

# Guidance provision in Youthreach centres

Article

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## Abstract

This article investigates the current provision of guidance counselling in Youthreach education. Current research and policy on guidance counselling provision in Youthreach suggests that there is an apparent gap in policy outlining clear guidelines (NCGE 2019: SOLAS 2020). This article aims to investigate these claims in more detail by combining themes from current literature and policy with themes identified in the data obtained from qualitative semi-structured interviews with eight Youthreach coordinators and eight former students.

**Key words:** Ireland; disadvantaged groups; mentoring; career guidance; youth work

## Introduction

The Youthreach programme originated in 1989 as an alternative education pathway for disadvantaged and marginalised early school leavers in Ireland, and was set up to be the main career route for this group. There are just over one hundred Youthreach centres in Ireland. ‘The learners come from a diverse range of backgrounds and have left the traditional education system for an equally diverse range of reasons’ (O’Sullivan 2019). Youthreach typically offers training and work experience placements to early school leavers aged between 15 and 20. Multiple studies (Stokes 2003, Dale 2010, Brown 2005, Downes 2011, Gordon 2017) suggest that the typical Youthreach learner comes from a disadvantaged background.

This paper critically examines the provision of guidance counselling in Youthreach centres from two perspectives, from the viewpoint of co-ordinators who fulfil the roll of school

principals in Youthreach centres and from the viewpoint of former students who are products of the centres that they attended. Due to its origins as an attempt to bridge the gap between youth work, secondary and further education, Youthreach falls under the umbrella of both post-primary education and further education and training (FET), as it is inspected by both the Department of Education and SOLAS. SOLAS is the State agency that oversees the building of a world class FET sector in Ireland. Dual governance causes confusion and lack of clear policy. The aim of this research is to investigate the provision of guidance counselling in Youthreach education.

## Methodology

Data was collected by recording semi structured interviews. Purposive sampling was adopted. This involves intentionally selecting respondents based on their experience, knowledge, and position (Cohen *et al* 2018; Creswell and Creswell 2018). Eight co-ordinators and eight former students were recruited, anonymity and confidentiality were discussed and insured, each participant was briefed on the aim of the research, why they were chosen as participants, how the interview would be recorded and where and how long the recording would be kept (Bell and Waters 2014). All participants were based in the greater Munster region, in the South of Ireland.

## Findings

Three themes were identified during the analysis phase in the data collected from co-ordinators, and an additional four themes were identified in the data collected from former students.

### Key Themes Identified by Coordinators

- Key Working
- Dual Governance
- Barriers due to a lack of guidance provision

### Key Themes Identified by Former Students

- Work Experience
- Career Planning
- Life Skills
- Culture of high support

## Key Themes from Coordinators

### Theme 1: Key Working

The first theme deconstructs the activity common in Youthreach settings that is known as 'Key Working' and 'Mentoring'. Key working was generally regarded by coordinators as the poor cousin to guidance counselling. Only centres that have Special Educational Needs and Inclusion (SENI) status receive additional funding for staff to spearhead mentoring while other centres are encouraged to take part without any additional hours, training, job description or eligibility criteria.

There are 20 SENI Youthreach centres in Ireland who receive additional funding each year to operate a SENI initiative which includes the use of mentoring. The SENI centres are the only centres whose staff have received any training and guidance on what the mentoring role is and how it should be carried out. While the SENI centres have received training and guidance on mentoring, the initial training occurred over 15 years ago and has potentially become diluted as original staff members train new staff and so on over the past 15 years.

Beth commented on the mentoring role in her SENI centre and how the initial training had been delivered 15 years ago and that the upkeep and continuation of this training is the responsibility of her centre. Both SENI coordinators acknowledged that the key working, or mentoring role was vital to their centres and provided individual guidance to students.

*It's about having someone to talk to, whether that is over a game of pool or it's in a meeting setting it can be whatever the student needs it to be. – Brian*

The other participants coordinate non-SENI centres who all take part in key working, an adaptation of mentoring. In these centres there is no funding, training, or job description for key working. Due to the absence of guidance counselling all coordinators saw key working as a necessary alternative but were frustrated by the role. Jack, in relation to key working as a support to students stated.

