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Being a peer educator: Perspectives from young women working with Home-Start and some reflections on the role

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Keywords

Peer education; informal learning; social inclusion; empowerment; recognition

Abstract

This paper focusses on young women working as peer educators through the charity *Home-Start* in the north of England. The paper is conceptual whilst incorporating findings from a small-scale empirical study undertaken in 2016. It holds relevance to the following SCUTREA conference themes: active citizenship; families and communities; formal and informal learning; social inclusion in times of austerity. The peer educators who participated are undertaking their work in a context where educational achievement is increasingly measured by certification and at a time when occupational hierarchies have been 'professionalised' whilst notions of what it is to be a professional have been drained of meaning in ways which can be seen as potentially democratising. State educational imperatives in the UK have focussed on academic excellence (for 'the gifted few') and the promotion of vocational opportunities (intended for those from 'hard working families') such as 'apprenticeships'. Deeper and more critical understandings of learning, commitment and achievement are generally unrecognised and largely not valued by the state, remaining in the relatively invisible domain of third sector organisations, and at the level of community activism. Our conception of peer education is based on a democratic ethos which does not privilege the peer educator and which does not set the role in contradiction to work undertaken by 'high quality educated professionals'. We see the peer educator as generally similar to the individuals with whom and the groups with which they are working. They are likely to share characteristics including some (but not all) of the following: age, gender, ethnicity, social class, educational attainment, parental status, and specific social categories which may be applicable in relation to sexual orientation, and the use of alcohol and substances. The peer educators who participated in this study have worked together in circumstances that lead to mutual benefits which stand largely outside the educational mainstream. This paper considers the motivations for involvement as a peer educator, peer educators' perspectives on the benefits/value of their involvement in this work, the impact of being a peer educator as well as discussing the peer educators' experiences in relation to their engagements with professionals. The paper is informed by thinking on the power of informal learning, on citizenship and co-production, and by issues relating to recognition and empowerment arising from informal learning through the peer educator role. It briefly considers the potential power of peer education in an age of connectivity through communications technology.

Introduction

Educational achievement is increasingly measured by certification, in a society where political rhetoric speaks of equality of opportunity and offers the promise of social mobility, and social cohesion, as rewards for individual effort. Occupational hierarchies have been

professionalised whilst what it is to be a professional has been drained of meaning by audit and regulation mechanisms (see Fisher and Fisher 2007). Austerity politics created a need for ameliorative social policy that can be operationalised outside shrinking state funded social care (Taylor-Gooby 2013). Working class identities have been transformed by the intensification of cultures of consumption, the breakup of traditional industries, and the global flow of labour (Standing 2014) as well as by access to new technologies. Educational imperatives have focussed on academic excellence for the more 'able', and vocational opportunities for those from 'hard working families'. Deeper conceptions of learning, commitment and achievement are largely unrecognised and unvalued by the state, remaining in the relatively invisible domain of third sector organisations. This study, in recognising aspects of the social factors indicated above, focuses on young women within a peer educator scheme operated through the charity Home-Start.

Informal learning and peer educators

The benefits of peer learning, based on cognitive psychology derived from the work of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky and their respective traditions, have long been recognised by educationalists (Damon 1984). It is, however, in a context of credentialism in employment and a tendency towards pedagogisation in higher education (HE) that the value of informal learning is relatively unappreciated. Peer education has had many adherents and proselytizers. We are regarding the bulk of the learning of these peer educators as 'informal' though they benefitted from a training programme operated by Home-Start on one day a week over nine weeks. Our focus, however, was on the experiences and feelings of the peer educators through interactions with other peer educators and with Home-Start.

Peer educators have long been a feature of social and health education, especially in the USA (Badura Brack, Millard and Shah 2008). Shiner (1999) pointed to difficulties around definition, the term 'peer' having often been used in relation to delivery by health professionals. Some studies utilise the term 'near peer' where there are status differentials. Shiner (1999) points to a need for clarity regarding what 'peerness' means. Given the wide range of factors that might denote 'somebody like us' Shiner argues that the key factor is that of 'age' although this is not seen as constituting a 'master status that overrides all other possible sources of identity' (p.558). Shiner highlights the significance of aims and methods arguing that peer education is '...primarily viewed as a method of delivery' (p.559). Burdette Williams (2011) discusses the trajectory of peer education within American HE, seeing peer educators as part of the changing nature of the HE cohort (more mature, more part-time), and of the move to learner centred pedagogy. Burdette Williams also argues that peer educators can provide 'critical assistance' to a 'high quality, educated professional workforce' and that they can do this 'at a fraction of the cost' (p.2).

