

## Reflections on supporting learner progression from a manager of Early Years programmes at Solihull College

“Progression takes various forms: you want them to progress in their ability to learn...you want to improve their skills...being able to analyse evaluate...to actually think about what they are doing and why they doing it.”

“Staff are really good at identifying where they are at, they are really tuned in, they know just how to motivate individual students.”

### Developing learner aspirations

Early Years is fast becoming a degree profession. Previously you were able to work in Early Years with a Level 2, and a Level 3 was the most that might needed for most jobs; but now that's not the case.

“If they are on a Level 2 programme...how are they going to get to Level 3? They need to see that progression...that there are opportunities...that it does not stop here...knowing that there is a ladder to go up.”

A manager from Solihull College told us that:

“Some of our students are coming in expecting that all they need to do is get to Level 2, they will get a nursery assistant job and that is it, they would be happy doing that. They don't see it going any further. They don't realise that this whole other world is there for them. “

But now teachers at the college are very consciously talking to learners about progression: for them, Level 2 is just the first step. They talk about those who are going to be leading the profession in the future about developing higher expectations.

“Some of our learners...are the ones that did not come in with any real...expectations of going any further. But when they start to learn because they are interested in something they really like, something that suddenly they are good at... a door is opened.”

“We nurture, encourage and put the right scaffolding in place to make sure that they can progress as far as they can. We give them the right advice. We talk a lot about the aspirational stuff... get them to visualise [and] to buy into that sort of motivational thing. And we talk a lot about the career.”

The Solihull College approach with learners is that they need English and Maths and they need to think about moving on to a degree in Early Childhood studies or similar. Their aim is to try to get their learners to realise that Level 2 is just the beginning.

### **A giant leap from Level 1 to Level 3**

The Early Years team had two students on a Level 1 program who were clearly very bright – above Level 1 - but they were troublemakers in the group and were really disruptive. In talking to them it became clear they had not had good experiences at school. They felt intimidated and didn't get on with that type of learning. So the staff had a discussion about where they could go and what they wanted to do. They needed to do the Level 1 course to get the foundation knowledge in place, but it was agreed that, if they did well at Level 1, they would receive some additional support – somebody to work with them every week on a Level 2 assignment to see if they could write assignments at Level 2 and, if that worked out, the college would take them straight to Level 3.

“We have very much a shared aspirational culture in the department...it comes very natural, to nurture...not to judge, but to really find out what the history is, why they behaving in a certain way...we end up having very good results; we end up saving a lot [of learners from] falling by the way side because we don't give up.”

On the Solihull Early Years programmes, the staff are talking about students' aspirations and getting them to the level of ability and motivation to take them on a degree level course. Traditionally, staff who work in Early years have not taken degrees, because they have gone the vocational competence route and worked in an area where Level 3 has always been the highest qualification needed; and they then took teaching qualifications. So the college are finding that they are running a programme of staff development, where all staff currently working with them or being recruited have degrees or are in the process of studying at degree level. So they aim to do as they teach.

### **Supporting the transition to Level 3...and beyond**

“Level 1 is just about remembering and understanding. At Level 2 you are hopefully analysing and applying. Then at Level 3 you are creating and evaluating.”

For the staff at Solihull College, one of the issues is trying to get learners to think at the next level. One of the things that the college has done in the past year is that, for the first week of term, they focused on study skills as part of induction. Learners still have their individual subject tutor and each subject tutor's lessons are about their subject, but they will also focus on a particular study skill embedded within that. So, for a Level 3 course, one tutor might focus on referencing, another will look at evaluating and the difference between evaluating and applying. Other tutors will look at terminology, presentation, essay structures etc. So over that first week learners will have had 20 hours of study skills.

“Study skills...their ability to learn...I think it's absolutely key because, if you teach them to learn, they will learn anything.”

The college also now does a studies course week towards the end of each level. They prepare learners for the next level by starting to introduce some of the Level 2 assignments to Level 1 learners, Level 3 work to Level 2 learners etc and thus building in some of that new skills development earlier. And they go beyond that to support learners onto degree programmes and give them the confidence that they are going to be able to work effectively at that level.

“I teach the research on Level 3, and they really like that..we are learning [and] they are learning, and when they know what we are doing then they sort of start helping you.”

The college has high expectations of its Early Years learners:

“...we push and push. Nobody is allowed to sit back... [we] encourage them to go that extra mile really and...take that next step. We tell them 'You need to start thinking about this and this ... you need to show us this and this.'”