

Ethics case study: How to support advisers who are working with challenging clients

1. Identify the problem

You are a career development practitioner with many years' experience of working as a Career Adviser in mainstream high schools and are currently employed by a provider of CEIAG provision to schools.

Due to a decline in contracts and opportunities at your organisation, you have recently agreed to support a school offering 'alternative provision' in your area. The school is a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) for young people with medium to severe behavioural problems. You have no significant experience in working in this type of provision but were reassured by your employer that your overall experience and generic skills acquired over several years will suffice.

You have now been working in the school for a few weeks and you are finding the job very difficult, feel isolated, are doubting your ability and you are considering whether you can carry on.

Although well-versed in the range of issues that young people may present with (from within a mainstream education), you are now working in an environment where most young people are physically and/or emotionally vulnerable; they may come with a range of poor life experiences as well as mental health issues including self-harm, anxiety disorders and eating disorders. You also worry that they will struggle to find successful outcomes after high school and in later life and that you will not be able to make any meaningful difference.

The young people may also demonstrate challenging behaviour within your one-to-one or group sessions.

As well as doubting your own knowledge, expertise and ability (you feel out of your depth to deal with such issues), you feel that you are taking home the issues and are experiencing stress and burnout. You are also concerned that your employer, the school and also the parents may have expectations of you that are too high.

What kind of problem is it?

It is professional: there is a lack of clarity around **professional boundaries** both with the schools and directly with the young people and their parents. A young person (and/or their parents) cannot be expected to understand the role and professional boundaries of the Career Adviser and where such issues present real barriers to progression it is reasonable for them to expect they will be addressed and even resolved.

There is also a potential conflict about professional boundaries in your own mind; the role of the Career Adviser is not to find solutions to all of the young person's problems and you should not attempt to adopt such a role. However, you are aware that CIAG does not take place in a vacuum and any barrier to a successful transition for the young person into further education, training or employment should be addressed as part of your CIAG role.

There is an issue around your own **competence** (or your own *perceived* competence) to deliver a service that meets the needs of the clients.

It is organisational: there is a conflict (or perceived conflict) between your understanding of what your own organisation, the schools and young people expect from you and your own expectations of how you can support the young people.

2. Apply the code of ethics

Principle 1 of the CDI Code of Ethics (Accessibility) states that:

*Members must promote access to career development activities and services **in a range of ways that are appropriate and ensure inclusion.***

Principle 4 (Competence) states that:

*Members must **monitor and maintain their fitness to practice at a level that enables them to provide an effective service.** Members must **represent their professional competencies**, training and experience accurately and function **within the boundaries of their training and expertise.***

Principle 6 (Continuous Professional Development) states that:

*Members must **maintain their professional competence, knowledge and skills through participation in continuous professional development** informed by reflective practice and the National Occupational Standards: Career Development.*

Principle 7 (Duty of Care – to clients, colleagues, organisations and self) states that:

Members have a duty of care and are expected always to act in the best interests of their clients.

Members must develop and maintain professional and supportive working relationships with colleagues both inside and external to their own organisation and respect the contributions of other career development professionals to the activities and services on offer.

Members must fulfil their obligations and duties to their employer (where applicable), except where to do so would compromise the best interests of clients.

Members have a duty of care to themselves, both in terms of their personal integrity, personal safety and their capacity to practice in order to provide an effective service to clients.

There are a number of questions to address in relation to the principles outlined above

1. What is the relationship between you as the independent, impartial Career Adviser and the school?
 - a. Is there a Service Level Agreement/Partnership Agreement that clearly states your role and responsibility and the contribution that you will make to the young person's transition?
 - b. Are the school clear about your professional boundaries and code of ethics?
 - c. Who are your main contacts at the school? Do they have a clear understanding of your role and responsibility? Do you have a clear understanding of the roles, responsibilities and specialisms of other school personnel? Are you making sufficient effort to find out about other school personnel and the roles that they have?
2. Are you taking responsibility to communicate your role and responsibility in a way that is meaningful to the young people?

3. Are you communicating your situation and concerns to your employer? What is your employer's response to your concerns? Is it adequate?
4. Are you adequately trained in techniques and tactics that can be utilised with young people with additional needs?

