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Exploring Staff Retention in Youthreach: Ireland's Response to Early School Leaving

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Abstract

A national review of Ireland's Youthreach education programme for early school leavers found staff retention to be a future challenge for the programme (Smyth et al., 2019). With no previous research into staff retention in Youthreach, this study explores the unique characteristics of the programme to identify variables influencing staff intention to leave. This mixed-methods study used emerging themes from interviews with former staff to identify constructs of interest and select quantitative tools grounded in the culture and perspective of the participants. Analysis of the quantitative data included a hierarchical multiple regression model to assess the strength of the relationships between intention to leave and independent variables. Alongside complementing existing research on teacher retention, the study draws attention to emerging themes specific to Youthreach; the most significant of these being staff burnout, role equity, and work commitment, which are included in the final regression model. The study findings highlight the profound emotional impact that working with at-risk young people had on Youthreach staff. A strong sense of inequity in professional standing contributed to intention to leave and was a possible recruitment barrier.

Keywords: teaching staff intention to leave, at-risk students, burnout, exploratory mixed-methods, Youthreach

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Youthreach is Ireland's principal education programme for early school leavers, providing an opportunity for vulnerable young people aged 15-20 years to gain education, training, and certification in a non-threatening, out-of-school setting (Smyth et al., 2019). A recent study by Kenny et al. (2022) on staff wellbeing in Youthreach showed that 74% of staff reported an intention to leave in the next five years or are unsure if they want to stay. Staff retention issues and elevated levels of staff intention to leave have been described as a threat to the quality of Youthreach provision (Smyth et al., 2019), with an inevitable negative impact on student education and supports.

Teacher retention is a significant issue in many countries across mainstream education provisions. In the United States of America, nearly 50% of new teachers leave the profession after five years (Barnes et al., 2007; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003), while 31.9% of recently qualified Australian teachers had intentions to leave the profession (Arnup & Bowles, 2016). This trend is also prevalent in Ireland, with the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI, 2018a) finding that 46% of new-entrant teachers do not see themselves in the teaching profession in ten years. Teacher shortages at post-primary level have been reported (O'Doherty & Harford, 2018), with Ireland's teacher shortage figures being above the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average (OECD, 2020). Notably, steps to address teacher recruitment and retention difficulties in Ireland have been described as fragmentary, piecemeal, and potentially damaging to the Irish education system and to the teaching profession (Harford & Fleming, 2023).

Unlike teacher shortage issues in mainstream settings, little research has been undertaken in alternative "second chance" education settings such as Youthreach. It has been noted that a decontextualised study of teacher attrition and retention has little value for understanding and dealing with the issue (Kelchtermans, 2017). Therefore, it is important to explore the particular factors that may be at work in the Youthreach context.

Research Problem

As student-staff relationships are key to early school leavers re-engaging with education in Youthreach (McGrath, 2006), understanding how best to recruit and retain stable staff teams of motivated and skilled educators is vital. With no previous research undertaken to guide staff recruitment and retention strategies for Youthreach, this study set out to explore the programme's unique characteristics to better understand how these may influence staff retention.

This study was driven by the research question, "What are the contributing factors to staff retention difficulties in Youthreach?", with the following qualitatively and quantitatively orientated specific research questions:

1. How prevalent is the intention to leave among current Youthreach staff? (Quantitative)

2. What factors contribute towards staff intention to leave in Youthreach? (Qualitative & Quantitative)

3. What factors mediate staff intention to leave in Youthreach? (Qualitative & Quantitative)

The Youthreach Programme

Youthreach is a further education and training (FET) provision, providing full-time education for 15- to 20-year-olds with learning, emotional, and behavioural difficulties, often aggravated by issues at home and mental ill-health (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2010). Students in Youthreach tend to present with high levels of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Gordon, 2017), with four or more ACEs found to increase the risk of physical disease, depression, drug abuse, and suicide risk (Hughes et al., 2017).

Youthreach has been identified by Cedefop (2017), the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, as an example of good practice in tackling early leaving from education, with the main success factor being "the student-staff relationship at the heart of the programme" (see *Success Factors* section). The Youthreach programme has also received particular praise from the Irish Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Harris, 2021), who stated that it provides "education, opportunity, respect and hope to so many people and their families and their communities. It is an example of Ireland at its best" (see *Inclusion* section).

Launched as an inter-departmental pilot programme in 1989, Youthreach is now the Irish government's principal response to early school leaving. It provides an opportunity to gain education, training, and certification in a non-threatening, out-of-school setting (Smyth et al., 2019), with a pedagogical approach more closely aligned to adult education and a focus on acknowledging student achievements rather than reinforcing failure (Stokes, 2003).

With up to 70% of students in Youthreach presenting with special education needs (Gordon, 2017), many require additional support to succeed in reaching their potential. Unfortunately, Youthreach's categorisation as an FET provision, and the lack of a school roll number, means it is beyond the service brief of many national agencies and initiatives supporting mainstream second-level teachers and students of the same age group (McHugh, 2014) – resulting in Youthreach staff being left to meet the needs of students without external specialist supports.

The designation of Youthreach centres as Centres of Education (DES, 2010), rather than as schools, has resulted in many educators in Youthreach not having a requirement to be registered teachers as per Section 30 of the Teaching Council Act (2001). Three employment grades exist in Youthreach – teacher, resource person, and coordinator (for staffing levels by employment grade, see Table 1). Staff employed as teachers have the same qualification requirements and conditions of service as teachers in second-level schools (TUI, 2018b), working a 167-day academic year from September to June. Resource persons and coordinators have expanded management roles, an extended 35-hour working week, and a 226-day operating year from September to July (Department of Education and Science [DES], 2003). Resource persons and coordinators are also not required to be registered teachers or have similar requisite qualifications, despite a requirement for 20 and 15 hours of timetabled classes, respectively. This means that there is no prerequisite training, qualifications or experience for up to 52% of educators in Youthreach. This variation in roles was highlighted by Smyth et al. (2019) as contributing to the logistical issues for the 209-day student academic year in Youthreach.

