

A summary of research findings: Training for a reflective workforce

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This summary presents key findings from a research project focusing on a group of 21 apprentices undertaking the new Careerforce apprenticeship programme, the Level 4 New Zealand Certificate in Health and Wellbeing. These apprentices are among the first to embark on the programme and come from across the health, disability, and social services sectors. We were interested in finding out: how the apprenticeship was contributing to their **capability** (knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to do support work well); how they were **transferring learning** (using what they learned, and applying it to more complex situations); and opportunities apprentices had to **reflect on their practice**.

Who participated in the research?

In 2015, in the first phase of this project we interviewed 20 support workers and five managers in three health and community support service organisations. We asked support workers about their work and training experiences, how they used new learning in their work, and opportunities they had to reflect on their practice. In phase 2, the focus shifted to the new Careerforce apprenticeship programme. The main participants were 21 apprentices from four organisations. We spoke with each of these apprentices twice, once in July-September 2016, and again three months later in October-December 2016. We also spoke with one assessor and two clients, and observed some apprentices at work.

The support workers¹ we spoke with in phase 1 and 2 worked in four broad contexts: home-based support, residential support, day-centre support, and case management. These four contexts shape the work that support workers do, and support workers have context-specific knowledge and skills (e.g., understanding dementia, training in de-escalation). However, there is much in common across their contexts, including:

- The unpredictability of what each day will involve – which brings variety, and challenge.
- The person-centred approach and significance of relationships between support worker and client, which involves “emotional labour” (we explain this in the full report).
- Being located in a team but working individually, making autonomous decisions.
- The many situations each day that require problem solving and reflective practice.

¹ People we spoke with tended to use their specific job title – including case manager, work broker, activities coordinator, and support worker. We use the term *support worker* to encompass all of these roles, and the role more generally. When discussing the apprenticeship, we use the term *apprentice*.

- The thing that makes support workers proud or happy in all contexts is seeing their clients progress and knowing they have contributed to improving the lives of others.

The changing nature of support work

Training for a Reflective Workforce (this research project) was prompted by the changing nature of service delivery models in the sector. There is demand for restorative models of care and client-driven or person-centred support. These changes take support work beyond straightforward task performance into problem-solving, critical thinking, relationship management, and a sense of professionalism and responsibility or “showing initiative”.

In response to these changes, training needs are also changing. Person-centred support in service delivery is a fundamental principle in the development of Careerforce’s new apprenticeship programme. The name of this project therefore pointed to an important development: training for a *reflective workforce*. This would be a workforce of support workers who are nimble in the face of evolving client needs and who can and will review situations and actions taken in order to make sense of what is happening and inform their future practice.

Apprentices are transferring their learning to their everyday work

We used a *transfer of learning* lens to think about how apprentices had transferred learning from one situation (the apprenticeship programme) into another (their everyday work). We talked about three types of transfer of learning: near, far, and further.

Near transfer is using knowledge from the apprenticeship programme directly. This was illustrated through apprentices’ accounts of raised awareness about client conditions and backgrounds, and knowledge of support models, resources and services. This learning sat mainly at the level of information (e.g., knowing the name of a model or learning about a particular service). However it also provided apprentices with more confidence in their support of clients because they knew of services they could call on or felt more professional in knowledge of their service model.

Further transfer is using knowledge from the apprenticeship programme in a different way, or applying it to a new kind of situation. Further transfer typically involved seeing things from the point of view of the client. It drew on new knowledge of the social, political, and economic influences that shape clients’ needs and clients’ ability to utilise support. Further transfer of learning could also involve apprentices in gaining a sense of “the bigger picture” about their role as a support worker, providing another level to the purpose for their work.

Far transfer involves using knowledge from the apprenticeship programme to assess the complexity of situations, and act flexibly. In the full report we give examples from several apprentices to illustrate what far transfer of learning might look like. These accounts show support workers bringing themselves to their work, re-evaluating their own values and behaviours, and connecting these new insights to how they worked with clients.

Using the transfer of learning lens, we can see that the apprenticeship programme seems to be linked to positive changes in how apprentices do their work. They reported asking different questions of clients to better understand their needs, instead of simply following “process”. They reported engaging in greater discretionary effort on behalf of clients. They reported talking with colleagues about ideas they were coming across in the programme. The value of the apprenticeship programme is apparent in what it adds to fostering support workers’ capabilities.

The apprenticeship programme has boosted apprentices’ confidence

The value of the apprenticeship programme is also apparent through apprentices’ reports of increased confidence. For some apprentices this related to their ability to learn. They were excited about what they were learning and thrilled to experience success in learning. They were pleased about their organisation investing in them through training. And they saw a career pathway and a future for them in support work. For many, these were “firsts”. Often apprentices had entered support work rather serendipitously, with few or no existing qualifications, and an uneasy relationship with formal learning. The apprenticeship programme also boosted some apprentices’ confidence quite directly at work, enabling them to work better with their clients.

This project has shown that personal and professional benefits from the apprenticeship programme are linked. The apprenticeship programme modules make good use of this interconnection, especially with the emphasis on reflective practice. This clearly resonated strongly with apprentices who readily transferred learning into their daily work with clients and interactions with colleagues. The apprenticeship programme can provide a valuable pathway for support workers to become reflective practitioners.

Workplaces and employers provide conditions to support transfer of learning and reflective practice

The transfer of learning facilitated by the apprenticeship programme is not just the responsibility of individual support workers. It requires support from workplaces and employers who provide the conditions and the opportunities to practise what is being learned. What happens after training is as important as what happens during it.

There are likely to be opportunities in each workplace to create or enhance existing spaces for reflection on action (after an event), and to foster reflection in action (during the event), and to do it in ways that build on everyday work.

Aligning the changing nature and structure of support work, the goals of health and community support organisations, and delivery of the apprenticeship programme will be an ongoing process. When all of these are aligned the conditions will be in place to enhance the likelihood of far transfer of learning and reflective practice.

You can download a free copy of the full report here: <https://www.careerforce.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/Training-for-a-Reflective-Workforce.pdf>