Our conception of the peer educator is based on a democratic ethos which does not privilege the role and which, at the same time, does not set it in contra-distinction to 'high quality educated professionals'. We see the peer educator as likely to share characteristics that would include some (but not all) of: age, gender, ethnicity, social class, educational attainment, parental status, specific social categories which may be applicable in relation to sexual orientation, and, in some instances, the use of alcohol and substances. This could be conceptualised as a form of 'pure peer-ness'. In computer networks a 'pure' peer-to-peer network is one where all nodes possess equal ability/capacity. This returns us to Shiner's (1999) notion of 'somebody like us'. The key factors, we suggest are,

- the principle method of 'delivery' for the associated learning processes,

- the nature of the relationship (a high degree of ‘peerness’)

Some issues with peer education

Frankham (1998) pointed to an ‘almost religious tenor’ in discourse about peer education with claims which are ‘overstated’ or ‘disingenuous’ (p.179). Frankham’s review of the literature found:

- little evidence that conversations between peers lead to any learning
- evidence that ‘peer pressure’/influences on young people ‘...may have been greatly exaggerated...’ (p.186).
- young people were drawn into being a peer educator primarily for the purpose of their own learning or to build their CV
- peer educators may well be the primary beneficiaries of their efforts.

She also fears that the role can place peer educators in ‘an invidious position’ (p.190) of pronouncing on issues where not qualified. Further issues arise from being at the intersection of professional and peer cultures, and from the contradictions around what peer educators are supposed to accept or resist.

Southgate and Aggleton (2017) have encapsulated issues afflicting studies of peer education. They see three problematics

- a technician interpretation of education unable to provide an account of the processes of peer education
- a ‘black box approach’ which frequently measures inputs and outputs but fails to examine ‘...socially mediated processes between learners (and educators) entering the educative moment...’ (p.6).
- limited attention given to the social dynamics ‘...inherent to educative processes such as ethical and power relations, the role of emotion and embodiment, and the evocation of tacit knowledge or practical wisdom...’ (p.6).

This places a focus on who the peer is, and the extent to which they embody the qualities for the specific context of their work. Southgate and Aggleton point to a need for critical theories of power relations and authority.

Home-Start and the context of this study

Home-Start was founded in Leicester, UK in 1973. It supports parents through volunteers who are parents. In the UK Home-Start has approximately 16,000 volunteers working to support 30,000 families – there are 269 local Home-Starts (Home-Start 2016).

In the UK:

- Frost et al (1996; 2000) found that Home-Start was seen as a flexible, non-stigmatising service filling a gap between health and social services (Frost et al 2000 p.331). Frost et al found that, over a six month period, 64% of the sample saw an improvement in emotional well-being, 55% saw an improvement in their informal networks, 51% saw an improvement in parenting issues (with 6% reporting a deterioration).

This study

This study is based on the completion of questionnaires by eight Home-Start peer educators, and the conduct of a focus group comprising five Home-Start peer educators

and a Home-Start worker, an interview with a Home-Start worker, and a telephone interview with a Home-Start peer educator.

The identities of participants have been anonymised.

Motivations for involvement as a Home-Start peer educator

The voluntary nature of the work is indicative of altruistic values and a commitment to others. One peer educator commented that,

...I do enjoy coming and speaking to everybody and just helping people as well. Like I've worked in the groups and I've also worked one-to-one with some mums as well, doing things like [...] sorting out housing or like [...] college applications and things, and just being a support for other people has been...it's quite rewarding.

There are instrumental motivations, another peer educator became involved to enhance her application to HE,

...applying for university I needed a hundred hours voluntary work, and they put me in touch with Home-Start [...] I did all my training and everything, and I had a plan to do like my hundred hours and I've been here [...] two years now [laughter in group].

Participants valued their participation in a community with a social purpose. Being a peer educator is a way of promoting personal objectives whilst enhancing the lives of others.

Relations with professional workers

One peer educator remarked that, 'A lot of people turned around to me and said "how are you supposed to look after a child when you're still a child yourself? You know, 'you can't do anything for yourself".' Another recounted an incident when her two year old was rushed to hospital having swallowed a coin, 'The whole time we were there, I lived with my mum at the time, everybody spoke to my mum, and it absolutely riled me. And in the end I were like "you do know I'm this child's mother? I might be eighteen but I am her mother. So if you've got something to say can you speak to me please, not to my mum".'

Fisher (2007 p.584), in a study involving parents of disabled babies, argued that their "... attempts towards the construction of their own wellbeing are being undermined by their contact with the health and social care services where they are confronted with oppressive frameworks of meaning that attribute 'damaged' identities to them and their children whilst failing to recognise their particularity and authenticity." Fisher applies the work of Honneth (2001, 2003) to argue that identities form intersubjectively with misrecognition arising through the application of normative frameworks. Parents' experiences within the context of the family may well contribute to the construction of narratives of wellbeing which are both authentic and meaningful but which are not validated by processes of professional recognition which are defined by 'expert' agendas. Peer educator relationships can remove the stigma which is sometimes enacted in professional/client interactions.