TABLE 1

Youthreach Staffing Levels by Employment Grade

Staff Category	Male (n)	Female (n)	Total (%)
Coordinator	42	60	102 (11%)
Full-time Resource Persons	109	142	251 (27%)
Pro-rata Resource Persons (WTE)	37	88	125 (14%)
Full-time Teachers	34	73	107 (12%)
Part-time Teachers (WTE)	112	215	327 (36%)
Total	334	578	912

Note. The numbers of pro-rata resource persons and part-time teachers relate to whole-time equivalents (WTE) and not the number of individual people. Adapted from Aggregate 2015 survey data for VTOS Youthreach (DES, 2015)

Literature Review

Literature informing the study is presented thematically, starting with a general overview of the cost of teacher turnover and teacher intention to leave. This is followed by themes emerging from the literature that relate to the Youthreach programme, including the effects of working with at-risk young people, special education teachers, and burnout.

Cost of Teacher Turnover

Teacher turnover disproportionately impacts the finances and student performance of schools with low income, high-minority, and special education students like the ones attending Youthreach. Students in these schools are more frequently taught by inexperienced, new teachers with higher turnover rates (Barnes et al., 2007). The productivity cost of teacher turnover reflects the replacement teacher's possible lower skill levels and is directly associated with student achievement (Kini & Podolsky, 2016; Milanowski & Odden, 2007), resulting in students from schools with high levels of teacher turnover being at a distinct educational disadvantage. Teacher turnover also has a profound negative impact on the relationships students build with staff (Liu & Meyer, 2005). For students joining Youthreach, the building of positive relationships with staff is key to their re-engaging with education (McGrath, 2006), as early school leavers overwhelmingly cite relationship breakdown with teachers as a reason for leaving school (Stokes, 2003).

The financial cost of teacher turnover to schools is estimated to be an additional 25% of the departing teacher's salary when the cost of recruitment, on-boarding, and additional staff support are factored (Barnes et al., 2007).

Teacher Intention to Leave

While intention to leave cannot be directly linked with the act of leaving, it is a useful indicator for analysis (OECD, 2020) as the antecedents of intention to leave provide an opportunity to better understand the psychological process of employee withdrawal (Lachman & Diamant, 1987). Causal links have been established between workplace conditions, job satisfaction, commitment, and a teacher's intention to leave (Conley & You, 2009). Teachers with higher job satisfaction are less likely to leave teaching by the following academic year (Sims & Jerrim, 2020) and high satisfaction may "make teachers more compliant and easier to work with" (Firestone, 1996, p. 215). Work commitment taps a partisan attachment to an organisation's goals and values and reflects a teacher's willingness to expend effort at work. It is also linked to teacher self-efficacy, autonomy, and discretion, as well as principal support and encouragement (Sclan, 1993).

Other major predictors of teacher intention to leave include dissatisfaction with school administration (Boyd et al., 2011), student socio-economic conditions (You & Conley, 2015), workplace conditions (Conley & You, 2009), teacher salaries (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019), teacher training and qualifications (Quartz et al., 2008), teacher autonomy (Major, 2012), student disengagement (Billingsley & Cross, 1991), role stress (Conley & You, 2021), and burnout (Maslach et al., 2016). Levels of teacher team efficacy within the school setting can also greatly influence a teacher's intention to leave. Higher levels of teacher team efficacy facilitate sharing of ideas with

colleagues, resulting in reduced stress, increased job satisfaction, and commitment among teachers (Berry, 2012). The subsequent sense of community can facilitate better resolution of misunderstood role expectations and become an informal support network (Conley & You, 2017).

Special Education Teachers

The diverse academic, social, and emotional needs of students with emotional and behavioural difficulties require classrooms to be staffed by experienced special education teachers (SETs) with the prerequisite skills and knowledge (Adera & Bullock, 2010). Research has shown that unqualified SETs have much higher attrition rates compared with certified colleagues, indicating a positive relationship between training duration and retention (Connelly & Graham, 2009; Miller et al., 1999). You and Conley (2015) argued that teachers' awareness of students experiencing debilitating life conditions is an important variable linked to teacher commitment. Compounding this in a special education setting, the unique demands of students, combined with poor life conditions, may drain SETs physically and emotionally (Major, 2012), regardless of qualifications.

Role Stress

Understanding the role stress of teachers is necessary to understand teacher retention issues (Conley & You, 2021). As a product of person-environment fit (Brewer & McMahan, 2003), role stress increases when job demands exceed the employee's abilities. Role stresses such as ambiguity, conflict, and overload have been found to contribute to intention to leave (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Within a school setting, role stress contributes to deterioration in job satisfaction and commitment (Ghorpade et al., 2011; Yin et al., 2016), as well as increased turnover intentions and burnout (Byrne, 1994; Hakanen et al., 2006).

Secondary Traumatic Stress

Childhood trauma has a detrimental effect on student social, emotional, and behavioural health (Fleckman et al., 2016). In turn, teachers learning of a student's traumatic experiences may experience debilitating effects on their own wellbeing through secondary traumatic stress (STS) (Caringi et al., 2015; Stamm, 2005). Presenting with similar physical and emotional symptoms as burnout, a teacher's response to hearing a student's account of a traumatic event may manifest as an inability to sleep, nightmares, a sense of responsibility to fix student problems, agitation or irritability towards students, and constant worry about student safety (Hydon et al., 2015). Fleckman et al. (2022) argue that there is a critical need to understand the psychological

and emotional consequences of working with students who have experienced trauma, as the emotional wellbeing of teachers influences the quality of education provided to students.

Burnout

Employees exposed to high work demands and low resources may experience the psychological syndrome of burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), making it harder to find intrinsic rewards that previously motivated them (Maslach et al., 2016). Teachers have a higher rate of burnout and STS than other caring professions (Christian-Brandt et al., 2020) with links to lower levels of commitment, decreased physical, and mental health (Hakanen et al., 2006), reduced effectiveness in the classroom, and increased classroom absence (Brunsting et al., 2014).

Kenny et al. (2022) reported that longer-serving staff in Youthreach were at most risk of experiencing burnout and that intervention supports were required. The positive association between length of service and occurrence of burnout is contrary to trends in other caregiving professions such as therapists, who develop tools and supports over time to support their emotional, social, and psychological wellbeing (Burke & Hackett, 2017). This may suggest that longer-serving staff in Youthreach, and other similar programmes/interventions, would benefit from additional training and supports to assist with maintaining wellbeing. Recent research has noted that the strength of association between burnout and intentions to quit in teachers is increasing over time, as the structure and function of teaching changes (Madigan & Kim, 2021).