*I think they're worried about that maybe people aren't qualified enough to be working this way with students. I don't think to be honest with you that there is an understanding of what key working actually is. Every Youthreach looks at key working and they look at it differently. it is it's a big role. – Jack*

Vicci, a coordinator who believes that key working cannot be implemented by untrained staff without guidelines stated that:

*I would be nervous about it being on a one to one when you're untrained – Vicci*

In addition to training and guidance, another barrier to the key working system is that it is the first thing to be withdrawn from the timetable if teachers are out sick. Six out of eight coordinators reported that when staff are out sick and cover is needed, key working provision is adversely affected. Career guidance is not delivered by qualified guidance counsellors, but falls on the shoulders of whoever is delivering career planning or work experience. This issue is discussed further in theme 3.

## **Theme 2: Dual Governance 'Everybody's problem and nobody's problem'**

Youthreach is subject to inspection by the Department of Education and SOLAS which places it under the governance of both. The dual governance of Youthreach places it at the intersection of post-primary education and FET. Participants suggested that education in general in Youthreach got 'lost in between structures' and in terms of guidance felt they were 'left to their own devices', 'lacked relevant supports', and are 'the problem child'.

Coordinators reported that although post-primary circulars and policies are best suited to the needs of their students, the main source of their funding comes from SOLAS therefore their operational tasks would cease to exist without its involvement in Further Education and Training (FET).

*The FET side are not going to let go of us because of the European funding. So we're getting the funding for the program through SOLAS so we have to answer to them*  
– Gill

There was a unanimous sway towards the post-primary policy due to its suitability for the age group that Youthreach caters to.

*You would always lean on the kind of post-primary because I think that's where our learners are you know, I definitely don't personally see this as further education. You know, very much in secondary education these are young people who were getting a second chance to complete a leaving cert standard* – John

It is evident that the dual governance is an obstacle for Youthreach to access guidance counselling. Youthreach is in receipt of their funding from SOLAS and audited by SOLAS while being inspected by the Department of Education which makes it difficult for Youthreach coordinators to ask for better services and provisions.

## **Theme 3: Barriers that face students in the absence of guidance counselling.**

Youthreach relies on an external counselling service that equates to 3 hours per week per centre, coordinators have acknowledged that this service is often not enough to meet the guidance counselling needs of the students.

*Work experience is obviously a core subject. So we need to teach that. But again, I mean, sometimes we have X, Y or Z teaching work experience, then we might have someone who's never taught it before and it's just a bit of a pass the buck. They definitely don't get the same level of career guidance through those subjects as the students in post-primary would* – Emily

Gill acknowledged that the lack of career guidance often sends the message that students are limited to further education or an apprenticeship and that the lack of career guidance inhibits their ability to see past further education as an option.

*They shouldn't be settling for these poor paid jobs and just these level 5 courses and apprenticeships and that's the message we're getting. You know, if you get an apprenticeship now you're doing great. What about the university? What about going on to UCC? – Gill*

Youthreach education is aimed at early school leavers that are the same age as their post-primary peers but due to their classification as further education students are not entitled to the same statutory educational rights as post primary students, making this issue a social justice issue. (Elftorp 2022) comments that though although guidance provision in the Further Education sector has improved these improvements have not extended to Youthreach. These early school leavers are being marginalised as they are not being provided with the same educational rights and opportunities as their peers.

*Most of them are coming from difficult backgrounds where they wouldn't really have any structure, they might be coming from backgrounds where education wasn't regarded as important. So this is all very new to them. They need to be advised and they need to be supported and they need to be encouraged – Jack*

The importance of guidance counselling was highlighted by all coordinators due to the counselling needs of their learners. Mental health research demonstrates that school-based guidance counselling can be highly effective in reducing feelings of distress, depression, and anxiety while helping students achieve personal and academic goals (Laletas 2019). The increased prevalence of mental health illnesses – combined with issues such as substance misuse, anger management challenges, lack of home support, involvement in criminal activity, and low self-esteem – had coordinators feeling stretched.

