Student welfare: complexity, dilemmas and contradictions

Abstract

The role of the education sector has expanded into areas of social welfare. A key influence, relates to the disintegration of public-funded organisations responsible for mental health and social welfare provision. This article considers the policy drive for a broadened welfare mandate within education settings. Drawing on illustrations of welfare-orientated teaching, the article explores the extent to which a welfare agenda influenced teaching practice and education provision for marginalised youth enrolled on an employability course in an FE college. During academic years 2013 to 2015, empirical research was conducted with seven tutors and twenty six students enrolled on a Level 1 employability course at a large FE college in South East England. Key findings discovered that there was a disproportionate focus on welfare duties when teaching youth with complex backgrounds. Fieldwork data mainly highlighted complications, contradictions and the counter-productive nature of welfare-orientated teaching: it gave rise to 'social welfare tutors'; they have a diminished academic focus and were wholly engaged in welfare duties, reducing the course to something akin to therapy and welfare practice. Despite good intentions, generally, such practice directly reinforced disadvantage and marginalised participants from essential provision that granted access to a range of further study and training opportunities within the setting.

Key words: Welfare Discourse, Student Welfare, Social Welfare Tutors, FE, NEETs

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> "…I've got a learner who comes in…she comes in one morning, and her head will go down on the desk and I know that there is a problem there. She's a self-harmer, she's got mental health difficulties, severe panic attacks, regularly she's going like this and I say, 'Are you okay?', and she says, 'I cut myself last night'. Then I have to pull her out the classroom, make sure the wounds are clean, make sure she's okay then maybe go to safeguarding, make sure that's put on pro-monitor, and that's before I even start teaching in the classroom. I can't just leave that girl with her head on the desk, because I know that her problems are massive. …we'll start teaching when I get back. But yeah, a nightmare! And that could take half an hour before I start teaching" (Interview with Tutor: Aggy – Recorded interview: June 2015).

Aggy's account illustrates the complexities, tensions and challenges of dealing with student welfare concerns on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. According to the tutors, the students experienced complex welfare problems; they were urgent, frequent, 'real' and potentially serious. This perception perhaps explained why their teaching practice was influenced by a strong nurturing and welfare focus. The sheer complexity of dealing with welfare duties on this course could not be overlooked. Although Aggy believed that such practice had benefits, her narrative also identified the pitfalls when teaching practice was governed by a predominant welfare ethos where dealing with student welfare issues took precedence over educational concerns. As a consequence, formal teaching was immediately postponed and classroom learning was temporarily suspended. The option of perhaps referring the matter to the college's safeguarding team as per protocol was not considered the preferred route.

Background reading highlighted that 90% of English councils have experienced funding cuts for children and youth services. More specifically, from 2013 to 2014 alone, approximately £103m was cut from Children's Social Care, youth justice services and child protection services (UNISON 2016). Consequently, the FE sector, like many other public sector agencies, has borne the brunt of the government's austerity agenda, despite facing an array of challenges with repeated funding cuts, redundancies and ongoing disruption with the current area reviews that threaten the merging or closure of several FE colleges (O'Leary 2016).

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As a result, within contemporary FE education settings, there was a broadened welfare agenda, observed in the Children Act (2004) and Children and Families Act (2014) which commissioned education, health and social care services to safeguard and protect vulnerable children and youth. As a consequence, education settings were expected to respond to student welfare issues on a limited budget. The growing welfare mandate and a likelihood of the disintegration of public services have contributed to conditions which give rise to the expanded role of education in social welfare matters.

Empirical research was conducted at a large general further education (FE) college in the South East of England, named *The Site* with seven course tutors and twenty six students from the 2013-14 and 2014-15 cohorts. A case study approach was used, drawing on multiple methods of data collection: including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews focussed group discussions and document analysis. Participants were sampled 'purposively'; using criterion sampling as the chosen sampling strategy as it enabled predominant focus on participants that have direct involvement with this particular course. Students self-selected to participate in the study and all course tutors agreed to be interviewed. Over the two academic years, classroom observations were conducted with one class per year and their tutor that volunteered; the required ethical consent was granted from relevant parties. A focus group discussion was held with students from both cohorts who volunteered to participate, with the aim to capture a group response on the research issues. The employability course provision was located in a green, temporary prefabricated building on the outskirts of a large FE college. Known as Q-block, the building is primarily used to deliver programmes for non-traditional students, i.e. NEET young people, disabled students, ESOL (English for speakers of other languages), Access to HE and Adult learners on Welfare to Work programmes. The surrounding environment entails the car park, bike shed and smoking area. This particular Level 1 pre-vocational course and similar Foundation learning programmes seem separate from the operations of this large institution.