Methodology

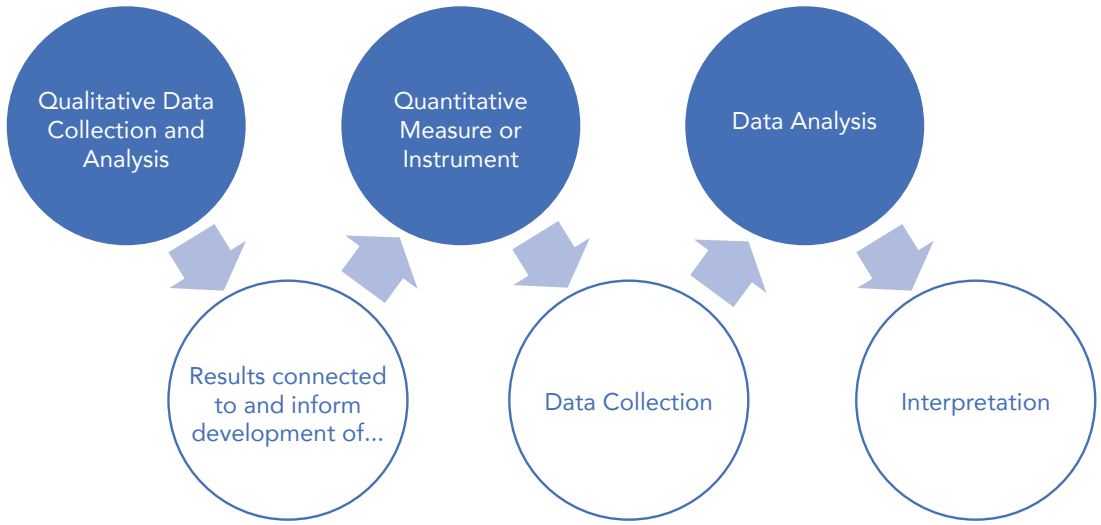
This study took place in 2019, following an exploratory sequential mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to explore staff retention in Youthreach (Figure 1). Qualitative data informed the development of a second quantitative phase; the primary intent was to develop and apply a quantitative survey to identify factors influencing the intention to leave of staff employed in Youthreach. As the quantitative instrument was based on the culture and perspective of the participants, this approach increased the likelihood that it would be seen as relevant to them.

Reflecting the qualitative and quantitative elements of the study, constructivist and post-positivist worldviews were adopted. As described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), the post-positivist views reality as singular and independent from the self, applying theory and hypotheses to data. The constructivist views reality as multiple and seeks out perspectives from individuals, using their views to build themes and generate theory. By using paradigms as tools to creatively fit certain research situations (Maxwell, 2011), the exploratory sequential mixed-methods approach allows for a depth and breadth of exploration of the phenomenon under study with the support

of corroborating qualitative and quantitative data in a way that a mono-method study could not.

FIGURE 1

Exploratory Sequential Mixed-Method Design Stages



Note. Adapted from Designing and conducting mixed methods research (3rd ed., p. 66), by J. W. Creswell, & V. L. Plano Clark, 2018, SAGE Publications, Inc. Copyright 2018 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

In addition to adhering to the quality criteria of each method (such as internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity in quantitative studies; and credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, rich rigour, and meaningful coherence in qualitative studies) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010), mixed methods require integration of qualitative and quantitative phases, results, and data (Hong et al., 2018). Reflecting the exploratory mixed-methods design, three phases of analysis were conducted: qualitative, quantitative, and an integration phase that connected the two strands of data to answer the research questions more comprehensively.

Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase utilised purposive sampling (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), collecting rich data from intentionally selected participants with experience of the phenomenon being studied, that is, former Youthreach staff. To eliminate a lack of commitment to education and teaching as a contributing factor to leaving Youthreach, selection criteria required that participants had remained working in education post-Youthreach. The sample contained two participants from each of the three employment grades in Youthreach (i.e., teacher, resource person, and coordinator), with no two participants from the same centre. This provided a sample size of six with a gender balance maintained. The selection criteria required staff who had left Youthreach in the previous five years to ensure relevance and recall of the experience.

The national coordinator of Youthreach and the branch network of the TUI assisted with participant recruitment. Information on the study was disseminated by email, inviting suitable candidates to contact the researcher. Those candidates who met the study criteria were sent a plain language statement and informed consent forms with the opportunity to discuss the study further prior to participation.

Semi-structured interviews with participants facilitated a context-specific understanding of Youthreach from a staff perspective. The interview guide comprised 13 questions ordered into three categories of inquiry: pre-service, in-service, and post-service (see Appendix). Interviews were conducted in locations suggested by participants with a semi-structured approach, giving the participants flexibility to explore and describe their experiences more fully, while also allowing for follow-up and probing questions to be asked. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Audio recordings of each interview were saved to a password-protected laptop under coded file names. A cleaned review copy of the interview transcript was provided to each interview participant within a week of the interview, with opportunity for participants to withdraw or edit elements of the interview content. Once the final transcript had been agreed with each participant, the original audio recording was deleted. To protect the identity of participants, identifying content was removed, and participants were given pseudonyms in the transcript; T (teacher) 1 and 2, RP (resource person) 1 and 2, and CO (coordinator) 1 and 2.

Qualitative Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was used to analyse the interview data (Table 2). Exploratory provisional a priori coding (Saldaña, 2016) was applied, allowing for a predetermined start list of codes generated from the literature review findings and reflecting an abductive approach to data analysis.

TABLE 2

Thematic Analysis Six-Phase Process

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Note. Reprinted from "Using thematic analysis in psychology," by V. Braun, and V. Clarke, 2006, *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), p. 87. Copyright 2006 by Arnold Publishers.

As the qualitative data were coded and analysed, provisional codes were revised, modified, deleted, and expanded to reflect emerging codes and themes, allowing themes derived from the literature review to be considered alongside context-specific themes that emerged from the field interviews. Coding was done manually, with coding phrases placed beside quotes to mark them. Themes were then developed by organising the codes into higher-level patterns that formed additional "candidate themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2013) at latent and semantic levels. After the candidate themes were recognised, a review was conducted to ensure data representation and research-question relevance.

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase attempted a census of the target population of 912 Youthreach staff nationally, as defined by the most recent figures available (DES, 2015). With the assistance of the National Coordinator of Youthreach and the TUI, an email was distributed to Youthreach staff containing a plain language statement and a link to the questionnaire, which was accessible for two weeks. Informed consent was required before completion and a dedicated email account was set up to handle participant queries.

