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# Development of Peer Educators within Paraprofessional Community-Based Adult Education Models: An Experiential Learning Perspective

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Keywords: peer educator, community-based, experiential learning, reflection

**Abstract:** In community-based peer education models, it is necessary to understand the relationship between learning, context and paraprofessional identity construction. Social relations are important in community education program implementation (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007); impacting power structure within communities and organizations (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, 2006). Drawing upon a current research project of community-based nutrition education, we explore the conceptual and practical role of *experience* in paraprofessional educator models and focus on the situated, contextual experiences of paraprofessionals in the communities they work and live as unique, challenging, and potentially positive for learning outcomes.

## Background and Justification

Literature regarding the development and use of paraprofessional models is sporadic and often centered on pragmatic impacts (Miller & Shinn, 2005). Paraprofessional community-based nutrition education models result from a 1968 federal mandate adopted throughout the United States (Vines & Anderson, 1976) and the historical context of paraprofessional nutrition education has been documented (Willis, Montgomery, & Blake, 2008). The United States Cooperative Extension System has traditionally implemented research-to-practice models of community-based education. In recent years, however, literature has focused on community-centered models to “enable communities to use evidence-based interventions more effectively and efficiently” (Wandersman, 2003, p. 227). These approaches allow for effective examples of peer education in adult learning (Miller & Shinn, 2005). Paraprofessional community-based educators have an opportunity to contribute to the behavior and knowledge of clients served by peer educator models.

Yet nutrition and health program literature lacks an appropriate theoretical model depicting what the paraprofessional *experience* is and its contribution to paraprofessional peer educator development. This research of paraprofessional peer educator experience in a community-based education program focuses on the notions of identity, social context, and reflective practice. Here, identity encompasses the understanding and development of who the paraprofessional is as a socially mediated individual (peer educator) (Holland & Lave, 2001; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Concepts derived from identity development in workplace as social context (Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant, & Yates, 2003), including social and cultural norms that contribute to identity development (Hayes, 2000) are drawn upon, allowing a focus on the role of gender and positionality in educator-client relationships (Lather, 1991; Tisdell, 2000). Reflection-in-Action (Schön, 1983), narration of self and experience (Foucault, 1980; Droegkamp & Taylor, 1995), and aspects of experiential learning (Fenwick, 1999; Usher, 2009)

contribute to the ideas of reflective practice and the connection of constructive reflection (Jordi, 2010) to social context and ideas of identity. Schön's narrative dialog of reflection (1983) may prove to be the essential missing piece in working with community educators toward successful development and autonomy. Fenwick (1999) challenges that: "alternative perspectives about the nature of human experience, and the relationships among experience, context, mind, and 'learning', raise important issues about the assumptions and values of the reflective view" (p.1).

### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

Dialogue about the role experience plays in adult peer learning settings is necessary. A paraprofessional model of non-formal community nutrition education provides a situation for looking at how educators with community-based programs may benefit from reflecting on identity formation and social context. Discussion can enhance and highlight the role of critical reflection and narration for future community-centered adult education program development.

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