The CDI Resources Library contains a wide range of helpful resources around all areas of the work of a Career Practitioner. The January 2020 addition of 'Inspiring Your Continuous Professional Development', in particular, has a focus on '*Resilience and well-being*' – '*.....our resilience and ability to look after our own well-being, whilst encouraging these characteristics in our clients and students*'.¹

3. Consult with experienced professional colleagues and/or supervisors and/or relevant professional bodies

Support and Supervision

Do you have access to Support and Supervision from your organisation? Support and Supervision sessions should typically consist of regular meetings between an Adviser and a 'Supervisor' (who may or may not be their manager). At these meetings Advisers should be able to report on their caseload and interventions and raise any issues that they have found problematic, either personally or professionally.

Support and Supervision is key not only to the well-being of Advisers but also to ensure that our clients are receiving good quality and comprehensive CIAG to meet their individual needs.

Alternatives to Support and Supervision

However, although Support and Supervision is integral to many professions, and became well-established within the Connexions service, it may not now be standard practice within all providers of CIAG services, particularly those without any previous history (e.g. previous delivery of Connexions). If you are a self-employed Career Adviser, you are obviously even less likely to be able to take advantage of support and supervision options.

In the absence of established practice of Support and Supervision, there are other/alternative options where you could still share ideas and get perspective from others; these may be through the opportunity to share and discuss practice within your own organisation or externally (e.g. via online forums). There are several helpful and supportive LinkedIn and Facebook groups and CDI has Communities of Interest including one on Learning Difficulties and Disabilities with a remit of 'Talking to members who focus on working with young people and adults who have very special needs'.

For Advisers who are self-employed, are you still in touch with ex-colleagues including those who have also chosen a similar self-employed status? They may have experience of dealing with a similar issue. They may have another perspective on the issue and/or practical ideas to help you to resolve this.

You may also find it appropriate to discuss the situation with trusted colleagues from within the school. They are likely to be able to provide information of appropriate referral options and procedures within school.

¹ <https://www.thecdi.net/News---Resources/inspiring-your-continuous-professional-development-january-2020>

Accessing CPD

Although generic skills will be utilised every day, when working with disaffected or disengaged young people, Advisers may need to focus on a wider and/or alternative range of issues such as motivation and attitude rather than the more traditional focus on what qualifications or skills they might need to follow certain paths. Such work requires particular skills on the part of the Adviser and understanding of additional or alternative techniques and tools e.g. motivational interviewing, solution focused techniques. Access to such techniques and tactics will also increase the confidence of the Adviser.

4. Potential courses of action

1. If you have the option to do so, you could decide that this is not an area of work for you and investigate the opportunities for moving back into mainstream work either with your current organisation or another employer.
2. You could decide to continue as you are and accept that there may potentially be risks to your own health and well-being. However, this might also be viewed positively as accepting a challenge, building resilience and developing oneself as a careers development practitioner building on the skills you already have around building an empathetic relationship, genuineness and positive regard.
3. If options 1 and 2 are not options that you choose, or are able to take, solutions would have to be sought to improve the situation for your own well-being as well as for the benefit of the schools and the young people. Examples might include some or all of the items below:

Support and Supervision

- a. *If Support and Supervision takes place* in your organisation you need to take (greater) advantage of the sessions to raise the issues that you are finding problematic, both professionally or personally, and to seek the support of your organisation to work through potential courses of action and find suitable and acceptable solutions.
- b. *If Support and Supervision does not take place* in your organisation, you could raise the possibility of establishing a system of Support and Supervision. You may find that colleagues are also supportive of the idea. You could provide research and examples of evidence based practice demonstrating the benefits of Support and Supervision to the organisation, its practitioners and its clients.

If your employer is open to the idea, in order for it to be effective, staff with a supervisory role would need to attend appropriate training. In the short term, peer or group supervisor sessions could be established to raise issues of concern around practice and to share experiences and examples of good practice.

If your employer is not open to the idea (at this time), you can utilise the other options (See Alternatives to Support and Supervision above)

Service Level Agreement

Even without Support and Supervision, management support is needed to ensure that the SLA is as clear as it can be in terms of your role and responsibilities and how you can contribute within the school. This may need to be reviewed in the light of your experiences working in the school. For example, to look at specific arrangements such as disruptive pupils being accompanied in their interview by a school member of staff.