The 180 survey respondents represented a response rate of 19.7% of the 912 staff employed. Based on the achieved sample and using a confidence level of 95%, a margin of error of +/-6.55% needs to be considered in the interpretation of the data in this study.

Quantitative Measures

Existing scales measuring the constructs of interest to the current study were identified through the qualitative phase. Drawing on established scales within existing literature was intended to yield more accurate measurement of the constructs of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Minor adaptation of the survey questions was required, with "school" being replaced by the term "Youthreach centre". All selected scales used Likert-type questions (Table 3). The questionnaire was coded before dissemination to assist analysis and responses were anonymised.

TABLE 3

Overview of Survey Tools Used in Quantitative Data Collection

Variable	Author/s	No. of items	Sample statement/question	Scale points
Intention to Leave	Wayne et al. (1997)	5	*"As soon as I can find a better job, I'll leave the Youthreach centre I work in."*	7
Work Commitment	Mowday et al. (1982)	15	*"I find that my values and the Youthreach centre's values are very similar."*	7
Job Satisfaction	Conley et al. (1989)	4	*"How satisfied are you with the chances your job gives you to do what you are best at?"*	4
Role Stress (Ambiguity, Conflict, and Overload)	Rizzo et al. (1970)	19	*"There isn't enough time during my regular working day to do everything that is expected of me."*	7
Burnout (Disengagement and Exhaustion)	Demerouti et al. (2003)	16	*"During my work, I often feel emotionally drained."*	4
Role Equity	Researcher Developed	1	*"How satisfied are you with your pay and conditions of service compared with equivalent others in the education sector?"*	5

Quantitative Analysis

The associations between intention to leave and the independent variables were explored, with correlation coefficients being used to assess the strength of these associations. A hierarchical multiple regression analysis (Pallant, 2016) allowed the strength of the associations between intention to leave and independent variables to be measured simultaneously. The hierarchical approach allowed for the introduction of variables sequentially informed by the qualitative phase and literature review findings.

Informed by the findings of Conley and You (2014, 2017), a Sobel test (Preacher & Leonardelli, 2001) was used to test the mediating effect of work commitment and job satisfaction in the relationships between other independent variables and intention to leave.

Results

The findings of the qualitative and quantitative phases are presented separately, followed by an integrated presentation in response to the research questions.

Qualitative Findings

Interviews were conducted with participants from each of the employment grades in Youthreach. A profile of participants is outlined in Table 4.

TABLE 4

Qualitative Phase Participant Profiles

Participant	Gender	Age	Role	Qualifications	Previous teaching experience	Progression	Years of service
CO 1	Male	40-45	Coordinator & Resource Person	Level 8	No	Education Support	17
CO 2	Male	35-40	Coordinator & Resource Person	Level 9	Part-time substitution	Education Management	14
RP 1	Female	30-35	Resource Person	Level 9	Yes	Post-primary Teacher	5
RP 2	Female	35-40	Resource Person & Teacher	Level 9	Yes	Post-primary Teacher	4
T 1	Female	40-45	Teacher	Level 8	No	Adult Education	10
T 2	Male	25-30	Teacher	Level 8	No	Education Support	7

The most prominent themes emerging from the qualitative analysis included: role stress, burnout, role equity, job satisfaction, and work commitment. The resulting thematic map from the TA process is presented in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2

Thematic Map of Qualitative Phase Findings

Intention to Leave

While five of the six interview participants stated that they had the intention to leave for up to two years before leaving, one participant reported having intended to leave Youthreach for ten years. CO 1 explained the delay in leaving as follows:

> *"I was worn out. And that had a lot to do with my staying… I think if I were to be genuinely honest, apathy kept me where I was."*

The apathy described by CO 1 may have a profound negative impact on the cohesion of small staff teams and the relationships with vulnerable students. This also provides insight into the relationship between intention to leave and the act of leaving, delayed, at times, dependent on the level of emotional exhaustion experienced by staff.

Burnout

Burnout featured heavily in interview responses, with four of the six participants making direct reference to burnout as a contributing factor to leaving Youthreach. The sentiment of many of the interviewees was summed up by CO 1:

> *"I don't think at any point would I have been confident enough to say that I would spend my entire career in Youthreach. I just don't see how I could have survived. And that's with it going well."*

Aligning with Major's (2012) assertion that the challenging life conditions of students can drain teachers physically and emotionally as a result of STS (Caringi et al., 2015),

RP 1 explained how they had found it very difficult when learning of the circumstance of students:

> *"There were nights I couldn't sleep thinking of students in certain situations they were in."*

CO 2 reflected on the intense nature of the work undertaken by Youthreach staff in attempting to meet the needs of students, with a perceived inevitability of burnout:

> *"When you have a situation where one lad is coming to knife another fella, and another person is going to kill themselves. Or another person is talking about dropping out and having to deal with all of them. At the one time. That's not good. That's going to catch up with you."*

Role Equity

Role equity was a dominant theme emerging in interviews with former staff that was not identified in the initial literature review. Equity is a process of motivation driven by the perception of unfairness leading to tension, with individuals motivated to resolve that unfairness (Adams, 1965). Role equity featured strongly across all staff grades, revealing two levels of inequity. T 1 explained how a centre hierarchy had meant that those on teaching contracts felt unimportant:

> *"I found the management structure very difficult because the teachers were put at the bottom of the pile. That was hard. I don't think we were respected for our profession."*

Reinforcing this point, RP 2 recalled how those on teaching contracts were referred to as "part-timers", despite many teaching full-time hours. Understood as being a reference to the shorter working week and year of teachers, this suggested a tension between staff of different grades, particularly teachers and resource persons. RP 2's perspective highlighted the additional work and inferior terms of employment of resource persons, especially during times when teachers were on leave:

> *"What was expected then of the resource staff when the teachers were gone? That you might have been down to two or three members of staff who were still trying to do the same job as maybe three or four other teachers… I found that really, that was really tough to do that."*

RP 1 also expressed frustration with the role inequity of resource persons:

> *"I'm doing more work for longer, for less money, for less recognition. Who on the planet would go near that from an objective point of view?"*

The lack of professional recognition was highlighted by some of the resource person and coordinator participants. CO 2 told of being labelled a *"yellow pack"* by a fellow education professional, meaning a low-skilled, low-cost alternative. Recalling these comments triggered a strong emotional response:

