

Article

# “We Respect Them, and They Respect Us”: The Value of Interpersonal Relationships in Enhancing Student Engagement

Joanne Banks <sup>1,\*</sup>  and Emer Smyth <sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, D02 PN40 Dublin, Ireland<sup>2</sup> Economic and Social Research Institute, D02 K138 Dublin, Ireland; emer.smyth@esri.ie

\* Correspondence: banksjo@tcd.ie

**Abstract:** Attempts to understand the patterns behind student disengagement and early school leaving have traditionally focussed on early school leavers’ individual characteristics. More recently, however, studies have begun to focus on the extent to which early school leaving is shaped by school-level factors, and in particular the central role of teachers and pedagogy, in (dis)engaging students. Studies have consistently shown how negative teacher–student relations can dominate the lives of young people, leading to poor attendance and behavioural issues which often culminate in them disengaging, leaving or being expelled from school. Furthermore, there is a growing interest in the role of pedagogical strategies in enhancing teacher–student relations, increasing student engagement and bringing about more socially just systems of education. Using in-depth qualitative interviews with staff working in a school engagement programme aimed at preventing early school leaving (the School Completion Programme) and young people who have left school early and who are now participating in an alternative education setting in Ireland as well as staff in those settings (the National Youthreach Programme), this paper provides a unique comparison of two approaches to learner engagement. Findings highlight the centrality of caring and respectful relationships between teachers and students across the two programmes. This paper suggests that aspects of the ‘productive pedagogies’ framework are being used to overcome barriers by placing equal emphasis on student wellbeing and formal learning. However, both programmes operate outside ‘mainstream’ education, with little scope for integration with the mainstream system. This paper concludes that at the micro level, the programmes are effective in re-engaging young people with education but argues that this has little impact at a broader level, where mainstream school practices impacting on student disengagement and early school leaving remain unchanged.



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**Keywords:** school engagement; early school leaving; alternative education; teacher–student relations; pedagogy

## 1. Introduction

Early school leaving (ESL) remains a critical issue in education systems around the world. In the European Union, an average of 10 per cent of young people leave school early, with rates ranging from as low as 3 per cent in Croatia to as high as 17 per cent in Spain. Despite Europe 2020 strategy targets to reduce ESL in member states by 2020, ESL still remains above national targets in 11 countries [1]. Research in this area has sought to better understand the profile of early school leavers as well as their outcomes in adult life [2,3]. There is now a substantial amount of research on the characteristics of students at risk of disengagement and early school leavers which shows that they are more likely to be from socio-economically marginalised communities, have ongoing social, emotional or health issues, have additional learning needs, live in poverty and/or have experience of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) [4–6]. Studies show that young people with poor attendance in school and those who leave school early are more likely to be unemployed or have low-quality and low-paid employment, have poorer health and be involved in

anti-social behaviour and crime [7–9]. Research in this area has moved on, however, from deficit perspectives which focus on aspects of individual student characteristics, willpower or effort [10]. There is increasing awareness of the impact of school processes and, in particular, the centrality of teachers in influencing student engagement and outcomes [11]. Developing upon a social reproduction perspective, Lingard (2005) argues that of all the factors influencing socially just educational outcomes, ‘that teachers and their pedagogies contribute most to better learning outcomes’ for all students but particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds [12]. Similarly, Crosnoe et al. (2004) highlight the impact of positive teacher–student relations (or what they refer to as ‘intergenerational bonding’) as a key factor in boosting student achievement and reducing disciplinary problems among students generally. For students that have experienced alienation in school, these relationships can have a greater impact compared to their peers (Muller, 2001 cited in Crosnoe et al., 2004) [13] with some studies showing a direct link between the quality of relations and school retention and the prevention of early school leaving [14–19]. These relationships can not only influence student attendance and retention, but also a student’s sense of belonging in school [17,20–22] Where early school leavers are re-engaging with education in alternative settings, ‘trust, recognition and acceptance’ appear to be key elements in positive staff–learner relationships that can lead to (re)engagement in education and ‘more positive and productive life choices’ for young people (p. 6) [20].