*Every day we are putting out fires, the needs are so complex I could have four different students in my office needing psychological support on any given day – Jack*

## Key Themes from Former Students

### Theme 4: Work Experience

Work experience undertaken was seen by former students as a crucial element in their career journey with three of the eight former students still working the job that they took on as part of their work experience, and seven of the former students attributing part of their career success to their time in Youthreach.

*There were maybe five or six different work experiences I had to do during the time I was there. I am still in the same job I got from work experience in 5th year. The last term of 5th year we had to go on work experience through one of the modules. They offered me a job then three or four months later and four and a half years later I'm still there, and I am actually a manager inside there now. It got me in the door of an actual job and gave me the basic experience of working. – Greg*

It is a common thread among the student participants that they got their first job through the work experience program in Youthreach, and stayed in that employment for a number of years after finishing in Youthreach. The successful work experience that these students underwent has kept them in gainful employment long after their time in Youthreach has ended.

### **Theme 5: Career Planning**

The integration of career planning across the curriculum was identified as being of value to the former students' career journey. Though this was not conducted with a qualified counsellor it was integrated across the curriculum. There is a strong focus across all subjects on gaining employment and life skills.

*Youthreach helped me to write my own CV, how to do interviews. We did kind of mock interviews and that. When I used to pronounce my words I used to pronounce them differently. Youthreach really kind of helped me with my speech – Andrew*

Andrew reports similar experiences and though the career planning and preparation that they undertook may not have been undertaken with a qualified guidance counsellor. These elements are so embedded into the curriculum within Youthreach centres that they have a lasting effect on students after their time in Youthreach.

### **Theme 6: Life Skills**

Gaining life skills during their time in Youthreach was identified as being of particular importance to former students. Career planning and preparation for the world of work are deeply embedded within the curriculum in Youthreach centres, another essential element of the curriculum within Youthreach centres identified by former students was the development of life skills.

*Youthreach pushes us to do work experience and teaches life skills that I don't think normal schools would. I came out of my shell completely in Youthreach. It taught me to be more of an active member of society more than normal schools would like normal skills teach you how to do maths and stuff whereas Youthreach teaches you how to be a person. Realistically they showed us how to get a job and how to live after school – Dermot*

Many of the former students interviewed expressed a dissatisfaction that their previous mainstream secondary schools were preparing them only for a points race to enter third level education. Many students who attend Youthreach see progression to third level as unviable and uninteresting and some former students even credit this as their reason for leaving as they felt their teachers in the mainstream had only one goal in senior cycle and that was to prepare them for higher education.

## Theme 7: Culture of high support

The highly supportive environment, small classes, and approachable teachers were identified by former students as being developmentally significant to their careers and personal development. Greg credits the culture of high support in Youthreach as well as the expertise Youthreach teachers have in dealing with students who did not have a positive experience in mainstream schooling.

*I got more time from the teachers in Youthreach because they had seen this before. They had seen people drop out of school, not get on well in school, go different roads in life and come to Youthreach and at the end of the day they were there to do a job and their job was to make sure we stayed in education. – Greg*

Youthreach was established to deal with marginalised students, the former students are aware of this being part of the organisational culture within Youthreach centres. The culture of Youthreach centres is also recognised by Conor. He also credits the Youth Advocate as being highly supportive, the role of the Youth Advocate is similar to that of a guidance counsellor in that they provide support in sourcing work experience and also emotional support, while not necessarily being qualified counsellors.

*I think Youthreach improved my people skills – there are less people in Youthreach so it improved my people skills and my social skills. I used to get nervous talking to people, I would have been a bit shy about talking to people. The advocate is there to listen to you. Any problem doesn't matter what it is, could be stuff you're going through or you could be after hitting someone with a car she would listen to you all day long. You were never the bad guy in her eyes. There was always some bit of good seen by the advocate. – Conor*

A culture of high support and the ability to treat students with unconditional positive regard in spite of indiscretions are identified as being helpful to his development. Youthreach was established to provide a second chance at education for early school leavers and Conor clearly indicates that the support of the Youth Advocate and the culture within Youthreach as contributing to him having a second chance. The expertise of the teachers in Youthreach in dealing with students who have challenging home environments is recognised by Brian.