> *"Yellow pack. Bang for your money. You're cheap. You're more value for money. We get more out of you for less money."*

Finally, RP 2 drew attention to social media advice to prospective job applicants to Youthreach, further undermining the professional standing of staff and the reputation of the Youthreach provision:

> *"I remember reading somewhere that somebody had said, well, it was career suicide working in a Youthreach."*

Work Commitment

Work commitment was explored in terms of both pre-service and in-service commitment to the Youthreach model of education and ethos. While in-service commitment was widely evident, there was less evidence of pre-service commitment. RP 1 and RP 2 had previously taught at second level. Both stated that their experience of working with at-risk students had motivated them to work in Youthreach. The prior knowledge and understanding of Youthreach amongst other interview participants ranged from none to having negative preconceived ideas. CO 2 summed up their understanding of what Youthreach was before joining:

> *"My misconception on it was, it was for behavioural reasons that they came to Youthreach. What is a typical Youthreach student? A delinquent. That was my understanding then."*

Despite a seeming lack of pre-service commitment, evidence of in-service commitment was abundant across both samples. Many interview participants regularly described their "love" and "grá" (Irish for affectionate love) for working with students in Youthreach. Many still referred to "we" when talking about the provision. The level of commitment observed by RP 1 in Youthreach was a source of inspiration:

> *"You could just see the level of commitment in the centre to the provision, to the students and to what they did. And I really loved that."*

Role Stress

Sources of role stress were identified under the categories of ambiguity, conflict, and overload, with findings on each outlined in turn. New entrants experienced ambiguity of professional roles and responsibilities, contributing to feelings of insecurity and of being overwhelmed. T 1 recalled how they felt the expectations of staff were unclear:

> *"There were a lot of expectations on us. I remember thinking it was a bit grey sometimes as to what we're responsible for, what we had to manage."*

Ambiguity existed around the role of resource persons too. RP 1, after five years in the role, still found it difficult to explain:

> *"I actually don't know a quick way of saying that. I don't, still don't. In some ways I still don't really know what a resource person was."*

Similar to other participants, CO 1 compared the responsibilities of the roles to the activities of a variety of traditional roles:

> *"In Youthreach, resource staff and coordinators, you have to do a bit of everything anyway. So, your role is, yes, it is a teacher, and yes it's a nurse, and yes it's a counsellor, and yes it's a prison warden. Yes, it's all these things."*

This ambiguity of roles is significant as many of the new staff entrants to Youthreach had little to no previous experience of working with at-risk young people or prior knowledge of Youthreach.

Role conflict was evident in the accounts of participants, especially coordinators and resource persons. CO 1 felt the direction of Youthreach had shifted in recent years causing a confliction in how Youthreach served early school leavers:

> *"And as far as I'm concerned, things changed in Youthreach… Our focus was dragged away from relationship-based teaching, for want of a better phrase, to bean counting and being results focused. …we're a centre for development, we're a centre for wellbeing and nurture. There was no way to measure that so it kind of got swept away."*

This sentiment was echoed by RP 2, who linked the change of emphasis to their intention to leave Youthreach:

> *"I didn't go into Youthreach to be in an office doing admin and not be able to really deal with things that were going on for the students… And I suppose, for me it looked like it was going in a direction I didn't actually want to go in."*

Role overload was a theme commonly identified across the three categories of interview participants. T 1 felt that the role required staff to be always on, without any time for a break or down time, a view shared by all other participants:

> *"We were never off. We were always with them. … there wasn't a staff room. There was nowhere to escape. So, it was pretty full on."*

Job Satisfaction

The three main sources of satisfaction for participants were working with students, the staff teams, and teaching. T 2 reflected that the fact that the centre did things for students that students may otherwise have been missing out on was a source of great satisfaction:

> *"I loved all the stuff we would do for them. You know the trips. The nice stuff. The Christmas dinner. When I felt we were doing something for the kids that they hadn't a chance to do."*

The next most substantial source of satisfaction was the staff team efficacy. T 1 still had strong emotional ties to the staff team she had worked with:

> *"Like really loving the staff. I'm being really honest with you now, it sounds a bit soft, but I loved the staff… There was a definite sense of family and connection."*

Teaching was a source of satisfaction and escape according to CO 2, who reflected on escaping to their classroom:

> *"…I was most comfortable as a coordinator and a resource person in the classroom... I escaped into the subject."*

The term *"escape"*, used occasionally by participants alongside other metaphors relating to imprisonment, may provide an interesting insight into the participants' self-perceived position in Youthreach. The job satisfaction stemming from teaching and engaging students on the educational journey of the subject countered the perceived negative and demanding elements of their professional role.

Quantitative Findings

Participant Profile

The distribution of employment grades of respondents was 53.3% resource persons, 26.1% teachers, and 20.6% coordinators. The gender distribution was 64.4% females and 35.6% males. In terms of age, 25.0% were in the 31-40 age range, 43.9% were 41-50 years of age, and 22.8% were 51-60 years of age.

A quarter (25%) of respondents indicated 11-15 years of service in Youthreach, with the 6-10 and 16-20 year ranges each accounting for more than one fifth (22.2%); the remaining 15% indicated fewer than five years of service. Eighty-four percent of respondents reported being registered with the Teaching Council, although nearly half (48.3%) indicated they had no previous experience of working with at-risk teenagers in an educational setting.

Descriptive Analysis

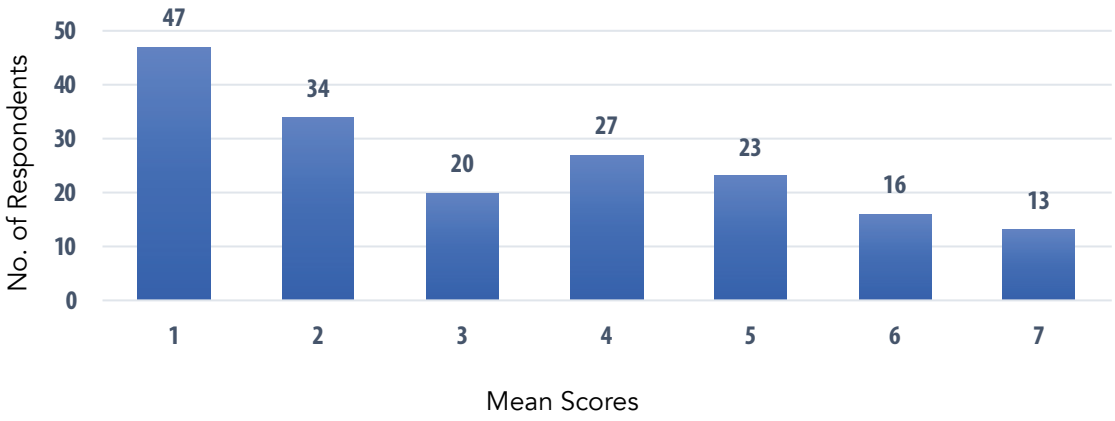
The survey measured the following variables: intention to leave, job satisfaction, work commitment, burnout, role stress, and role equity.