In addition to meaningful relationships between teachers and students, research highlights the importance of focussing on aspects of school culture and pedagogical practices which influence student disengagement and early school leaving [23,24]. A number of studies have questioned the assumptions around how and what is taught with a focus on how pedagogy and authentic instruction can be used to help bring about more socially just systems of education [25]. Hayes et al. (2005), for example, use the idea of the instructional or pedagogical core in schools which they describe as a ‘taken-for-granted part of schooling’ (p. 33) [19]. This ‘default mode’ or values in schools has a particular relevance for students whose own cultural or social habitus and individual identities are not strongly matched to the dominant culture of the school [26]. Hayes et al. (2005) suggest that to improve the educational outcomes of these students, we need to challenge the pedagogical core of schooling. Lingard et al. (2003) and Hayes (2005) use the productive pedagogies framework as a way to challenge structural inequalities in our education systems [19,27]. Based on an Australian study from the early-2000s, this framework promotes the provision of a high-quality education for *all* students but especially students from disadvantaged backgrounds [28]. The productive pedagogies framework is based on four dimensions, namely intellectual quality, relevance, supportive classroom environment, and recognition of difference. These principles challenge conventional understandings of what is important and what should be emphasised in school [29]. The evidence suggests that these dimensions are necessary to achieve high-level outcomes for students and especially students ‘who have been traditionally failed by the education system’ [28] (p. 71). Where productive pedagogies are absent, it is argued that the culture of schools will continue to disadvantage some students over others and inequalities will be exacerbated [19,27]. It is noteworthy that the productive pedagogies framework has not had as much traction in recent years. This article therefore seeks to renew interest in the potential of this approach as a framework for addressing educational inequality.

One of the main elements of the productive pedagogies framework is that all students should be provided with intellectually challenging classrooms. Education that lacks intellectual challenge is considered socially unjust and often stems from the deficit perspective, where individual students or their families are blamed for their lack of academic success [18,23]. Challenging work and intellectual demand is particularly important for students from traditionally underachieving backgrounds [28]. Research studies have shown that where disadvantaged students have high levels of need in a school, school may become a habitus of ‘care’ rather than ‘challenge’, which can negatively impact students’ academic

progress [30,31]. Lingard and Keddie (2013) describe this as a trade-off between intellectual demand and ‘an almost therapeutic culture of care’ [32].

Why some students disengage from school remains a key policy challenge in education systems around the world. Policy responses tend to focus on either school prevention strategies or compensation approaches but rarely both. This paper provides a unique comparison between a school-based preventative programme (The School Completion Programme) and a compensatory alternative education programme (The National Youthreach Programme) in Ireland. Using qualitative data from interviews with staff working in the School Completion Programme and staff and young people participating in the National Youthreach Programme, this paper examines the role of relationships and pedagogical approaches in increasing student engagement in two programmes which operate outside mainstream education. Given that relationship building and the use of innovative pedagogical approaches are, more often, features of these types of interventions [17,33,34], this paper explores how these approaches can inform mainstream school culture by improving teacher–student relationships and addressing barriers to learning for students who experience marginalisation in school.

## 2. Context—The Irish System

Ireland has a high rate of secondary school completion by European standards, with 91 percent of those entering secondary school in 2013 completing upper secondary education (Department of Education, 2020). In Ireland, as elsewhere, early school leavers are more likely to come from less advantaged households and to have networks (siblings and friends) comprised of other early leavers. Finding school ‘boring’ or ‘difficult’ and not getting on with teachers emerge as important drivers of leaving school early [35]. Ireland’s success in school retention has had two sets of consequences. Firstly, the small group who do leave school early are increasingly composed of young people who face multiple challenges, including mental health and other disabilities [17]. Secondly, policy focus has moved towards a broader idea of educational participation to encompass school attendance and engagement.

In Ireland, the dominant approach to addressing inequalities in educational engagement and participation has involved targeting additional resources and supports towards schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged populations. The approach is similar to the educational priority areas approach used in many European countries [36]. This Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme is multi-faceted in nature, facilitating smaller class sizes at the primary level, providing access to literacy and numeracy supports, and offering additional supports such as personnel to promote parental engagement [37]. The programme aims at ‘closing the gap’ in attendance, participation, and achievement between those attending more disadvantaged schools and those in other schools.

Interventions designed to promote participation more specifically fall into two categories: supports to retain children and young people at risk of school drop-out within full-time education (the School Completion Programme); and programmes to help re-engage early school leavers with education (the Youthreach programme). These programmes form the focus for this article. Table 1 provides an overview of some of the key features of the two programmes, highlighting important commonalities and differences in their approach and focus.

