Nikki Lawrence

Well-being in work-based learning: How learners' personal issues are supported.

This is the second in a series of occasional blogs drawn from research projects carried out by MA Education students at Wrexham Glyndŵr University (WGU). The second, by Nikki Lawrence, who has just completed her MA Education, was a qualitative research study that explored the training of tutors to help them support personal issues that impact their learners. The study examined the types of learner issues that tutors encounter, how they supported their learners with those issues, what support was available for tutors and if tutors used counselling skills in their practice. Research methods included an extensive review of the literature and semi-structured interviews with work-based learning tutors in a Welsh Further Education Institution. Edited by John Luker, programme leader for the MA Education at WGU.

Part of my role in the work-based learning (WBL) sector within a Further Education (FE) institution, is to assess and support learners with their qualifications. The role includes supporting learners' well-being, ensuring any difficulties are identified, addressed and resolved where possible. The Well-being of Future Generation (Wales) Act (2015) outlined seven well-being goals that public bodies, including FE colleges, must work towards. The well-being goals are; a prosperous Wales, a resilient Wales, a healthier Wales, a more equal Wales, a Wales of cohesive communities, a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language and a globally responsive Wales (Welsh Government, 2015). Under the goal for a healthier Wales, the Welsh Government aims to create a society in which people's physical and mental well-being is maximised. Field (2009, p. 7) stated that education has 'a measurable impact on well-being through all stages of life'. The link between well-being and mental health is a matter that concerns FE tutors, as most will at some point work with learners who experience difficulties that affect their ability to learn. Tutors have a crucial role to play in promoting positive mental health and well-being, and people with mental health issues are the focus of many government policies and social inclusion agendas (Clark, 2010).

For work-based learning (WBL) providers such as FE institutions, well-being also forms part of the Common Inspection Framework against which they are assessed by Estyn (Estyn, 2015). Key question one of the framework covers aspects of well-being such as learners' attitudes to keeping healthy and safe, participation and enjoyment in learning, community involvement and decision making, and social and life skills. In addition, key question two covers the provision for health and well-being, specialist services, information and guidance, safeguarding arrangements and additional learning needs (Estyn, 2015).

My MA Education dissertation research was a qualitative study that examined the perceptions of WBL tutors regarding the difficulties learners experienced and how tutors supported them to prevent issues escalating to the point where learners dropped out of courses before completion. The research methods included semi-structured interviews with 10 WBL tutors. Additional data was also obtained from the FE institution using the most recent leaver figures and the reasons given for learners leaving before course completion. As a WBL tutor, I had personal experience of supporting learners with issues that affected their course and sometimes felt that I may not be adequately trained to deal with some of the well-being issues that arose. Therefore, the initial research question arose from my interest in exploring WBL tutors' experiences and the strategies they had used to support their learners. I wished to carry out this study not only to inform future practice, but also to highlight and share best practice within the department. As Becker (1998, p. 7) states, 'We need ways of expanding the reach of our thinking, of seeing what else we could be thinking and asking, of increasing the ability of our ideas to deal with the diversity of what goes on in the world'.

The research findings showed that learner well-being issues encountered by tutors were wide ranging. The main issues were personal including, health, stress, family commitments, time and previous poor education. Tutors felt that they were able to support learners with these

types of issues using a range of methods. Where they were unable provide suitable support themselves, they felt they were able to signpost learners to relevant support within the FE institution or to external agencies. However, some issues appeared to be out of the tutors' control such as when learners left the sector or moved to a job role that did not support the qualification. The data collected indicated a consistent issue arising over the last 13 years where learners struggled to attain all components of their qualification, leading to non-completion of their course of study. Most learners appeared to struggle to achieve the three Essential Skills Wales (ESW) components of the framework. Estyn (2004) state that this could be due to a lack of emphasis on developing key skills (now ESW) on the behalf of the provider. However, there was no clear evidence to suggest whether the problem lay with the FE institution, the way the different ESW were delivered, or the learners themselves. It is an area that would require further research in order to ascertain whether this could be prevented in future.

With regards to how the tutors supported learners with well-being issues, the findings showed that they drew on a range of methods to support learners with any issues that arose. These methods included breaking work down, flexibility, keeping in touch with learners, one to one support and in general just talking and listening to learners. Where they could not provide support themselves, tutors felt that there was additional support available within the institution or external services such as counselling, that they could refer learners to. Tutors also appeared to draw on the use of counselling skills that was the final part of the original research question. The data indicated that the use of counselling skills was embedded within the practice of the tutors who engaged in the research, although it was not always recognised what those skills actually were. There was some agreement that some of these skills were not fully utilised or their potential explored. This was not unsurprising as the most of the tutors involved in the study had not received any formal counselling skills training. The level of support tutors could provide was limited where timeframes for work were inflexible. This was also outside of the control of the institution, where timeframes were set by the funding

organisation such as the Welsh Government. Regardless of this, data collected indicated that the tutors strove to do everything possible within practical limits to support learners and achieved positive outcomes by drawing on a range of interpersonal support methods.

Data indicated that, within the main function of the tutors' role to support learners to achieve their qualification, they instinctively provided emotional support for learners experiencing personal and emotional issues. They did this in order to achieve a positive outcome for the learner, even though it was not always a recognised part of their role (Westergaard, 2017). Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) highlighted that taking into consideration learners' well-being as well as supporting their learning can place a high emotional demand upon tutors, both in the demands made by their students as well as the need to adapt to counselling roles they might not have expected to perform. Tutors acknowledged that supporting learners with issues could evoke different emotions within themselves that they might struggle to deal with. Chang (2009) highlighted this issue stating that some tutors might find it difficult to manage their feelings. Findings from this study concluded that a significant proportion of the tutors felt that they required training in this area, to learn how to deal effectively with their emotions and to appropriately manage their feelings in front of learners. Findings from the study indicated that the tutors did feel comfortable in dealing with most general learner support issues that arose and that they were happy with the support they themselves received. While it was clear that there were effective support systems in place, some of the tutors highlighted that further training or support could be beneficial to help improve their practice even further.

While there was already clear effective support within the FE institution for learners who experience issues and for tutors who supported them, based on the findings from the study, the following recommendations were suggested to the FE institution in order to further enhance practice further:

- Basic counselling skills training to be available to tutors to assist them to define the skills required in a helping relationship. To understand, develop and demonstrate the use of basic counselling skills including active listening skills, reflecting and questioning, empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard. To help tutors to develop strategies for raising self-awareness.

- Training to be available on being a reflexive practitioner, to be aware of feelings, to be aware of assumptions, and to be able to evaluate practice.

- A formal support system to be established where tutors can disclose issues, discuss emotions and receive support strategies.

- Access to be provided to tutors for stress management and emotional health services.

Nikki Lawrence

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