Intention to Leave. Intention to leave was measured using five items on a 7-point scale from Wayne et al. (1997), as used by Conley and You (2021). Scored from 1

(*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), higher values signal higher intention to leave. From the survey of current Youthreach staff, intention to leave had a mean score of 3.29 (*SD* = 1.92). Being close to three, this is indicative of "slight disagreement" with intention to leave overall. Further investigation of the sample's rounded mean scores for intention to leave showed that 56.1% of respondents (*n* = 101) scored between 1 and 3, indicating low intention to leave, while 28.9% (*n* = 52) scored between 5 and 7, indicating higher levels of intention to leave (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

Rounded Intention to Leave Mean Scores of Survey Participants



Work Commitment. Work commitment was measured using a 15-item scale from Mowday et al. (1982). Responses were scored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) with higher scores indicating higher levels of commitment. The mean score for commitment from the quantitative sample was 4.74 (*SD* = 1.15) meaning, on average, slight agreement.

Job Satisfaction. To measure job satisfaction of current Youthreach staff, a four-item scale from Conley et al. (1989) was used. Each item was scored from 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 4 (*very satisfied)* with higher scores indicating greater levels of job satisfaction. The mean score for job satisfaction in the sample was 2.70 (*SD* = 0.78), interpreted as "satisfied".

Role Stress. Role stress was measured using a 19-item scale from Rizzo et al. (1970). Responses were scored from 1 (*very false*) to 7 (*very true*) with higher scores signalling higher levels of role stress. The mean score for role stress in the sample was 4.01 (*SD* = 1.20), indicative of a relatively neutral score, on average.

Burnout. Burnout was measured using the *Oldenburg Burnout Inventory* developed by Demerouti et al. (2003). This 16-item measure is scored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) with higher scores indicating higher levels of burnout. The mean score for burnout in the sample was 2.54 (*SD* = 0.60), which signifies a relatively neutral

outlook (midway between weak disagreement and weak agreement).

Role Equity. The perception of role equity was measured with a single question asking participants, "How satisfied are you with your pay and conditions of service compared with equivalent others in the education sector?". This was measured on a scale from 1 (*very dissatisfied)* to 5 (*very satisfied*) with higher scores indicating higher levels of role equity. Sixty-seven percent of respondents reported dissatisfaction, including 38.0% who reported being *very dissatisfied* with pay and conditions of employment.

Means and standards deviations of each of the variables of interest, as well as their Cronbach's alpha (**α**) coefficients and Pearson intercorrelations are presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5

Means, Standard Deviations, Alpha Coefficients, and Correlation Coefficients

	Mean	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Burnout	2.54	0.59	0.88	-					
2. Role Stress	4.01	1.20	0.92	0.67*	-				
3. Job Satisfaction	2.69	0.78	0.87	-0.65*	-0.55*	-			
4. Work Commitment	4.74	1.15	0.89	-0.60*	-0.50*	0.75*	-		
5. Role Equity	2.15	1.18		-0.40*	-0.29*	0.34*	0.31*	-	
6. Intention to Leave	3.29	1.92	0.93	0.57*	0.43*	-0.53*	-0.54*	-0.43*	-

Note. Role equity is a single-item scale and has no Cronbach's alpha coefficient.
* $p < 0.01$

Statistically significant correlations were observed between intention to leave and each of the examined independent variables, corroborating the qualitative phase findings. Statistically significant correlations were also found across all independent variables. Bivariate analysis of survey data identified the strongest positive and negative variable relationships between each independent variable and intention to leave. These zero-order correlations indicated that increased levels of burnout (r = .57, p < .01) were associated with higher levels of intention to leave. The variables with the strongest significant negative relationships with intention to leave were job satisfaction and work commitment (r = -.53, p < .01 and r = -.54, p < .01, respectively).

Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression was employed to assess the strength of the relationships between the dependent variable, intention to leave, and the independent variables collectively,

reflecting the complex interrelationships.

The final model that yielded the highest coefficient of determination[1] with intention to leave is shown in Table 6. The variables of role stress and job satisfaction were not included in the model as statistically significant relationships with intention to leave were not observed in earlier iterations of the model. The three retained independent variables of burnout, role equity, and work commitment collectively accounted for 41.2% of the variation in intention to leave reported by the sample of Youthreach staff.

TABLE 6

Final Regression Model of Intention to Leave

F Significance: <0.01	F (3, 18) = 42.97	R^2: 0.42	Adjusted R^2: 0.41
	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	
	B	Standard Error	Beta	p-value
Intercept	3.79	1.09		0.00
Burnout	0.99	0.24	0.31	0.00
Role Equity	-0.36	0.10	-0.22	0.00
Work Commitment	-0.47	0.12	-0.28	0.00

Given that variables were measured on different scales, standardised regression coefficients were calculated to facilitate comparison using a single common set of units (Siegel & Wagner, 2022). Burnout had the highest standardised regression coefficient of 0.31. Role equity and work commitment had negative coefficients, meaning that higher reported role equity and work commitment were associated with lower intention to leave.

Sobel Test for Mediation

As identified by Conley and You (2021), job satisfaction and work commitment may act as mediating or intervening variables between a range of independent variables and the dependent variable of intention to leave amongst schoolteachers. Sobel testing (Preacher & Leonardelli, 2001) was utilised to examine whether work commitment and job satisfaction mediated the relationship between the retained variables of role equity and burnout in the final regression model, with intention to leave as the dependent variable.