**Table 1.** Comparison of the School Completion and Youthreach programmes.

	School Completion Programme	Youthreach Programme
Target group	Primary and secondary students at risk of early school leaving	Early school leavers (i.e., left school before the end of upper secondary education)
Basis for participation	Some discretion at school or cluster level to identify particular groups of students for involvement	Largely word-of-mouth or other informal methods; some centres engage in outreach
Location of provision	Clusters of primary and secondary schools	Stand-alone centres
Scale of provision	Variation across clusters—often combine large groups for some activities with one-to-one supports for students in crisis	Intensive supports for small groups of participants
Curriculum and learning	Some additional supports for learning (on a small group or one-to-one basis) and homework clubs but teaching and acquisition of qualifications mainly happen in mainstream classrooms	Smaller class sizes, focus on hands-on/practical approaches, variation in qualifications offered (further education v. traditional secondary qualifications)
Socio-emotional supports	Some personal development, therapeutic and behaviour supports; informal support important	Many centres are linked to local mental health services or provide counselling support in house; informal support important

The two programmes have some similarities in that they target at-risk groups and provide supports that encompass learning as well as broader personal and social development. In both programmes, informal supports and relationships between staff and participants play a key role in the success of these interventions, a central theme of this article. However, the programmes also have important differences, which are important in understanding the context for the findings presented in the remainder of this article. Youthreach can be seen as providing more intensive support, taking a holistic approach to addressing the needs of participants and often offering counselling and other mental health supports. In contrast, the School Completion (SCP) programme operates alongside mainstream school provision. As a result, children and young people may take part in SCP activities before school (such as a breakfast club) or be withdrawn from class for more intensive supports on a one-to-one or small group basis. SCP staff are employed by the ‘cluster’ of schools and are not school staff. Furthermore, they are often not involved in broader school planning around the DEIS programme. This can result in SCP provision being somewhat ‘siloed’ within the school. The extent to which this can impact on the nature of provision and the relationships between staff and students is discussed in the remainder of the article.

A further difference relates to how children and young people are identified for programme participation. Clusters of schools set the criteria for identifying at-risk groups of students (within overall national guidelines) for participation within SCP and can then target specific students and their families to take part. Constraints on involving participants are therefore largely the result of the scale of funding. In contrast, referral to Youthreach largely involves informal sources, with young people hearing about the provision from family, friends or neighbours, and few being referred through formal (school-based or service-based) routes. Although some centres engage in active outreach, the programme may not be reaching the most vulnerable young people who do not have the networks to encourage them to take part in Youthreach.

### 3. Methodology

This paper draws on two mixed-methods studies, which combine survey data with in-depth case studies of practice at the local level. Both studies also involved interviews with key stakeholders who provided insights into the location of the two programmes within the broader education and training landscape.

The study of the School Completion programme involved a postal survey of all SCP coordinators and chairpersons of the school clusters, with a very high response rate of 95 per cent for coordinators and 77 per cent for chairpersons (for further details, see [38]). These survey data were used to identify ten clusters for case-study analysis. Within each of these clusters, interviews were conducted with school principals, SCP coordinators and chairpersons, and members of the SCP local management committee. A limitation of this study was that interviews were not conducted with children and young people themselves. This decision reflected budgetary constraints as well as the anticipated difficulty in interviewing students about a programme that was not clearly identifiable to them as such. For example, a student could attend an SCP-funded homework club without being aware of its funding source. The implications of this lacuna for the inferences drawn in this article are discussed in the concluding section.

The Youthreach study involved a postal survey of all Youthreach coordinators, with a high response rate of 86 percent 9 for further details, see [17]). These data were used to identify ten case-study sites where interviews were carried out with coordinators/managers, staff and young people themselves. The study placed a strong emphasis on capturing the voice of these marginalised young people, involving interviews with 94 current participants and 13 past participants.

This article draws mainly on the qualitative interviews conducted in the case-study sites, though reference is made to the survey data to give insights into the nature of each programme. Interviews with staff and students in Youthreach settings and staff in schools with the SCP were transcribed and coded using NVivo software. A grounded-theory approach [39] was used to create a series of themes or ‘nodes’ based on the observations of participants. In the interviews, Youthreach learners were asked broad questions about what they felt about the Youthreach setting compared to their experiences in mainstream education. Staff from both programmes were asked more specific questions about student experiences in the programme, the key challenges in their work and their relationships with learners. Analyses identified the main themes emerging from the interviews around the topics of ‘student circumstances’, ‘relationships’ and ‘ways of connecting’. The quotes presented in the following section are intended to illustrate the main issues raised by participants.

