs to be more contact between the two.
- Youthreach needs to give more out more information on who they are.
- Bring out the students who are the success stories of Youthreach and let them tell their story of what Youthreach has done for them.
- All parents didn't know Youthreach was in existence for 25 years.
- They needs to put out more of the success stories.

**From reading these stories, if Secondary school education was not working for your son or daughter would you send them to a Youthreach Centre?**

- All said absolutely.
- They said in my first meeting with them it would have been a no flat out. But now because of these stories and learning more on Youthreach it is a yes.
- All they want is there for son or daughter to get an education and that is what Youthreach offers.
- The stories should Youthreach is for everyone.

#### **4.9 Findings from Parents Council B Second meeting: Presenting the students stories**

- One parent said you can look at it from a different angle, and said look here is a student who dropped out of school, and ok they want to Youthreach, but look they achieved something, as other people in school. They should be treated as equal. It is the same qualification they should be treated as equal.
- One parent is spilt this parent said is a sad thing that we have Youthreach because we let these kids down or is a good thing to have it for them because it takes them out of the madness of secondary school, and gives them another chance of education
- They felt home life was to blame.
- Parents said they agreed with Youthreach teachers, that Youthreach should be seen as a alternative education and not a second chance education, they are doing great work. Not all studnets are the same.
- One parent said that yes it should be seen as alternative education but is not seen as that, what parent would say ok secondary school education is not working for my child I will send them to a Youthreach centre. It is perceived or seen as somewhere for dropout outs. This is wrong. Youthreach needs to do more to improve this needs to do more to educate people on what Youthreach is. Show people they great work them.
- Adult education and PLC colleges is held in high regard because they are always showing what they are doing they are open, Youthreach needs to be more like this.
- The reason is because most people don't know what Youthreach is.
- Youthreach needs to change this.
- The parents felt Youthreach and secondary schools need to work more together they both can learn from each other. More collaboration between the two. They need to work together more and say to each other hey this student isn't coping in secondary school they would benefit from Youthreach.

*Then the parents read out the three Youthreach students' stories.*

After the stories one parent said to be fair to secondary school teachers they have bigger classes.

**An issue that come across in these stories was that there was too much control in Secondary School and from the teachers would you agree with this?**

- Yes. Classes not too big.
- Some teachers are not interested in you there if you find it find it difficult to learn there is good teachers and bad teachers. Good teachers will do anything to help you learn where as bad teachers give up.
- Teachers in secondary school have 30 minutes class with 30 students they are on a treadmill don't have time classes too big.
- Where as in Youthreach teachers have more time classes not as big, and not under the weight of a big curriculum like secondary school teachers.
- Youthreach have more time.
- Some teachers now all the information but they just can't get it across in the class for whatever reason.

**In these stories the students from Youthreach said their opinion didn't matter in Secondary school and their confidence was low as a result of Secondary school, could you see how this could happen and would agree with them when they say it?**

- They all said yes 100 per cent.
- In a lot of schools they are trying to help students who are struggling, like the Chaplin etc.
- They do agree that students need supportive teachers who will help with them with their problems.

**Did these stories help you learn more on Youthreach?**

- They said yes masivelyly.
- They liked the idea of the students wanting to come out to them they will love that.

**Any recommendations you as a Parents Council would make to a Youthreach Centre?**

- The need to advertise more.
- Allow transition year students into Youthreach.
- Get Youthreach students into to speak to TY students.
- Youthreach and secondary schools need to work more together.
- Youthreach needs to be more open.

**From reading these stories, if Secondary school education was not working for your son or daughter would you send them to a Youthreach Centre?**

- This was split half and half.
- Some said yes.
- Some said they are privileged and that their son or daughter is doing ok in school.
- Youthreach should be seen as an alternative and on a par of that of secondary school.
- Students need to know more about Youthreach, they need to be shown that you don't go to Youthreach because you where bold or can't cope in secondary school. Youthreach needs to show this.
- They also recommended the name of Youthreach needs to be looked at.
- They said these stories helped them learn more they know more on Youthreach now and would look at it if secondary school wasn't working for their kids.