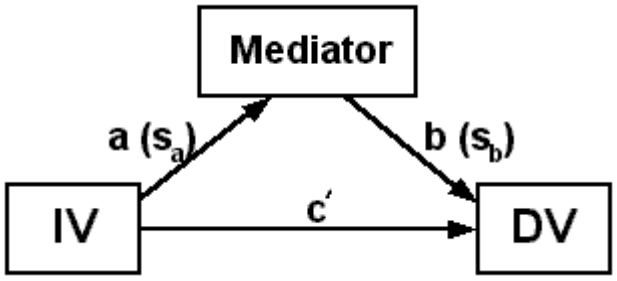
The Sobel test for mediation required a linear regression A of the independent variables (IV; i.e., role equity and burnout) on the mediators (M; i.e., job satisfaction and work commitment), and a separate linear regression B of the IV and M variables on the dependent variable (DV; i.e., intention to leave). These analyses provided unstandardised regression coefficients and standard errors for paths a and b,

1 Output from earlier models is available upon request to the author.

respectively, as shown in Figure 4. Path C represents the direct effect of IV on DV without mediator effects.

FIGURE 4

Illustration of Mediator in Relation to Independent and Dependent Variables



Note. Reprinted from "Calculation for the Sobel test: An interactive calculation tool for mediation tests," by K. J. Preacher, and G. J. V. Leonardelli, 2001, quantpsy.org (http://quantpsy.org/sobel/sobel.htm).

As the calculated z scores fall outside of the z critical values of +/-1.96, a significant mediating effect of work commitment and job satisfaction in the relationships of role equity and burnout with intention to leave was confirmed (Table 7).

TABLE 7

Results From Sobel Tests for Mediation on Intention to Leave

	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4
IV	Role Equity	Burnout	Role Equity	Burnout
M	Job Satisfaction	Job Satisfaction	Work Commitment	Work Commitment
a	0.23	-0.85	0.30	-1.16
b	-1.30	-1.30	-0.90	-0.90
Sa	0.05	0.07	0.07	0.12
Sb	0.16	0.16	0.11	0.11
Z-Score	-4.18	6.74	-3.83	6.49
p-value	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Integration of Findings

The integrated study findings are presented below under each of the research questions driving the study, and the joint display of key study findings table (Table 8).

TABLE 8

Joint Display of Key Study Findings

Theme/Variable	Survey Findings	Regression Analysis	Interview Quotes
Intention to Leave	28.9% expressed intention to leave Mean score of 3.29 (7-point scale) indicating "slight disagreement"	Retained predictor variables of burnout, role equity and work commitment account for 41% of variation	*"I was worn out. And that had a lot to do with my staying… I think if I were to be genuinely honest, apathy kept me where I was."*
Burnout	54.4% indicated higher levels of burnout Mean score of 2.54 (4-point scale) indicating "mostly agree"	0.31 standardised coefficient An *SD* increase in burnout (.59) results in an expected increase of .31 in *SD* of intention to leave (1.92)	*"I don't think at any point would I have been confident enough to say that I would spend my entire career in Youthreach. I just don't see how I could have survived. And that's with it going well."*
Role Equity	67.2% reported dissatisfaction, including 35% reporting being very dissatisfied with terms and conditions of employment compared with equivalent others in education Mean score of 2.15 (5-point scale) indicating "dissatisfied"	-0.22 standardised coefficient An *SD* increase in role equity (1.18) results in an expected decrease of .22 in *SD* of intention to leave (1.92)	*"…teachers were put at the bottom of the pile. That was hard. I don't think we were respected for our profession."* *"I'm doing more work for longer, for less money, for less recognition. Who on the planet would go near that from an objective point of view?"*
Work Commitment	63.3% expressed high levels of work commitment Mean score of 4.74 (7-point scale) indicating "slightly agree"	-0.28 standardised coefficient An *SD* increase in Work Commitment (1.15) results in an expected decrease of .28 in *SD* of intention to leave (1.92)	*"You could just see the level of commitment in the centre to the provision, to the students and to what they did. And I really loved that."*

How Prevalent is the Intention to Leave Among Current Youthreach Staff?

Data analysis indicated that 28.9% of current Youthreach staff responding to the survey reported high levels of intention to leave, scoring between 5 and 7 on a 7-point scale on average. While five of the six interview participants who previously left Youthreach stated that they had the intention to leave for one to two years before leaving, exhaustion and "apathy" resulting from burnout contributed to a delay in acting upon their intention to leave. With CO 1, this delay was up to ten years, during which time the participant's burnout state may have negatively impacted the staff team and students.

What Factors Contribute Towards Staff Intention to Leave in Youthreach?

In the regression model, burnout, role equity, and work commitment retained a statistically significant relationship with respondents' intention to leave. Higher levels of burnout were reported by 54.4% of survey respondents, with four of the six interview participants making direct reference to burnout as a concern during their time in Youthreach. With a positive standardised coefficient of .31 within the regression model, each *SD* increase in burnout (.59) accounted for .31 increase in *SD* in intention to leave (1.92).

Several interview participants referred to a need or inability to "escape" from the stresses experienced in Youthreach. Symptoms of STS were evident in interview participant accounts, with examples of staff who *"couldn't sleep thinking of students in certain situations"*. Many participants felt that burnout was inevitable, which contributed directly to their intention and act of leaving.

Two levels of perceived role inequity were identified in the study's qualitative phase; teachers being perceived as "part-timers" and feeling undervalued, and coordinators and resource persons being perceived as "yellow-pack" versions of teachers. A standardised regression coefficient of -0.22 meant that higher perceived equity of current staff was associated with lower intention to leave. Unfortunately, dissatisfaction with pay and conditions of employment compared with equivalent others was reported by 67.2% of survey respondents.

Work commitment had a statistically significant and negative relationship with intention to leave, with a standardised regression coefficient of -0.28. While pre-service work commitment was less evident amongst interview participants, in-service work commitment was high and a source of inspiration. This finding is reinforced by the 63.0% of survey respondents indicating high work commitment.

What Factors Mediate Staff Intention to Leave in Youthreach?

The mediating qualities of work commitment and job satisfaction were shown via Sobel tests. These mediating variables were shown to reduce the effects of the independent variables retained in the regression, namely, burnout and role equity, on intention to leave. In turn, this indicates that targeting improved levels of work commitment and job satisfaction within current staff will potentially reduce the effect of burnout and role equity on intention to leave.