The two studies from which this article draws were designed to provide an overall evaluation of the two programmes, rather than to test a specific conceptual framework. While the emerging themes fit well within the productive pedagogies framework, the interview material provides a good deal of information on two aspects of the framework—relevance and supportive classroom environment—but data on teaching and learning were not sufficiently detailed to allow an assessment of the ‘intellectual quality’ of the provision. Recognition of difference was apparent within the case-study settings, in particular, in relation to Travellers. However, space does not permit an exploration of this theme here.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. The School Completion Programme

#### 4.1.1. The ‘Target’ Group

In interviews with SCP coordinators, they described how student engagement and attendance in school were often impacted by difficult family circumstances, marginalisation, poverty and socio-economic disadvantage in the homes of their ‘target’ students. Some felt that intergenerational poverty and negative experiences with education resulted in school not being valued in the home, making engagement more difficult for the children concerned.

*There’s definitely a generation of disadvantage built in, you know and they’re coming from a background where education is not valued. And we’re definitely trying to break a cycle that is there. (SCP Coordinator)*

In some cases, the schools were the same schools that young people's siblings and parents had attended and often dropped out from. One SCP coordinator described how this often framed the child's view of school from the start:

*There is a pattern, their siblings have dropped out or their parents have dropped out. And parents in particular having I suppose that negative vibe about school. And I find it difficult to get them to move on, you know they've had a really tough time themselves in school . . . that's very much there, you have students coming into our secondary schools, if their parents had been here, and they're coming in with that negative attitude straight away. (SCP Coordinator)*

One coordinator described the different emphases being placed on these students as they moved from school to home.

*Nobody is asking how your day was, how did you get on in school, what did you do today in science or what, did you cook anything in home etc.? They're not going home to these kinds of conversations. (SCP Coordinator)*

In addition to cultural factors, students in the SCP programme would often be targeted for not having the bare essentials for school such as stationery, food or clothing.

*Day-to-day things like if a child has no uniform or no books or down to no shoes, one child here had no glasses, the Mum couldn't afford to buy him glasses. Kind of school requisitions like swimming, like school tours, exam papers, little things, you know, that really hinder the child kind of participating day to day. But they're massive really, you know. (SCP Coordinator)*

Staff described a range of social issues including marriage breakups which would impact on how students engaged with school.

*And you know different problems arise from that then with social issues and with the families themselves kind of you know one thing leads to another causing unhappiness in families and family break downs and break ups and the kids are badly affected from that. (SCP Coordinator)*

Students from families where illegal drugs, alcohol or crime were an issue would often be in the 'target' population of the SCP programme.

*You know around here there'd be a huge problem with drugs you know so we would have a lot of, we would have a lot of children who their father could be in jail or the mothers in jail. (SCP Chairperson)*

#### 4.1.2. The Importance of Trusted Relationships

Interviews with SCP coordinators consistently highlighted the role of trusting, non-judgemental relationships in establishing and maintaining connections with students at risk of disengagement from school. Despite the resources and activities available to students in the programme, one SCP coordinator described the 'personal aspect' of the programme as its 'strongest' asset (SCP Coordinator). For many, their role was about creating a safe, welcome and caring environment for students where they could be a source of support if needed.

*The staff are lovely and very welcoming, very homely. So that's nice for them too. You know they build relations with them and get to know them. (SCP Coordinator)*

Others described how students benefitted from having a constant, caring source of support in what was often a challenging school setting.

*Well we're in the school nearly all the time. And we are a friendly face for them in the school. And we're always watching their back, that is our job and we let them know that, we're watching your back. (SCP Coordinator)*

Ensuring that these students felt valued by someone at school was achieved through, often quite subtle, daily contact and connection.

*Where they feel, where they feel welcomed, and, and important and where they, where they achieve their best and where, and where they're valued you know. Like, like I think it's important for me to, to say hello to everybody every day you know. (SCP Coordinator)*

Trust appears to be an important aspect of this relationship, where information about students' home lives is known but not shared with the broader school community.