In this publication I recognise that there may be potential benefits associated with a focus on welfare, while at the same time noting that the welfare mandate within the education sector was deeply complex and fraught with tension. Previous academic studies supported the need for welfare focus in order to address students' unmet emotional needs within education settings (Hornby and Atkinson 2003; Hyland 2005), but other studies cautioned against the prioritisation of welfare as such teaching practice tends to diminish an academic focus and limit student opportunities for higher educational attainment (Hayes and Ecclestone 2008; Atkins 2009;

Simmons and Thompson 2011). My key empirical findings confirmed that a predominant welfare focus on this particular employability course produced tension, which could be seen in the embodied practice of social welfare tutors: they were resolutely engaged in welfare practice, classroom teaching was sporadically suspended; roles became blurred. They considered their role to be that of a counsellor first, then that of a teacher. The article concluded that unwittingly, tutors may also reinforce disadvantage through an overemphasis on care and nurture.

Pedagogy and practice - the centrality of the welfare discourse

The government's employability agenda played a prominent role on this Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. The course had an central focus on students' personal attributes and expected individual shortcomings to be addressed within the employability course. Thus, a focus on student welfare issues seemed justified, particularly when welfare problems arguably threatened political goals to make individuals employable inhibiting youth from attaining personal growth and individual success. Research conducted by Tower et al. (2011:512) confirmed that students 'burdened with difficult home circumstances' appeared 'unfocused and low in confidence' in the classroom. It was theorised that these difficult home and personal circumstances impacted a student's sense of self-esteem, confidence and academic attainment and therefore a focus on affective processes and confidence building within educational objectives seemed necessary (Hyland 2005; Tower et al. 2011).

The tutors likewise believed that the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course needed to focus on raising students' self-esteem and confidence building. Tania, one of the tutors, explained:

> …someone who either has not enjoyed school very much, not performed as well as they could, might have taken the easy route and not bothered… And suddenly they came to their sense and say 'oh no, I wish I didn't mess about. I really needed that GCSEs... And some of them are really very, very lovely. Others, as I have said, there has been barriers along the way, having learning needs and disabilities that have not been picked up. Problems at home, there could be abuse, self-harming, lots of mental health issues, lots of things getting in the way…Either way, to that point, most of them have not succeeded to their most potential at school (Interview with tutor, Tania – April 2015).

Although Tania's account had positive nuances, overall, when she described 'typical learners' on her course, she positioned some of them within a deficit ideology. In other words, the students all had individual shortcomings which could be seen in many students' low academic credentials, difficulties in home life, emotional and mental problems and so forth. Tania's description also portrayed a weakened image of most students on the course, which in one way perhaps explains why a predominantly welfare discourse and pedagogical activities would benefit students on the course. Drawing on the welfare discourse, Peter, one of the tutors, claimed that some of the learners have 'lost their voice' and it was therefore the tutor's goal to foster trust and rapport with learners. There was therefore a perceived need for a therapeutic ethos and desire to counsel students on the course. This point was reflected when Hope explained:

> "…because you definitely sometimes get the more 'needier' learners, or if you have a group who are living in 'care', or …it does kind of change. I very much see my role…I am almost a counsellor before a teacher, and then there is argument you are not a counsellor, but essentially we are because until you have that rapport with your student, and until they trust you and you take care of whatever else they worry about, they are not gonna worry about what is happening in the classroom. And I think that is the problem" (Interview with tutor, Hope, July 2014).

My research findings discovered that most of the course tutors considered their main role to be that of a counsellor first and a teacher second. In this respect, their practice appeared to be governed by counselling philosophies with some deviation from 'traditional' educational practice based in structured learning and conceptual knowledge. Ecclestone (2004) previously cautioned that within therapeutic education, educational practitioners could subtly adopt the role of therapist. My empirical findings confirmed that on this course, boundaries, roles and responsibilities appeared blurred. Tutors generally adopted a counselling disposition in actual practice.

Illustrations of welfare-oriented teaching practice

It can be seen that the welfare discourse influenced teaching practice on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. During interviews, staff members identified a wide range of teaching duties, including formal teaching and curriculum delivery, student recruitment, liaison with partnership agencies, referrals and management of pastoral support for students. However, when they considered the distribution of these duties within their daily practice, all tutors acknowledged that there was a disproportionate focus on pastoral duties.