#### **4.10 Reflection on the second meetings with both Parents Association, and the power of personal stories**

In my second meeting with these parents I presented the stories of Jake, Lisa and Jack. I asked three parents to read out these stories. I sat back and let these stories take a hold. If we reflect to back to our first meeting with these Associations there perception of Youthreach was mixed. They both stigmatised against Youthreach and referred to it as a second chance education. It was held in a high regard. They tended to label the students who went there as young offenders, students who got kicked out or could not cope in secondary school. However in this first meeting they did share positive opinions on Youthreach so I knew that their opinions were mixed and open to change. Also most importantly I had a real personal feeling that their preconceptions could be challenged and changed, because I felt the individual stories were powerful and moving. There were three common views that came from this meeting. The first was that of how powerful these stories are, and how they did fact change their biews. Secondly, what also come out of these meetings was the power that secondary school hold. Lastly both Associations made the same recommendations for Youthreach.

These stories where presented to the members in the same way that the students wrote them, I did not edited them in any way. I felt that it would have taken away from them, and they were as powerful as it is, and I was just delighted to give them a platform to be heard. While the stories were being read I sat there and looked at the members to see how the stories where being perceived. I could just see the ever changing set of emotions on their faces with every part of these stories striking a chord with them. As I sat there observing I was overcome with joy for these students because their voices, views and opinions where being heard. They were getting the chance to show people who the students really are that attended a Youthreach and what Youthreach is all about. At end of the stories being read all members at both meetings just said whoa, wow, these students are amazing. I got that sense from the parents that they were not happy for pre - judging them in the first place.

But the big question is did these students challenge and change the stigma these parents had towards Youthreach. Parents Association A stated ‘These stories show that not all Youthreach students are bad. They felt more needs to be done to show students you are not falling when you go to a Youthreach, it is an alternative education. Showed them all Youthreach doesn’t have a bad name and should not be looked at like this’. This shows that



their preconceptions were challenged by these stories and as a result their opinion has changed. This change is evident in the shift from my first meeting with them they said they won't send their son or daughter to Youthreach. Now after listening to these stories they 'all said absolutely. They said in my first meeting with them it would have been a no flat out. All they want is there for son or daughter to get an education and that is what Youthreach offers. The stories should Youthreach is for everyone'. This shows how powerful Jake, Lisa and Jack's stories are. The personal stories and experiences of these changed this Association's view on Youthreach.

The same also occurred with Association B where they stated that 'students need to know more about Youthreach, they need to be shown that you don't go to Youthreach because you where bold or can't cope in secondary school. Youthreach needs to show this. They said these stories helped them learn more they know more on Youthreach now and would look at it if secondary school wasn't working for their kids'. These quotes show this Association's attitude towards Youthreach had been challenged and changed because of these stories. They are now saying that Youthreach should be for all students and not just for disadvantaged students, it is an alternative education not a second chance education. They were now saying that they would be open to sending their son or daughter to Youthreach if secondary school wasn't working. I would take this as a result because in my first meeting with them they would not have considered this, but now they are. This again highlights the power of Jake, Lisa and Jack's stories in educating people on what Youthreach is all about and the students who attend it. Their preconceptions were challenged and changed.

I feel the power of these individual stories refers to McCormack's literature, when he told all of these adult educators how nervous he was to deliver his talk, he shared his emotions with them and as a result of this they shared their emotions with him. This is what exactly the Youthreach stories did they shared their emotions with these members, and the members did the same. I was just the mediator and the represented body bringing these stories. It highlights McCormack's view that just being yourself and being honest does carry weight. The Youthreach stories have shown this.

The second commonality that came from these meetings was that of the power and defensiveness about of secondary school teachers and system. Both of these Associations said it that secondary school teachers can't get along with all of their students, it is not their fault if they don't like some of their students. As a teacher myself I just don't agree with this. It is

part of our professional code to work equally with all students, all the Teaching of Council Ireland state in their code of conduct guidelines for teachers

‘Teachers uphold human dignity and promote equality and emotional and cognitive development. In their professional practice, teachers demonstrate respect for spiritual and cultural values, diversity, social justice, freedom, democracy and the environment’ (Teaching Council Of Ireland, Code of professional conduct for teachers, p. 7).

If a doctor had a patient and the doctor didn’t give them proper care because he or she didn’t like them. Would this be accepted? No. So why would do we accept it in our education system? The role of a teacher is to always look for the learning possibilities and potential in our students while they are in our care. Why because they are vulnerable young adults going through a transition period in their lives. It is our job as a teacher to help them with this ‘Teachers’ practice is motivated by the best interests of the pupils/students entrusted to their care. Teachers show this through positive influence, professional judgement and empathy in practice’ (Ipid p.7).