*To be able to look at a student and just say hello to them and they know that there's somebody in the school who knows who they are, who knows where they come from, who knows about their problems you know. Doesn't necessarily have to be a whole class sharing of information. I think that is key you know. It's key to getting these kids through in my opinion. (SCP Coordinator)*

By not being in a teaching role, some SCP coordinators felt that they could work with the student in a difficult situation where they have broken school rules or not attended rather than adopt punitive approaches.

*They might have had a bad morning at home or you know they were out the night before and they're just not able and they can't tell the teacher that they've got a hangover . . . But I mean I can take note of it and say listen if you come in tomorrow me and you will have a wee chat about, get them back on track like that. (SCP Coordinator)*

For some students, the SCP staff were viewed as a 'friend' compared to the 'enemy' that was school more generally.

*I've met kids who have come up to me and said if you hadn't been there I wouldn't have stayed in school . . . think they see us, school sometimes for these kids is the enemy and they see us as the friend do you know? (SCP Coordinator)*

At the same time, however, the programme also appeared to break down some of the pre-existing barriers between teachers and their students outside the classroom context. In schools where the SCP programme was well integrated into the school, coordinators noted greater teacher involvement in SCP activities, which appeared to have a positive knock-on effect on teacher–student relations. Where teachers worked on the programme in, for example, breakfast clubs, homework clubs or other after-school activities, relationships between teachers and students seemed to become more 'friendly', which could have the effect of reducing 'tension' in class and increasing student engagement.

*I like teachers running our programmes because once they're running the programmes they're not teaching anymore and it shows a more friendly side to them. And the kids see a different side and if there is tension it just reduces the tension . . . So it's a win, win. (SCP Coordinator)*

Homework clubs appear to have a positive practical impact on school for both students and their teachers as the task of homework could be completed and therefore issues around homework non-completion are avoided the following day.

*Even the help with homework in the evening times, it ends that whole cycle of maybe going home. Not having an opportunity to get homework done. Coming into school the next morning, facing the teacher. (SCP Coordinator)*

More specific one-to-one 'diary time' or small group activities were made available to some students which sought to address any psychological or behavioural issues they had.

*Something happens at home, there could be a suicide, and there could a bereavement of some sort, separation. Or bullying issues, or just low self-esteem could've come in and that they would need something like diary time to boost their confidence. Or deal with their anger management. (SCP Coordinator)*

#### 4.1.3. Using Food as a Way to Connect

Within the four pillars of the SCP, a broad range of supports is offered in schools as a way to overcome barriers to school engagement for children and young people. Despite cutbacks to the types of SCP supports on offer over the recession, many coordinators

described the importance of maintaining the provision of food and in particular breakfast and lunch clubs. These clubs were viewed as essential in providing food to children and young people in the programme who may not have any breakfast before school or lunch while in school.

*You'd have kids coming, they won't come to school because they don't have a lunch or you know so at least we feed them, we give them, you know we give them a good breakfast in the morning and a chat. (SCP Coordinator)*

In some cases, breakfast was seen as an incentive to come to school.

*Well I suppose it's a mainstay in terms of ensuring that (A) the kids are coming in (B) that they are properly fed when they go into class do you know, and it's very much structured in now. (SCP Coordinator)*

However, the interviews also describe how food was used by SCP coordinators as a way in which to 'check-in' and connect with students on a daily basis. In some cases, the physical space of the canteen offered students somewhere different that they could be safe, get a hot drink and link in with someone.

*They like going to a different place and you know then they can get a cup of tea or a hot chocolate or something like that and then you might do you know, try to talk to them about goal setting and about choices and you know, stuff like that. (SCP Coordinator)*

#### 4.2. The Youthreach Programme

As rates of school retention had declined significantly in Ireland, the profile of early school leavers was seen as an increasingly negatively selected one. In particular, Youthreach staff highlighted the increasing incidence of mental health difficulties among participants.