During my fieldwork, it was observed that teaching and learning were temporarily suspended to facilitate a discussion on the reason for lateness. In turn, this circumstance often served as a trigger for subsequent arguments and classroom disruption. Nevertheless, it became evident that the tutors were usually driven by genuine concern for the students' well-being and the recognition of the need for practical support. This genuine concern was also seen in the teaching practice of Tania and her learning support practitioner (LSP). LSPs play an integral role on the course in that they provide teaching support for those students with additional learning needs. In turn, the tutor and LSPs often work closely together, and it was therefore unsurprising that LSPs were asked by tutors to assist with social welfare duties. For both, welfare-oriented teaching duties extended beyond the classroom, as explained when Tania reported:

> And we had a girl last year, who was 17 but she was still at risk and a vulnerable person. She was in care all her life, she kind of ended up homeless, so we couldn't send her to go and sleep under the pier or something. So it took me and the LSP, we had to go to the council offices, you know all that kind of things, you need time for. This was outside my teaching hours and ate into our own time, because it was quite late when we finally found her a B&B… (Interview with tutor, Tania – April 2015).

Tania's account demonstrated the extent of practical support provided to help one of the students attain housing and shelter for the night. Although these duties were clearly beyond Tania's remit, it is important to recognise that in that particular moment, she believed it was really necessary for her as tutor to step in and support the student at the housing office. These staff members evidently cared for their students and were moved by their circumstances.

Colleagues confirmed that there have been a few students faced with similar housing crises that required support. Without trying to minimise the importance of such duty, notably the narrative revealed the resolute welfare practice and time-consuming, complex nature of welfare duties. Roles, responsibilities and boundaries were blurred with some of the students' private affairs became public knowledge when tutors were duty bound to disclose safeguarding concerns to the safeguarding team and colleagues.

Evidently, these course tutors were emotionally moved by their students' circumstances. Undoubtedly, the tutors believed that a strong welfare ideology was necessary when working with these particular learners. Although

they felt that it was important for them to be involved with these welfare duties, most of the participants from both cohorts disagreed with them on this issue. They usually preferred to access welfare support from wider college resources as they rather wanted their tutors to help them improve on previous academic failure and 'get their grades up'. For these students the employability course was seen as a second chance enabling them to attain higher qualifications. They therefore expected their tutors to assist with these goals and for this to happen, formal teaching duties and academic focus were needed. Although this sentiment was echoed by most of the students who participated in the study, it was uncertain whether the narrative included the students who faced housing issues.

Nevertheless, it became apparent that students were able to demarcate roles and functions far more easily than their tutors. According to them, they were looking to their tutors for assistance with learning, and wider college resources for welfare support (in line with college protocol). In light of classroom events and teaching practices, the main empirical findings reveal the rise of social welfare tutors.

Key implication: the rise of social welfare tutors

In light of the tutors' collective approach to student welfare matters on their course, their teaching practice was based on a strong welfare ethos which led to the rise of social welfare tutors; in other words, their teaching practice often prioritised welfare duties over formal classroom teaching. These tutors gave the distinct impression that they were capable of dealing with emergencies and complex student-welfare matters. The perceived themselves to be distinctly different from mainstream tutors. Gina explained:

> (XY) staff are 'not teacher teachers', not very strict tutors, a bit more lenient, but there is a mark… We are not 'teachery', but building a good rapport and relationship with the young person (Interview with tutor, Gina, July 2014).

They not only saw themselves as different to the 'usual' type of teachers, they also positioned themselves as 'strong'. They reported that the job reportedly required a 'tough person' who was able to cope with 'whatever the students throw at you' (Interview with Peter, July 2015). Fundamentally, this discourse and an inherent belief in their competence to deal with student welfare issues formed a firm basis for their practice. Referrals to the college's safeguarding team were considered the last port of call. As a means of justification, Eve explained:

> I'll sort out all pastoral issues, of which there are a quite a few with this group. They're very challenging, so there's lots of contact with

> parents, with mental health workers, with other support workers… With this particular student I've taken the lead because in situations like that it's easier to just pick up the phone and call the number and get somebody to come in. With something that's more long-winded you can say 'Here you go' but with an emergency situation which this instance was you just need to make the phone call… It works. It does work! (Interview with tutor, Eve, July 2014).

Perhaps this rhetoric explained why the tutors appeared confident and determined to 'hold on' to more serious welfare incidents than to refer the matter to the safeguarding team. Dealing with student welfare emergencies seemed to be their forte, inasmuch as they generally assumed the 'lead' or key role in meetings, despite the fact that qualified mental health workers were present, although over-stretched and limited given budget constraints. Yet even so, Eve seemed readily prepared, though unnecessarily, to deal with complex student welfare issues.