*The teachers there, they treat you different, nothing seemed to shock them either. There were students there with X Y Z issues going on at home and nothing ever seemed to shock the teachers there. They would hear things that are totally bizarre, that anyone else would be taken back by, and they would just take it as normal. – Bill*

The former Youthreach students clearly identify the expertise and dedication of the staff within Youthreach centres. The perceived deficit in qualifications among Youthreach staff does not seem to have affected these students adversely. The sample size of students interviewed was admittedly small however they do seem to recognise the dedication and

experience of Youthreach staff as having an influence in their own personal development and on their emerging careers.

## Discussion

There seems to be a disconnect between the perceptions of the practitioners and the former students. A possible reason for this is that once the students leave, staff have very little opportunity to find out what happened to them and how their lives developed. Gordon (2013) claims that teaching staff were responsible for the delivery of guidance subjects such as work experience and career planning, which were reinforced with access to a guidance counsellor and supports from external counsellors. Gordon's account of the guidance provision in Youthreach is more in line with the account of the SENI coordinators who took part in this study. However, unlike Gordon's account, the non-SENI centres had far less access to a qualified guidance counsellor. Non-SENI coordinators in this study painted a less favourable picture of the guidance provision in their centre claiming none of them had a guidance programme due to the absence of policy, resources, and appropriately qualified staff. Psifidou *et al* (2021) comments that while a whole school approach to guidance is recommended for Youthreach by the NCGE (2017), this is problematic when over half the staff in Youthreach do not possess teaching qualifications.

Two SENI coordinators stated that mentoring is delivered by all Youthreach staff including teachers, resource people and coordinators and although there is no official training for this role, original staff who were present during its introduction trained the new staff when they joined. Both SENI coordinators in this study found that their staff were appropriately qualified to engage in the mentoring programme despite having no counselling qualifications.

Non-SENI centres do not receive the additional €58,500 funding per year but are expected to implement a key working programme. Coordinators from non-SENI centres reported that the key working programme was unregulated, had no guidelines on how it should work or who should deliver it, had no funding or training and they were required to implement it with existing resources. Most coordinators reported that they liked the idea of key working and thought it could benefit learners in the absence of guidance counselling but felt frustrated that they were left to their own devices. When asked if they felt their staff were qualified enough to provide key working there was a varied response with some coordinators saying that some staff were naturally good at it and others felt that key working could be dangerous due to its unregulated nature and delivery by staff who were not appropriately qualified to key work with students who had such complex and adverse needs. The coordinators who were reluctant to provide key working in their centres stated that Youthreach students needed psychological supports from appropriately qualified professionals, especially considering the rise in their students presenting with adverse issues.

## Conclusion

In spite of the challenges in the provision of guidance counselling the frustrations and management headaches indicated by the co-ordinators interviewed the former students seemed happy with the education and career preparation they received within Youthreach.



Issues identified by co-ordinators, such as increasing needs for psychological supports and a lack of desire to progress to third level education, may be deeply rooted in societal issues and social reproduction. Perceived deficits in qualifications of Youthreach staff, or inadequate provision of counselling may be less important factors. While Coordinators seemed overburdened and exhibit high expectations of their students, the former students recognise the care and legitimate concern for their well-being and progression.

SENI funding, currently available to only 20% of Youthreach centres should be extended to all centres. This study, together with Gordon (2013) and Smyth et al (2019), demonstrate that the outcomes of SENI funding are positive. Mentoring and key working must become standardised with appropriate training, guidelines and funding and should be delivered by appropriately qualified staff members in the absence of a guidance counsellor.

Youthreach has neither been adopted by either the post-primary or FET sector fully. Attempting to adhere to two sets of guidelines is stressful for Coordinators. National Association of Youthreach Coordinators should establish a working group to examine the possibility of creating Youthreach specific policies, guidelines and training procedures for Youthreach staff.

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