*In the last number of years now, I think we're dealing a lot with mental health issues . . . Ten years ago it would be all kids that are being kicked out of school or about to be kicked out of school, but it is kids that are not going to school and the reasons that they are not going to school is because of bullying, you know, their own mental health issues that are happening in the home. (Youthreach Coordinator)*

*A lot of the kids have issues around their . . . own selves. They have anxiety, they have panic attacks, they have depression . . . they have ADHD, we have, okay, dyslexia and things like that we have always had but it's people that don't seem to have coping skills. (Youthreach Staff)*

However, survey data from coordinators indicated the persistence of socio-economic disadvantage among the target group, with a high proportion from jobless households and a significant overrepresentation of young people from the Traveller ethnic minority group. While Youthreach staff did mention the family context of participants, they were less likely than SCP staff to frame educational disadvantage in terms of family issues alone and more likely to emphasise the complex interplay of socio-emotional difficulties, family and school in leading to educational disengagement and early school leaving.

Participants in the Youthreach programme were asked about their pathways into Youthreach, starting with their reasons for leaving school before the end of upper secondary education. Alongside difficulties with schoolwork and poor relations with classmates, poor relationships with teachers emerged as a central theme in the accounts of early school leavers, with many of the young people reporting a cycle of getting into trouble for misbehaviour and increasingly negative interactions with teachers leading to withdrawal from school.

*I kept getting into trouble in school and stuff like and they [staff] basically just said like leave, like I was going to get expelled like, so I left . . . They just didn't like me that much. (Youthreach learner)*

*I just didn't like the teachers; I couldn't get along with them. (Youthreach learner)*



Several of the participants felt that teachers labelled some students because of their background and consequently treated them unfairly or without respect.

*I hated it, never got on with anyone in school: the students, the teachers. I always felt like they were looking down on me and I never got any respect so I was just sick of it.* (Youthreach learner)

*Some of them just, they basically pick on you because of where you're from . . . the teachers didn't like me.* (Youthreach learner)

A number of the young people had experienced expulsion (permanent exclusion) from school rather than leaving voluntarily.

*I didn't leave . . . I got kicked out like . . . in second year, just start of the second year.* (Youthreach learner)

In Ireland, expulsion can be appealed by the young person's parent(s) or on their own behalf (if they are aged 18 years or over) under Section 29 of the 1998 Education Act. Rather than being formally expelled, a number of young people reported a pattern of being 'managed out', whereby they were encouraged to leave school rather than being expelled.

*Well, one of my teachers told me, like, my attendance was too bad, that I was gonna be expelled but I obviously didn't want to so I just left. "Go to a different school", they told me.* (Youthreach learner)

*[They] just called me into the office and said, "We can either help you to get into Youthreach here, or you can leave on bad terms and have your name put in under Social Help" or whatever that is.* (Youthreach learner)

This approach meant that the young person had no formal rights to challenge the school's suggestion that they leave and that their leaving school did not have to be reported to educational welfare services for follow-up intervention (as would be the case with a formal expulsion).

Young people's pathway to reengage with learning was generally influenced by informal contacts—parents, family and friends—though referrals through school staff accounted for approximately one in six entrants [17]. The quality of relationships with Youthreach staff was highlighted as a central foundation for young people's successful reengagement with learning. Interviews with staff and learners indicated three factors that shaped the nature of these relationships: formal supports for learners, informal support from staff ('keeping an eye') and establishing mutually respectful and equitable interaction.

In the centres, each young person was assigned a mentor or key worker who maintained ongoing contact with them around learning and personal issues. 'where you link in with the students every week or every second week depending on what's gone on for them' (Youthreach staff)

*Mentoring covers such a wide range of things. So, it goes from like . . . maybe organising them to have dental checks and to get registered for their public service card. Really what maybe the parents aren't able to do or organise for them. Doctor's appointments. To them, it may be dealing with a particular issue that might be happening for them outside of the centre. To inside the centre, maybe they're struggling with some of their work and they need extra help there . . . So . . . there's quite a lot of stuff.* (Youthreach staff)

The learners interviewed spoke about the importance of their mentors as someone with whom they could discuss any issues or problems they might have.

*We have mentoring programmes where, you know, a teacher would take you out of class and ask how like your home life is doing and how you feel about it, and then you know any problems you have in the centre or at the centre you can tell her and she like records it, and then you know that would also help with you know reasons why you wouldn't be in or you might be feeling too like shitty to come in.* (Youthreach learner)

Perhaps even more effective was the use of seemingly banal day-to-day interaction to identify potential difficulties experienced by the learners and help foster their motivation and self-confidence. Many of the staff interviewed described the importance of the first greeting with the learner in the morning which often flagged difficulties to them.