By no means could it be claimed that the tutors did not seek the services of the safeguarding welfare team. In fact, they do, but based on emerging data, safeguarding services were primarily sourced for so-called 'trivial' student welfare matters regarding support with bursaries, food vouchers and so forth. However, when presented with more serious welfare matters, the course tutors rarely followed college protocol to contact designated safeguarding officers for assistance. Though the details of safeguarding officers were easily accessible, they believed they were better able to help and deal with students' problems. Conversely, students raised doubts and questioned the efficacy of tutor involvement in welfare matters. The focus group discussion revealed this.

> **Interviewer:** What happens when you bring it (your problems) into college?
> **Kyle**:(become) unfocused.
> **Interviewer**: Do you feel supported?
> **Elsa:** We do get support though from our LSPs.
> **Lea:** They're more nicer than the tutors.
> **Elsa**: Because they'll talk to you like privately. Just talk about anything and support you all the way through it and stuff.
> **Kyle**: Yeah I do I speak to LSP's about them and stuff. Sometimes yeah they're quite helpful.
> **Interviewer**: And then what happens after you tell them? What kind of support do they give you?
> **Lea***:* They give you advice on what to do next. They try and help you out, see if there's anyone upper in the college to speak to you about it.

However, why did the tutors prefer to deal with complex social welfare issues rather than refer matters to college resources and specialist agencies? Other than what appeared to be genuine concern over student welfare issues, one possible explanation emerged from Aggy's account:

> ….we used to have an amazing system in B*** College. We used to have pastoral tutors and we had one allocated to each area and they'd take on all the pastoral support for that student. So all the tutor would then do is invite them in, say this student needs X, Y and Z, and they'd take the whole lot on. They'd set up the meetings, they'd do the phone calls, they'd do the referrals, they'd have one to one tutorials with those students twice a week, liaise with the family. That was all taken away from the tutor so the tutor just did teaching and learning. And it worked fantastically and then we had the merger and they were all made redundant and its gone backwards (Interview with Tutor: Aggy - Field notes: June 2015).

According to Aggy, the previous pastoral system was effective and reportedly beneficial to both tutors and students. However, it could well be argued that Aggy's version of the 'old' pastoral system clouded her judgement of the current system. From my own practice experience and first-hand knowledge of both systems, I judged the current system to have a more formal, co-ordinated and rigorous system of governance in place; that is, if college protocol was followed. The college's Safeguarding Students and Adults At Risk Policy (http://www.***/wp-content/uploads/Safeguarding-Students-and-Adults-at-Risk-Policy-June-15.pdf) clearly outlines a system of governance, aided by graphical depictions to indicate lines of responsibility and a list of allocated, trained safeguarding officers to deal with student welfare issues within the organisation.

Detailed, specific guidelines are stipulated to enable staff to report safeguarding concerns to the Designated Safeguarding Officers at the different campuses. Though not very numerous, a core group of trained staff members were designated to perform pastoral duties. In principle, tutors were therefore alleviated from the responsibility to perform welfare and safeguarding duties. However, in practice the designated safeguarding officers were not always able to respond as quickly or conceivably as effectively as these course tutors when dealing with student welfare issues. According to college operations, student welfare issues should therefore be handled by trained personnel, but whether the course tutors on the day were prepared to concede to policy, was questionable.

However, this issue of dealing with student welfare matters is very complex and we cannot adopt a reductionist explanation when it came to the teaching practices of these staff members. The disintegration of public services and a broadened welfare mandate were instrumental and contributed to tutors struggling with the effects of an expansion of the educator's role into areas of social care. This complexity is highlighted by Finney (2006) when he argues that, although there is often clear direction for educators to take action in a welfare mandate, their involvement seemed discretionary and boundaries lacked clarity. The call to engage in multi-agency meetings as outlined for instance in the Children Act (2004) were echoed when Kirsten stated:

> I think all the pastoral side of things, because there is so many different people you need to go to, go down the right routes make sure you've taken all the right steps that that takes up a lot of time to make sure you're doing it right and to make sure you're not missing out any steps, to make sure everyone's involved and all these different organisations that you've got to keep on top of. Communication with all of those organisations can take a lot of time (Interview with Tutor: Kirsten - Field notes: June 2015).