Underlying this is the cultural and normative power which secondary schools hold in our society that parents are unwilling or unable to question. As noted earlier, these respondents are highly motivated parents who have chosen to voluntarily sit on their child’s school parent association and naturally they are quite invested in this school system. Hence we can see their use of quite defensive language and positions throughout these findings, in terms of defending teachers on the basis of large class sizes, that they can’t like all students and so on. But if teachers in Youthreach can teach in a way where they value and care for all their students why can’t secondary school teachers do likewise? Is there an inherent difference in the learning relationships in the two education systems or is it based in different cultural and cultural norms and expectations about what secondary school and Youthreach are, with consequent different expectations of the student-teacher relationship? Similarly, the misconceptions about the issue of pay in Youthreach is striking. There is a lack of understanding on parents’ part about the training role of Youthreach (which is quite distinct to schooling education) and the move towards employment with the associated pay. These are issues that these research findings with the Parents Associations highlight and are worthy of further study as Youthreach and secondary school education system needs to address them.

Lastly the third viewpoint that came from the Parents Associations was that the recommendations on how can Youthreach can improve. As stated at the start of this thesis, one of the intentions of this research was to identify ways in which Youthreach can change.

In the interviews with Lucy and Harry they did agree that Youthreach needs to become more open and visible to the public rather than staying within their own space. So did these Associations. They said Youthreach needs to come out into the community more and educate people on who they are, needs to be more open, needs to work with local secondary school more establish better links, they need to educate students more on what Youthreach is all about, and lastly address their concerned with the issue of students getting paid. All of these recommendations I feel are just and shows the areas where Youthreach needs to improve on. I will be putting forward these recommendations to a coordinator of a Youthreach centre in my next part.

#### **4.11 Interview with Youthreach Coordinator and reflection on this interview**

The semi – structured interview with a Youthreach Coordinator gave me an opportunity to forward some of the issues arising from the Parents Associations discussion and gain the views of an insider working in an influential role in the Centre. I asked the Youthreach Coordinator a series of questions/comments from which there general themes were identified.

The questions were;

- How would you describe Youthreach Education?
- One of the issues that came from the Parents Associations was that they felt they didn't know very much about Youthreach. They felt Youthreach was a closed shop and needed to come out into the community more and educate people more on who you are. Would you agree with this?
- The Parents Associations felt that secondary schools and Youthreach should work together more. Would you agree with this?
- Another suggestion put forward was that of Youthreach designing leaflets that should be left in secondary school classes for students to see, so that it shows them if they feel secondary school isn't working for them, there is an alternative available. What would your view be on this?
- They also questioned the name of Youthreach and felt this should be looked at it. What would be your view on this?
- They were also concerned with the idea of students getting paid and felt that this should be means tested. Would you agree with this?
- And lastly I shared three individual stories from Youthreach students with these Parents Associations and it help informed those more on Youthreach and challenged their stigma towards Youthreach. Could you see this being a way of how Youthreach could inform people more on who you are and challenge the stigma towards yourselves? I found when doing this interview and now reflecting back on it and reading back on my transcript, there was three views that I noticed.

During the subsequent transcription and reflecting back on it and reading back on my transcript, there was three themes that emerged in the analysis.

The first was that the coordinator did agree that Youthreach needs to come into the community more ‘absolutely 100 per cent absolutely. The problem is Youthreach is a government programme it is 26 years old. The government never advertise Youthreach you never see anything on Youthreach any were’. This shows that the coordinator does acknowledge that Youthreach is too much of a closed shop and needs to come out into the community more and educate people more on the mode of education. As the coordinator explains this occurred for structural and historical reasons as Youthreach’s funding never prioritised communications nor did the government ever highlight this sector. This coordinator asked me to go back to these two Association and to ask them if they would come along to a regional Youthreach conference where Youthreach’s from two counties come together and meet, later this year, which they have accepted. This shows an openness to a flow of communications once an avenue is identified.

The second viewpoint that came from this interview was that this coordinator identified structural issues in the education system for this disjuncture between the second level and Youthreach sectors. The Coordinator ‘felt that Department of Education should direct more on this. At that the moment there is no onus or law governing secondary schools to refer a student to Youthreach, even though they are both government funded programmes. The onus is on the Department to tell secondary schools that if they know someone won’t survive secondary school that there is alternative and that is Youthreach. It is not fair on young people who are dropping out of school, and there referrals are coming from parents who are in crisis mode with them.