Peer educators' views on the benefits/value of involvement in this work

New Labour, between 1997 and 2010, enacted policies based on notions of empowerment through the citizen as a reflexive agent. The Coalition Government (2010-2015) which followed captured this in the ethos of the 'Big Society' (a form of conservative communitarianism). Parenting is conceptualised as a form of occupation based on the application of skills which can be regulated by professionals, all in a framework of well-being based on paid employment. As Fisher (2007 p.585) has pointed out, within policy discourses the '...notion that life within the private sphere may also provide the basis for

self-esteem and wellbeing and be seen as a hallmark of participation is conspicuously absent.'

Intersubjective recognition enables the development of the reflective and competent citizen actor (Sointu 2006) able to attain the positive 'practical-relation to self' (Yar 2001 p.299) which provides for self-empowerment. Recognition is a prerequisite for agency. Honneth (2001, 2003) argues that recognition is institutionalised across three spheres of life: these are 'love' (relationships), the 'legal order' (equality in law) and 'achievement' (through self-esteem derived from the value accorded to abilities). All three depend on recognition by others. 'Love', according to Honneth (2003, 2006), is primarily engendered through the private sphere (family and friends). 'Achievement' follows success in the public sphere (jobs/career). As argued elsewhere,

Misrecognition may be attached to social marginalisation through socio-economic circumstances, religion and or disability (of the parent) and parents who simply lead unconventional lives are likely to be subjected to normalising judgements and the exercise of 'disciplinary power'...contributing to processes of misrecognition by an over-zealous policing of people's lives...linked to an increasing tendency to perceive individuals' 'needs' for resources and services in terms of personal failings ... (Fisher, 2007 p.593).

Whilst Honneth's analysis (2001, 2003) is premised on a separation of private and public realms, the testimonies of the participants in this study suggest that the peer educator project provides recognition across boundaries. One peer educator stated that,

I went through a bad relationship about six months ago, and I got all my support through Home-Start, like benefits, having to go find a house, everything. That's helped me do that. And then because of that I came out a better person, and then she asked me if I wanted to do the peer educator training.

It was clear that learning for the peer educators went well beyond their training sessions and that much of it arose from their informal interactions with each other,

...the practical side of it really helped [...] it was stuff like thinking that I'd not done stuff right. So, I'd be at home with her and I'd panic, and then I'd come to [the] group and I'd be like 'oh John did so-and-so, so-and-so and they'd all be like 'oh that's fine, my baby does that too', and I thought 'oh does it?' [laughter] You know, just the relief of knowing that you're not actually a bad parent.

The sense of being part of a peer community was simultaneously empowering and supportive.

Impact on life plans and aspirations

The experience of working as a peer educator had clearly positively influenced life choices and aspiration. For one the peer educator engagement with Home-Start had proven a platform to joining a college course,

I'm starting college this September as well and I wouldn't be able to do that without Home-Start either, getting back into education and doing what I want to do [...] I probably wouldn't have known about the course because Jenny did it and that's kind of how I knew there were an access to nursing course.

For some the commitment was seen as long term,

... I'd love to [carry on in the role], just because Home-Start have done so much for me and I would not be here, I would not be the person that I am today if it weren't for Home-Start.

Conclusion

I'm really busy all the time [...] I feel like, like Wonder Woman, like I can do anything now like. I can't possibly go through any more shit in my life. I can just do anything. But having people to talk to [...] with peer educating, helping other people, and now I feel like because I've been through that much, I can tell people 'you're going to be alright'.

The peer educators in this study are engaged in the active construction of relationships that link with their rights of recognition. This is achieved through valuing individual particularity and authenticity. Peer education legitimises a broader definition of achievement that includes 'expertise by experience', often associated with the private realm. Nancy Fraser (1997) has argued that those belonging to socially excluded groups should resist through the development of 'subaltern counterpublics' (or discursive arenas) constructing interests and oppositional identities based on 'counter discourses'. Elsewhere, in a consideration of auto-didacticism amongst parents of disabled babies (Fisher and Fisher, 2007), it has been argued that this process is being enacted through cyber-communities leading away from professional expertise and towards the development of expertise through experiential knowledge which has its genesis in the domestic sphere. Utilising Granic and Lamey's (2000) conception of the Internet as 'a self-organising system' with the capacity to 'catalyse major shifts in the cognitive styles and beliefs of its interactants' (p.94) frequent internet participation might well transform cognitive patterns and build confidence/expertise and the development of non-binary worldviews. Our sense in relation to this group of non-virtual peer educators was that the sheer viscerality of working with others in person and in the present was a key part of their transformant.

Lingard (2005) has discussed uses of pedagogy which,

... challenge the modernist provincialism of an 'education-bound' conception of pedagogies, as well as challenging the salience of contemporary education and its traditional pedagogies...(p.167-8)

We see pure forms of peer education as generally situated outside educational institutions, and we conceive peer education as propagating forms of pedagogy which are relatively free of authoritative relationships associated with 'teaching'. In the domestic/private sphere, parents nurture relationships in which they receive and provide recognition grounded in affection and love. The refusal of recognition in the public sphere must be addressed.

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