The above practice symbolically represents the merging of social and educational services and the complexity around this. This can be seen in the description of its time-consuming nature and the great responsibility to safeguard and support students with complex welfare issues. Evidently, the tutors on the course engaged in multi-agency meetings; even though these obligations were within the remit of the college's safeguarding team. This current practice amongst the course team was contrary to previous research that suggested many educational practitioners felt lacking in the required knowledge, understanding and skills to undertake therapeutic responsibilities (Hornby and Atkinson 2003). Instead, the tutors that participated in my study appeared confident and competent to enter the remit of welfare practice. They regularly crossed the threshold into the students' private lives – a zone where the stakes were high due to the potentially serious nature of welfare issues; there was no room for error when dealing with safeguarding issues.

Critical Discussion

The central aim of this article was to examine how tutors dealt with student welfare issues on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, and their implications on students and classroom conditions. An analysis of key empirical findings found that a welfare discourse was deep-seated and embedded within the course's pedagogy and staff practices. Despite good intentions, the predominant welfare discourse surrounding the tutors' practice did not always work in their students' favour.

No matter how well-meaning, welfare-oriented teaching seemed cloaked in notions of helplessness and emotional vulnerability. From this perspective, such practice was arguably deeply pessimistic. It routinely erected a metaphorical mirror that offered constant reflections of students' reported fractured lives. It also contrasted sharply with the 'more able', positive student images reflected in my student data; many wanted to 'get their grades up'

The course team judged their involvement in welfare duties as necessary, perhaps because they care and probably felt that they were the best persons to deal with their students' welfare issues, despite it being the purpose of the safeguarding team. Nevertheless, a practice governed by a resolute focus on welfare in this case complicated the collective work duties of the course team. It also risked students not achieving higher academic qualifications and staff being held accountable for any problems around safeguarding duties.

Current and key safeguarding policies have repositioned welfare and education agencies to work together to promote 'better' health, education and welfare outcomes. Admittedly, multi-agency working between key professionals has potential positive benefits that facilitated 'swift' referrals amongst practitioners, information sharing and pooling of resources. However, it also creates challenges and complicated educational practice; in my study the tutors became entangled in a web of duties and as a consequence, roles, responsibilities and blurred boundaries.

Lack of educational resources and government cuts to social services placed the tutors in a very tricky situation. Several young people (students) were falling through the gaps left by lack of essential services. Take for instance the increased rationing of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), which has established a growing demand for welfare support aimed at adolescents experiencing emotional and mental health difficulties. Although an investment of £143 million was announced in the budget speech (House of Commons 2016), widespread cuts from children and young people's mental health services have unveiled an overall cut of £35 million in spending on CAMHS (Young Minds 2016). Hence, a culmination of broader social, political and structural issues together with the disintegration of publicly-funded organisations were key influences that could not be overlooked and affected the rate of occurrence regarding student welfare issues within *The Site*.

A broadened welfare agenda in educational settings exacerbated and fuelled contradictions in official rhetoric on academia and welfare. The Raising of Participation Age (RPA) legislation reproduced such tension and contradiction; it broadened its intake of a diverse group of youth, announcing enhanced academic and employment prospects when students engaged in post-16 education (Cornish 2018). Nevertheless, RPA placed an onus on individuals to achieve higher academic and employment outcomes, irrespective of welfare concerns or personal challenges. The demand to 'work harder' and the belief that young people could overcome social problems if only they try, underpinned both RPA and the actual course's pedagogy. Thus, a youth's inability to achieve higher academic and employment prospects were construed as personal failure to seize RPA outcomes. As a consequence, lesser consideration was given to the constraining influences of broader structural, social and political factors inhibiting students' outcomes.

Conclusion

This journal article started with a focus on student welfare needs, highlighting the welfare discourse and tutors' pedagogical practices when responding to welfare issues on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. My key findings exposed the tensions, contradictions and constraints between official discourse and the 'on-the-ground' realities for these Level 1 students and their tutors. Although a pedagogy centrally driven by welfare could be considered academically advantageous when teaching previously NEET or socially excluded youth, actual fieldwork data suggested that such practice complicated teaching practice.

Despite good intentions, a predominant welfare discourse on this particular course appeared to be counter-productive whereby a prioritised focus on welfare duties reduced the course to something akin to counselling and social work. My empirical findings highlighted the activities of 'social welfare tutors' – they prioritised welfare duties over academic learning. Hence, a predominant welfare focus largely compromised academic ideals and challenged official RPA discourses of upskilling, inclusion and participation in higher educational opportunities. Although the education sector may well be suitably positioned to have access to youth of wide-ranging capacity, my key empirical findings raised concerns over a broadened welfare mandate within The Site. As illustrated, when social welfare and educational goals merged, it complicated educational practice

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