Relationships with the schools and multi-agency teams

- a. Are you making sufficient effort and time to communicate within school, in a way that is meaningful to the young people, your role and responsibility?

- Do you have clarity about the roles of others in the school and how to seek specialist support when you become aware that a young person's problems are beyond your remit?
- b. It is very likely that there will be a **Multi-Agency Team** with regular review meetings attended by members of the team and other key school staff. This is where students are discussed, concerns aired and action plans agreed. It would also be a potential opportunity to update the team and school on your work and establish clarity around your professional boundaries and code of ethics.
 - c. There may be the opportunity, outside the mechanism of the Multi-Agency Team, to speak to school staff to talk about your area of expertise and your role and responsibilities as well as your professional boundaries and code of ethics. There may also be the opportunity to speak to parents via, for example, parents evenings or newsletters.
 - d. Are there alternative ways that you can establish ground rules with the young people? Some ground rules will need to be tailored to the young person, and may need to be re-stated at subsequent sessions (for example if they have been abusive) the unacceptability of such behaviour may need to be stated. Similarly, if a young person has missed earlier appointments or been late, the need for reliability and punctuality may need to be clearly stated. Again, the support of the school and discussion about their codes of behaviour would be helpful.

All of this might help to make the issue more manageable for you and support your own resilience.

CPD

Following on from discussions with your manager and/or trusted colleagues and confidantes, appropriate CPD may be identified to support you in your role. **See suggestions above.**

5. Select the most appropriate course of action

You have decided to stay within the current post and to take a positive and proactive approach to improve the situation.

1. You have talked to your line manager about establishing a system of Support and Supervision. They are tentatively open to the idea and have committed to researching options but are mindful of costs. In the meantime, they have agreed that one hour a week can be spent in peer support activity. As colleagues work a variety of different hours, this will be difficult to organise as an actual meeting so you are trialling a supportive forum and exchange of resources.
2. You have agreed with the employer to investigate CPD sessions to build better techniques and tactics. This might be available via online and virtual sessions as well as webinars. You will also utilise the forums and CDI Communities of Interest.
3. You have identified multi-agency working within school as essential to the effectiveness of your own service. You have spoken to your contacts in school and you have found them very open and positive about your participation in multi-agency working/meetings. You have also discovered a level of empathy amongst other professionals who are also wrestling with the same emotive issues.

6. Evaluate the selected course of action

The test of justice: you feel that this is a course of action you would be happy with for someone you cared about. You believe that this will allow you to be an effective member of the school community and provide the best possible support for your clients. You will also be considering your own health and well-being.

The test of accountability: you would be happy to publicise your actions as you feel you have maintained your professional integrity. You have been honest with all concerned and you have recognised where improvement is needed for the situation and acted proactively and positively for the benefit of your clients, your organisation and yourself.

The test of universality: you feel that you would be happy if this course of action were reported to your professional colleagues. You feel that you have provided good examples of being resourceful and resilient and the action planned will benefit your colleagues as well going forward.

7. Implement the course of action

Improvements have not happened overnight but the step by step improvement is noticeable

You have found the school very open and positive about your participation in multi-agency working. You have attended a couple of meetings and have found that it

- Provides a helpful forum to exchange ideas and experience to identify solutions for individual students
- Improves your own knowledge & skills in terms of effective techniques to communicate with the young people as well as clarity about others' remits and referral options
- Increases efficiency and effectiveness in your work in school in that you are not trying to do the work that others are more knowledgeable about. This, in turn benefits the young people
- It cements relationships and builds trust between you and other staff in school
- It creates opportunities for creativity, collaboration and understanding of different organisational strengths and cultures including that of the CIAG practitioner
- It makes you realise that you are not 'on your own' and the sharing of your feelings and emotions about the young people helps you to deal with your own feelings and averts the burnout.

You have also been able to speak to governors and to the wider school workforce to explain your role and expertise and the limits to these.

Peer support is providing positive results across the organisation although a more 'formal' Support and Supervision system would still be desirable and is still being pursued. This is also helping to rebuild your confidence and self-esteem in the knowledge that you do have the core skills to build on.