*They come in. . . . Then you might have a little chat. You'll notice things about people. Some of them are coming in, great, all make up. Another person looks like they've slept in their clothes. These are little things that we would log, maybe check in with someone if, you know, if they're in good, bad form, whatever. (Youthreach staff)*

These informal supports were seen as very important in dealing with anxiety and other mental health difficulties and in de-escalating potential conflict between the young person and other learners or staff.

*If someone comes in under high anxiety, rather than waiting for the panic attack and the big shouting in the hallway, we might pull them aside and just check in with them. Go down, play pool, give them a glass of water. I think that's where we've improved over the years too in terms of de-escalating. (Youthreach coordinator/manager)*

The fact that staff were 'keeping an eye out' for them was valued by the learners who felt that staff cared for them and were always willing to help.

*I feel like they genuinely care and like they'll genuinely take the time out of the day to explain something to you. (Youthreach learner)*

Both staff and students emphasised the family-like atmosphere at the centres, an atmosphere fostered by the fact that both groups usually ate together.

*Their lunch is provided downstairs. They can chat to staff all the time and young people do use that one-to-two times, sit beside you, have a cup of tea, chat about their issues, and chat about their problems. (Youthreach staff)*

*I love the fact that we sit in there and eat with them in there and that kind of stuff. . . . It's much more respectful than any school situation they've experienced. (Youthreach staff)*

The term 'family' came up over and over again when interviewing staff and students.

*In any home the kitchen's kind of the centre of the family and in here the kitchen's kind of the centre of the family in here as well, and they get, they get a good hot meal. But they learn how to prepare it, so they're getting life skills and that, and they're working as a little team. (Youthreach coordinator/manager)*

Mainstream secondary education in Ireland has been characterised as hierarchical in nature [40], with many students reporting little say in the day-to-day issues that affect their school lives [17]. In contrast, for many learners, entering the Youthreach programme offered them an opportunity, sometimes for the first time, to be treated as an equal by respected and trusted adults.

*I care about them all. They're brilliant kids. And I think even that, positive adult responses, that they may not experience or may not have experienced, this may be the only place that that happens to them where they're spoken to respectfully and they're encouraged and liked. (Youthreach instructor)*

Even the fact that staff and students were on a first-name basis was seen as establishing a different dynamic to that experienced in mainstream education.

*I can trust them more . . . I get to know them a bit more . . . we kind of, like you know, create relationships with them [staff], so that we respect them and they respect us. They treat us like adults. (Youthreach learner)*

Staff emphasised the importance of establishing trustful, mutually respectful relationships with learners, while at the same time, maintaining boundaries around behaviour.

*I suppose the relationship is key because it's all based in trust . . . It's not about saying and telling them what you want it's about you hopefully rising to that and them following, you know, it's a two-way partnership. (Youthreach staff)*

The learners frequently emphasised the contrast between their experience of mainstream education and their relationships with staff in the centre. They saw their interactions with staff as characterised by care, unlike in their secondary school where relationships with teachers were viewed as, at best, impersonal and, at worst, conflictual.

*I feel like in school the teachers are against you, where here they're kind with you like. They work with you like, rather than against you and stuff like. But they're very open-minded. They understand like. If you have a problem and you come to them like they like—they understand you like. They want to help you like and stuff. (Youthreach learner)*

The relationship with staff was seen as one of mutual respect and several learners reported feeling they were allowed an agency which reflected their maturational stage.

*The difference between here and school is, as I was saying, you get much more freedom, you're not looked down on, you actually get the respect you deserve. (Youthreach learner)*

In sum, the quality of relationships emerged as a key factor in both the young person's departure from school and in their re-engagement in learning. Participants experienced a shift from learning in a more hierarchical and often conflictual setting towards one characterised by mutual respect and care.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This article examines two approaches to promoting learner engagement in Ireland, one intended to prevent school drop-out (the School Completion Programme) and one designed to reengage early school leavers in second-chance education (the Youthreach programme). In doing so, it draws on two mixed-method studies, which combine survey information with in-depth interviews with staff and, in the case of Youthreach, learners. Previous research on such initiatives has tended to focus on either preventative or compensatory measures [13,32]. This article contributes to existing knowledge by highlighting commonalities in, and differences between, the two approaches, focusing in particular on the importance of staff–learner relationships in the success of such initiatives. The findings indicate that the two initiatives embody (at least) two of the dimensions of the productive pedagogies framework—relevance and supportive classroom environments. They differ somewhat in relation to 'intellectual challenge'. SCP provision largely focuses on non-pedagogical activities (although can be used to provide additional support for learning), leaving day-to-day teaching and learning in the mainstream classroom largely unaffected. Youthreach, on the other hand, provides relevant, engaging learning experiences and the evidence is suggestive of, though not definitive on, classes being intellectually challenging.