The coordinator highlights how the education system’s structure and referral system does not flow smoothly through the system. The second levels system (from which these students are early school leavers often in difficult circumstances) are not required to refer students to alternative education such as Youthreach. Instead this responsibility refers back to the centre of hierarchy; the Department of Education and Skills, which is far removed from students’ lives. Consequently, students and parents are finding out about Youthreach themselves and coming to them in crisis mode. This creates a very stressful situation for all involved. It is part of the wider culture in the Irish education system where each sector operates in it own silo and hence does not pay attention to the transitions between the education sectors which was discussed earlier ( O’Brien 2010).

The third and final view that came from the interview was with the voices and power of the Youthreach students. I showed the coordinator the stories I was using, and how these had challenged and changed the perceptions these Parents Association had with Youthreach. I asked if this was something that should use more of to educate outsiders about Youthreach and the Coordinator responded to say ‘Yes it could be. But we are talking about real people here so there is a level or protecting them and that doesn’t endanger them. But absolutely yes, yes’. As discussed earlier, the power of narrative and the story is very profound, and it can bring these students’ voice and experiences to life. This is a vital contribution given the level of misrecognition and non- recognition which they have experienced as early school leavers and Youthreach students. However, this must be done in an ethical and safe way as the Youthreach Coordinator points out.

#### **4.12 Conclusion**

In this section we discussed the education on offer in Youthreach thanks to the interviews from two teachers there Lucy and Harry. We also saw from these interviews what they felt was the stigma facing Youthreach. We then discussed my first meeting with the Parents Associations and we saw the type of stigma they had towards Youthreach and the students there, but we also saw that they had a few good points to say on Youthreach. Next were the stories of three Youthreach students Jake, Lisa and Jack and how powerful, strong and moving their words are. We then saw how these stories challenged and changed both Parents Associations’ preconceptions towards Youthreach in my second meeting with them. They also outlined the areas that Youthreach needs to improve on. I feel as a result each of these sections have addressed the following questions;

- 1 What type of education is on offer in a Youthreach center? Is the interpersonal relations a key part of their education?
- 2 Does the stigma towards Youthreach have anything to do with the issue of class in our society?
- 3 Is Youthreach education stigmatized? Does the lack of recognition towards their education play a part in it?
- 4 How can Youthreach respond to these challenges?

5 How do personal stories from Youthreach students transform attitudes of parents within these communities?

## Chapter Five: Recommendations and conclusion

### 5.1 Introduction

This section will briefly identify key issues arising for Youthreach as an education section in the Irish system. Recognition of the sector continued to be a contentious issue as the literature and findings chapters of this thesis demonstrate, with Youthreach having a lower profile than the schooling sectors. It struggles with recognition issues as a sector, often being disrespected in perceptions of it as a ‘last chance’ (Byrne, 2010:136), rather than being recognised as the alternative route to education that it is. Further difficulties are caused by the silo effect of Irish education, where each sector stays in its own silo with those outside Youthreach having little knowledge of it. Consequently, students are expected to make the transition between the very different structures, cultures, curricular and values of different education sectors. Maeve O’Brien talks about this in her research about the transition from primary to second level as

‘scant attention has been paid in Ireland to students’ transitions from first- to second-level education (see Department of Education, 1981; Naughton, 1998) and it has largely been regarded as unproblematic (O’Brien, 2001). There has been an astonishing silence on the subject of the classed and gendered experiences of students at the transfer to second level in Ireland.’ (O’Brien, 2003: 250).

There key issues that I felt stood out throughout this research was the following: i) How recognition operates through the fear of the unknown in the case of Youthreach education, how this is connected to the role that social class plays in the misrecognition and stigma of education sectors such as Youthreach ii) the educational value of Youthreach education in terms of experience – based learning, learner-centeredness and interpersonal relationships and learning between teachers and students in Youthreach and iii) the potential of individual stories about educational experiences to transform attitudes.

### 5.2 Recognition of Youthreach Education

In terms of recognition, a host of issues emerged from the findings of this thesis about the perceptions of Youthreach, as discussed above. This was seen in three parts.