8. Monitor and evaluate outcome

An important part of your recovery is the realisation that the impact of burnout – including symptoms of stress, anxiety and low self-esteem – does not happen overnight.

You are employing recovery strategies that include some of the practical steps discussed above but that also include some personal and self-directed measures such as recording a log of any incidents or events that have led to heightened stress or emotions and identifying any underlying patterns or themes. Going through the process of logging these moments has allowed you to pinpoint the causes of short-term stress in your life and anticipate any potential reoccurrence of 'burnout'.

Through doing this, you have found that incidents that cause significance moments of stress are becoming less frequent and less overwhelming as your resilience increases.

What lessons emerged

- Many school staff do not have an accurate view of the role, functions, skills or standards that career development practitioners need to work to in order to be carry out their jobs. It is the

responsibility of the CIAG service to make this clear. Any agreement needs to be made perfectly clear so that both sides know what has been decided and clear boundaries are drawn.

- You need to know how to acquire adaptability skills and learn how to negotiate needs in a new/unique context.
- No matter how long you've been in the profession, if you have doubts, questions, or just need a sounding board, seek supervision (if possible) or the next best thing if not. Everyone needs a second opinion once in a while.
- Don't let the problem "fester"
To work successfully with young people with special/additional needs it is important to be clear about your role and to be aware of, and respectful of, the roles of other workers and agencies. You should actively seek and respect other people's knowledge and input to deliver the best outcomes for your clients. Stay aware of what expertise you contribute to your school team and school community. Take ownership over your role and make sure to develop knowledge, skills, and expertise in your work.
- Multi-agency work is also often supported by a number of tools and processes that make integrated working more effective including early intervention, information sharing and common assessment processes.
- Training can empower you with more strategies and best practices to be more impactful and meet needs. Making a habit of professionally developing can help you feel better able to meet the demand of each new year and each new caseload. You may get a student with needs that you've never had experienced working with before. Instead of feeling under-equipped to meet the demand of your role, find a way to seek professional development in specific areas or to meet specific needs. This helps you avoid burnout because the more developed you are as a professional and the more confident you are within your role the less you feel drained and an able to meet the demands of the job long term.

Further reading

Support and Supervision

'Providing Support and Supervision: An introduction for professionals working with young people'
Edited by Hazel L. Reid and Jane Westergaard (Routledge 2006)

'Supporting personal advisers in Connexions: Perspectives on supervision and mentoring from allied professions' Andrew Edwards (Editor) (Canterbury Christ Church University College 2001)

'Connecting with Connexions: the role of the Personal Adviser with young people with special educational and support needs' Bob Grove and Alison Giraud-Saunders (SFL Magazine, February 2003)

Burnout

'Burning out during the practicum: the case of teacher trainees'
Constantinos M. Kokkinos & George Stavropoulos, Encyclopaedia of Clinical Psychology, Feb 2013

'Understanding the burnout experience: recent research and its implications for psychiatry'
Maslach and Leiter, World Psychology, 2016

Resilience

'Building better wellbeing: Coping with stress and recognising the physical signs' Fit for Work blog, Feb 2017
(<https://fitforwork.org/blog/building-better-wellbeing-coping-with-stress-and-recognising-the-physical-signs/>)

Tactics and techniques

'Developing good practice in Connexions: Techniques and Tools for Working with Young People'
DfES Publications 2003
<https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6126/>

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Client issues and responding to trauma (with emphasis on ACEs*)

<https://www.acesaware.org/treat/principles-of-trauma-informed-care/>

<https://www.afasic.org.uk/>

The Scottish Government have ***<https://www.gov.scot/news/identifying-and-responding-to-trauma/>*** - with the ***Scottish Psychological trauma and Adversity Training Plan*** as part of this. PINS Pupil Inclusion Network has a ACEs section - ***<https://pupilinclusion.scot/aces/>***

<https://www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/education-and-training/by-discipline/psychology/multiprofessional-psychology/national-trauma-training-framework/trauma-informed-resources-opening-doors-and-sowing-seeds-animations.aspx>

*Growing up with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as abuse, neglect, community violence, homelessness or growing up in a household where adults are experiencing mental health issues or harmful alcohol or drug use, can have a long-lasting effect on people's lives.

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