Survey results showed job satisfaction levels to be high overall, with qualitative findings indicating that the most satisfying parts of working in Youthreach were working with students, the staff team, and teaching. While interview participants expressed "love" for these parts of their roles, they were also the parts of their roles that they "escaped" into. The mediating variable of work commitment was also retained in the final regression

model that best predicted intention to leave. These dual direct and indirect properties of work commitment make it vital in understanding staff retention in Youthreach.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore staff retention challenges in Youthreach, Ireland's principal education programme for early school leavers. Given the unique characteristics of Youthreach as a provider of education, training, and certification for vulnerable young people in an out-of-school setting (Smyth et al., 2019), an exploratory sequential mixed-method design facilitated a depth and breadth of understanding of staff intention to leave with corroborating qualitative and quantitative findings.

Intention to leave among Youthreach staff broadly reflected the findings of Kenny et al. (2022) and was higher than found in studies by Conley and You among high school teachers and SETs in the USA (Conley & You, 2014; 2017). Given the small staff team sizes and specialist knowledge required in Youthreach, Smyth et al. (2019) warned that high staff turnover rates could profoundly negatively impact vulnerable students.

The profound emotional impact of working with at-risk young people on staff in Youthreach was evident. While role stress was not retained in the regression model, burnout resulting from unmanaged work stress had the strongest association with intention to leave. The high demands associated with working with at-risk young people in education are typical of the conditions Bakker and Demerouti (2007) associate with burnout. Given that Youthreach students are beyond the service brief of many agencies supporting mainstream second-level students of the same age cohort, it is arguable that the likelihood of burnout is further increased. Interview findings also demonstrated how apathy and exhaustion of burned-out staff may delay the act of leaving with possible additional negative outcomes for students and staff teams.

A staff supervision and wellbeing programme should be developed to support the emotional, social, and psychological wellbeing of staff. The introduction of trauma informed positive education (TIPE) may be of benefit not only to students, but also to the staff working closely with them. Brunzell et al. (2021) found that teachers working with students impacted by trauma can be shown how to reduce ill-being and to increase their wellbeing when incorporating TIPE in their practice.

In this study, 63.3% of survey respondents reported high rates of work commitment, which was lower than the reported work commitment of teachers in Conley and You's studies (Conley & You, 2014, 2017). As a retained variable in the regression model with a mediating effect on intention to leave, particular attention should be given to work commitment in improving staff retention in Youthreach.

Study findings highlighted a lack of pre-service commitment to Youthreach. As previous professional experience and qualifications of teachers in high-need schools directly

impact staff retention rates and the achievement of students (Kirchhoff & Lawrenz, 2011; Whipp & Geronime, 2017), the selection criteria for recruitment of staff to Youthreach should be reviewed. It is recommended that selection criteria should include Teaching Council registration, experience of working with at-risk young people, and additional training or qualifications in special education needs. A staff induction programme would help new staff acclimatise to the unique culture and ethos of Youthreach and support in-service work commitment development. Induction programmes are key to reducing the social and fiscal cost of teacher turnover in education settings with high levels of at-risk students (Watlington et al., 2010), especially those that utilise mentors and focus on high-leverage activities (Schmidt et al., 2017).

A strong sense of inequity in professional standing among staff in Youthreach contributed to intention to leave and is a possible recruitment barrier. Former Youthreach staff describe how the work undertaken in Youthreach was perceived as less valuable than that in a mainstream second-level school, with suggestions that it would be more difficult to build a career having served in Youthreach. As differences in teaching load and difficulty, working conditions, and differences in salaries help to explain higher attrition rates in some educational settings (OECD, 2021), conditions of service and staffing structures of Youthreach should be reviewed and aligned with other educational settings. Accounts from interview participants suggest that a restructuring of roles within Youthreach would help to address perceived internal inequities. Given the negative perceptions of Youthreach evident among some other education professionals, it is also suggested that steps be taken to promote Youthreach as a quality education provision and a genuine career path for teachers.

The study findings concerning role stress were mixed. Elements of role stress featured heavily in interview findings, with multiple examples given of role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload contributing to intention to leave. While a statistically significant bivariate relationship was established between role stress and intention to leave, it was not retained in the final regression model. It is proposed that further study be undertaken into the relationship between components of role stress and intention to leave within the Youthreach context, with particular attention to role conflict resulting from the changing nature and focus of the programme.

Limitations

The conclusions of this study are bound by the recognised limitations of the study. First, the teacher grade was under-represented in the quantitative sample compared with staffing figures in Youthreach; 26.1% of respondents reported to be teachers in this study, while the equivalent proportion in Youthreach is 47.6% (DES, 2015). Second, it should be noted that specific age cohorts and years of service were not represented in the study's qualitative phase. None of the interview participants were over 50 or had more than 20 years of service. Third, the role equity variable was measured with a single

question, rather than with an established multiple-item scale. Lastly, with a response rate of approximately 20% to the survey from the target population of Youthreach staff, it is worth noting that those who responded may have differed in some ways from those who did not and the findings from this sample may not, therefore, be fully generalisable.

Conclusion

This exploratory mixed-method study set out to explore staff retention issues in Youthreach. The joint display of study findings demonstrated how the quantitative findings are further enhanced by understanding the participants' contextual and cultural sensitivity. The study findings should benefit staff and management of Youthreach, informing policy and practice reform to ensure that the needs of some of Ireland's most vulnerable young students continue to be met. The methodological framework of this study may be recommended for use in other studies seeking to understand teacher retention challenges within unique contextual and cultural settings.

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Appendix

Exploring Staff Retention Factors in Youthreach
Sample Questions for Interview Phase

Before Joining Youthreach

What previous experience, training, and qualifications did you have on entering the Youthreach provision?

When you applied for the post, did you have a clear understanding of the role you were applying for and what Youthreach was?

How long did you intend to work in Youthreach when you started?

Time in Youthreach

What positions did you hold in Youthreach and how long did you work there?

How would you describe your main responsibilities?

Was your role clearly defined? Were there clear expectations that were supported by management?

While working in Youthreach, what in-service training was provided? Was this beneficial and did it meet your needs?

What parts of the job were most satisfying to you in Youthreach?

What parts of the job were most frustrating to you in Youthreach?

Migrating from Youthreach

What were the main reasons that motivated you to leave Youthreach?

How long had you intended to leave Youthreach before you actually left?

Were there factors that delayed your act of leaving Youthreach?

Given the opportunity would you work in Youthreach again? Explain.

Have you any other comments or suggestions relating to staff retention in Youthreach?