The first was that at the start of this thesis we saw that the Youthreach education was not held in high recognition and was not recognised as key part of educating young people in the Irish education system. This was highlighted in the Youthreach students’ seen in the literature review from ‘*A Road Less Spoken*’ *The experiences of Youthreach participants*’ by Kathriona



McHugh, in particular Jessica's story where she stated 'Youthreach was the best decision I ever made in my life, and I don't think I would be where I am today otherwise. I had very bad experiences and attitudes towards education prior to this. I am aware of the stigmas attached to the Youthreach centres'. For many the status of Youthreach is a class-based issue, with the Youthreach sector and its students associated with working class and disadvantage. While Youthreach has developed as an alternative route for early school leavers amongst others, this is framed in a class-based negative perspective. As one of the Youthreach teacher Harry described 'the public don't see us like (as an educational setting) that, [they] refer to us a 'drugreach', our PR isn't great, but locally our image is good, centres do it locally. Educationally and societally we are not held in the same high regard as secondary school'. This is echoed by previous research findings such as McHugh (2014), Lodge and Lynch (year) and O'Neill (year). It is a theme that warrants further research.

I am not saying that this thesis has raised the recognition of Youthreach on a large scale or raised its recognition on a national level. But what this research has shown, is that the lack of recognition towards Youthreach needs to be challenged. This research has done this on a very small scale, and has shown that Youthreach's recognition can be raised by showing people the pivotal role that Youthreach education plays in the Irish education system, and that they cater for a significant amount of young people's. This leads onto the second part that seen in this theme of recognition.

That was how the recognition towards Youthreach can be challenged and changed. We saw that in the findings section of this research when the Parents Associations perceptions of Youthreach were changed with the aid of the personal stories of Jack, Lisa and Jake. For example Parents Association A stated 'These stories show that not all Youthreach students are bad. They felt more needs to be done to show students you are not falling when you go to a Youthreach, it is an alternative education. Showed them all Youthreach doesn't have a bad name and should not be looked at like this'. This shows that their preconceptions were challenged by these stories and as result their opinion has changed. They said in my first meeting with them it would have been a no flat out. Now after listening to these stories they 'all said absolutely, all they want is for their son or daughter to get an education and that is what Youthreach offers. The stories should Youthreach is for everyone'. This I feel, shows how on a small scale in this research that the recognition of Youthreach was improved upon, and what people think of them and their learners is not set in stone, it can be changed. People's non recognition of Youthreach was because they knew very little about it, it was this

fear of the 'unknown'. Improving the recognition of Youthreach, this will aid with challenging the stigma towards them. More of this needs to be done. This leads onto the third part that seen in this theme of recognition.

That is that of how to improve the recognition of Youthreach. This can be done by Youthreach coming out more into the community more and educating people more on who they are and the education they offer. This was noted by both Parents Associations, by the two Youthreach teachers Harry and Lucy and the Youthreach Coordinator. By doing this it will help improve the recognition of Youthreach more and therefore aid with challenging the stigma associated towards them.

A way of how the recognition can be improved is that of Youthreach centres and secondary schools establishing better links. Structural issues are important in terms of breaking down some of the silos between education sectors which lead to misrecognition. This needs to be embedded in the structures of education, with the Department of Education promoting more active strategies and policies to get secondary schools and Youthreach working together more and offering clearer help with the referral processes for students to Youthreach. No more of Youthreach under the radar they are playing a pivotal role in our education system, the stories of Jake, Lisa and Jack have shown this.

### **5.3 Relationships of learning in Youthreach**

Throughout this thesis the Youthreach students' didn't reflect back kindly in their secondary school education. They all said that it was too controlling, it was the school and teacher's way, and if you didn't follow this, then there was the door. Both the school and the teachers didn't care too much about their lives outside of school. These students knew that some of their teachers were not their biggest fan, and as result of this it put them off their learning in that particular subject. In secondary school all of these students pointed out that they had no voice, no opinion, and that some teachers were not bothered in getting to know them as a person. The teacher also kept their barriers up so that the students could not get to know them. So basically there was little or no academic and personal relationship being built these students felt. Yes one could note that these stories tell only one side. However when I read these students' account of their time in secondary school, it is echoed it ir echoed by many findings in Irish literature on schools (Devie, 200: Lynch and Lodge, 2002). Personally, I do agree with them on certain aspects, because things that were happening them also happened to me when I was in secondary school. I was told countless of times when doing my work

leave out your opinion it is irrelevant. Or when teachers would give out to me, if I tried to explain myself or even question it, I was in more trouble. In all of my six years in secondary school I knew what teachers liked me and what ones didn't, they made it very clear. I would also say I only built a relationship with a maximum of three teachers in all my time there.