The early school leavers interviewed discussed the negative interaction they had experienced with their mainstream teachers and attributed their decision to leave school, at least in part, to this dynamic. In contrast, they reported very positive relationships with Youthreach staff, emphasising the respect and care with which they were treated and the mutual trust that had been established. The staff themselves placed a strong emphasis on 'checking in' with young people, using day-to-day activities, such as eating together, to build trusting relationships and reinforce the provision of support. SCP staff also discussed how breakfast and lunch clubs in schools could provide an opportunity for connection and positive reinforcement of children and young people experiencing difficulties or alienation at school. In both settings, support was on a continuum ranging from 'checking in' to providing access to specialist counselling or therapeutic supports, reflecting the complex needs of the learner groups. Such provision reflected the way in which both programmes regarded learning and wellbeing as fundamentally intertwined,

with many learners needing socio-emotional support before they were in a position to engage in formal learning.

Despite some commonalities, the two case studies highlight important issues regarding the appropriate emphasis on prevention or amelioration in provision for at-risk children and young people. Preventative approaches facilitate intervention, at least potentially, with a wider group of learners, though in the case of SCP, staff in many schools operated largely independently of mainstream teachers, making it challenging to provide truly wrap-around supports for students. Waiting until young people have already left mainstream education to provide supports has its own challenges, with many reporting deteriorating mental health and wellbeing between the time they left school and when they reengaged with educational supports. Reaching these early leavers is also largely dependent on informal networks, creating difficulties in involving those in the most marginalised groups. Youthreach tended to provide a holistic, wrap-around set of learning and socio-emotional supports but, at the same time, could be regarded as siloed from mainstream education. There was clear evidence of innovative practice at centre level but no mechanism for the translation of such practice to other parts of the education system.

In the Youthreach programme, learners have flexible, individualised curricula in a socially supportive environment. Through this tailored approach, learners were encouraged to relate their work to their lives outside Youthreach and course work appeared to have sufficient levels of challenge. While social and emotional supports features strongly in the SCP programme, there is little scope for more supportive pedagogical approaches to be used as student learning remains the responsibility of the mainstream teacher.

While there was some evidence of a deficit view being held by some Youthreach staff about the learners and their home lives, this was in stark contrast to positive student perspectives about their 'new' educational experiences and post-school outcomes. This deficit view was, however, far more evident among SCP staff who often viewed the families as primarily responsible for student disengagement. Given the lack of educational focus within the SCP programme, the application of the productive pedagogies framework is, perhaps, more problematic. The findings do show, however, that staff sometimes overemphasised the socio-emotional needs of children and young people, focusing on making schools a 'safe space' compared to their academic requirements. The authors acknowledge, however, that this comparison is limited by not having the student perspective captured as part of the SCP study.

In sum, both programmes show the importance of caring and respectful staff–learner relationships in engaging and reengaging disaffected young people in learning. However, they appear to operate outside 'mainstream' education, with little evidence of good practice leading to change at a broader school or system level. This reflects, for Youthreach, provision taking place in separate centres to local schools or colleges, and, for SCP, variation in the integration between programme activities and day-to-day teaching and learning in the school. The findings echo previous research [17,40] which highlights the often hierarchical nature of teacher–student relations in Irish secondary schools and the significant consequences of negative teacher–student interaction for educational retention and academic performance among socio-economically disadvantaged young people. Both programmes offer lessons for mainstream educational provision around the importance of placing care and wellbeing at the heart of formal learning, though previous research cautions against an overemphasis on care as opposed to challenge [31]. In Ireland, wellbeing is being given renewed attention with a new wellbeing curriculum at lower secondary education but the strong orientation of the system towards preparation for high-stakes exams poses significant challenges to progressing a wellbeing agenda across the whole system. In the absence of broader reform, the embedding of a climate of care into formal learning may remain confined to separate activities within schools or separate learning settings altogether, thus restricting the potential to (re)engage young people.

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