Throughout this research all of these students spoke highly of Youthreach and the teachers. They all said that when they came to Youthreach their confidence was low, and that they had a lot of personal problems going on. The Youthreach coordinator and teachers didn't ignore these problems, instead they talked with them about them and integrated this interpersonal aspect as a core part of the learning process. They helped them deal with these situations and learn from them. When they made mistakes they didn't give up on them, they were always there for them. The teachers also opened up to the students about themselves and entered into a two-way relationship. What become evident throughout this thesis is that many of the qualities of adult education exposed by adult education professionals and theorists are evident in Youthreach. As a sector, Youthreach coordinators and teachers value the backgrounds and experiences of their students and bring them into learning relationships. The ILP's described earlier were an integral part of this. I feel this shows some aspects where Youthreach is ahead of our secondary school education and they can learn a bit from Youthreach. This again also show the vital part that Youthreach education plays in the education of our young people and there must be recognition for this. This does have its limits and tensions, as Youthreach is set within the academic structures of the formal education system (in its use of training and formal curriculum)

#### **5.4 Potential of Narrative Stories about Learner Experience to Change Attitudes**

Throughout this research I have presented numerous personal accounts of Youthreach from Youthreach students from this research and previous studies. These stories have been quite moving, powerful and educational. In relation to the stories of Jack, Lisa and Jake they have shown the potential of how narrative stories about learner experience can change attitudes. As seen in the former chapter this was evident with the Parents Associations of two mainstream secondary schools. As seen in my research findings, Parents Association B, stated that 'students need to know more about Youthreach, they need to be shown that you don't go to Youthreach because you where bold or can't cope in secondary school. Youthreach needs to show this. They said these stories helped them learn more they know more on Youthreach now and would look at it if secondary school wasn't working for their kids'. These quotes

show this Association's attitude towards Youthreach had been challenged and changed because of these stories. They are now saying that Youthreach should be for all students and not just for disadvantaged students, it is an alternative education not a second chance education. They were now saying that they would be open to sending their son or daughter to Youthreach if secondary school wasn't working. I would take this as a result because in my first meeting with them they would not have considered this, but now they are. This again highlights the power of personal narratives like Jake, Lisa and Jack's stories in educating people on what Youthreach is all about and the students who attend it. Their preconceptions were challenged and changed by the power of narrative stories. More Youthreach students' stories could be used to raise the recognition of Youthreach.

However one must note here the limitations of such narratives. Yes it has had an impact without doubt, but would this impact last long term? If I was to go back to these Parents Associations in years' time would these new found perceptions of Youthreach be the same or would their opinions have drifted back into the negative bracket? This is something further research should be conducted to explore in more detail.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This research project has investigated the area of Youthreach education, exploring its status as a sector in Irish education. Specifically, it has argued that Youthreach is often perceived as a lower status form of education and hence holds stigmatizing effects for the sector and its learners. This research used the concept of recognition to explore the issue, and to begin to turn the tide on it through an active case study approach which explored the following questions;

1. What type of education is on offer in a Youthreach center?
2. Using the concept of recognition, what status does Youthreach have in the Irish education system? Is it stigmatized as a form of education?
3. How is the status of Youthreach education related to the early school leaving profile of its learners? How does the issue of class relate to this?
4. How can Youthreach respond to these challenges?
5. How do personal stories from Youthreach students transform attitudes of parents within these communities?

This research with Youthreach students, members of Two Parents Association of second level schools and a Youthreach coordinator highlighted the themes of i) How recognition operates through the fear of unknown, and the role that social class plays in the misrecognition and the stigma of education sectors such as Youthreach ii) How adult educational qualities of learner –centeredness experience –based learning and interpersonal relationships and learning between teachers and students in Youthreach, iii) The potential of individual stories about educational experiences to transform attitudes.

The research gives a platform through narrative research to three Youthreach students so that their voices, opinions and stories can be heard by parents within their communities. The research reveals the power of narratives for learning and attitudinal transformation based on discussion of their educational experiences. Their stories highlight the damaging effects of early school leaving and how they got their education back on track, with the assistance from the Youthreach programme. Such an initiative however also raises question about the scale of transformative learning and whether narratives can hold a longer – term impact, thereby illustrating the power and limitations of narratives.

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