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### Recommended Citation

Seibel, Megan M. and Rudd, Rick D. (2014). "Development of Peer Educators within Paraprofessional Community-Based Adult Education Models: An Experiential Learning Perspective," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/papers/79>

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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:** research project of community-based nutrition education explored the conceptual and practical role of *experience* in paraprofessional educator models and focused on the situated, contextual experiences of paraprofessionals in the communities where they work and live as unique, challenging, and potentially positive for learning outcomes.

## Purpose

In community-based peer education models, it is necessary to understand the relationship between learning, context and paraprofessional identity construction. Social context is an integral consideration in non-formal [adult] education. Social relations are important in community education program implementation (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007); impacting power structure within communities and organizations (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, 2006; Forester, 1989). 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. An exploration of learning and teaching in community settings, and the function of educators indigenous to a population, are important in considering implications for practice applications of paraprofessional models due to the unique social context in which they function.

## Theoretical Framework

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 behavior and knowledge changes in clients served by peer educator models.

This research of paraprofessional peer educator experience in a community-based education program focused 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) were 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) contributed 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) has proven an 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).

### **Research Design**

Existing quantitative measurement within this program structure assesses knowledge change in clients as a result of paraprofessional intervention (Virginia Cooperative Extension, 2009) and qualitative methods were used to establish educator curriculum delivery competencies (Baker, Pearson, & Chipman, 2009; Hoover, Martin, & Litchfield, 2009; Wakou, Keim, & Williams, 2003) at the federal level. Upon exploration of the literature, an understanding of paraprofessional *experience* and the influence of identity, social context, and reflective practice were clearly void. At no point in the history of such program delivery methods, had the first-hand experience of the paraprofessionals themselves been documented. The most effective way to explore this with the adult women in the research population was through in-depth qualitative analysis that respected context within complex and interactive social settings (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Open-ended interviews and focus groups facilitated the exploration of this perspective to address the following research questions:

1. How do paraprofessionals view themselves in their role as community educator?
2. How does the social context influence the experience of being a paraprofessional?
3. How does reflective practice influence cognitive awareness of the paraprofessional?
4. How does the paraprofessionals' comprehension of contextual experience influence the perceived impact on client understanding and behavior?

*A priori* propositions served as a point of alignment for relevant literature and research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994), as well as the development of interview questions for two one-on-one rounds and two focus groups. These propositions, supported in adult education literature, are: paraprofessionals are community-based practitioners; the historical context of the paraprofessional model holds significance in defining the role of these practitioners; paraprofessional peer educators are responsible for teaching information to clients; paraprofessional peer educators are adults situated in a learner/educator dyad; the context in which paraprofessionals live and work contributes to a cognitive understanding of that experience; the situated, contextual experiences of paraprofessionals in the communities they work and live are unique, challenging, and potentially positive for learning outcomes. Nineteen female participants across the state program area were selected based on years of experience, geographic area (context), and level of education. One-on-one in-depth, open-ended interviews

and subsequent focus groups conducted with the women as they participated throughout the process were recorded, transcribed, member-checked, and analyzed for content by the researcher.

### **Findings**

Perceptions of socially mediated paraprofessional educators emerged as eight clearly distinct themes that highlight aspects of social context, identity perception, and reflective practice while providing persona to a job description and giving voice to the value of serving as a lay educator aiming to better a community. These eight themes are articulated as follows:

1. Participants have various levels of understanding and association with the components of their job role; namely, that of paraprofessional community-based peer educator.
2. Qualifications and education contribute to personal and professional development within the context of the program.
3. Life experience and personal strengths contribute to identity development as a lay nutrition educator.
4. Relationships with clients, agencies, and the greater community influence identification and understanding of social context.
5. The relationship between paraprofessional and client is based on issues related to client advocacy and needs assessment but is complicated by self and societal views of the client population.
6. Teaching style is understood as influencing client receptivity and the resulting impact on knowledge and behavior change.
7. Implementation of critical reflection is limited to program-related activities and affected by evaluation procedures.
8. Programmatic expectations and structure impact interpersonal relationships and ability to excel within the social context of providing service to others.

Although used commonly in program and practice, identity and context-laden words were described qualitatively using a wide range of connotations and associations; namely the words indigenous, community, and peer. And yet, relational perceptions of role-of-self to others were more similar. Further, it was evident that critical reflection, as a practice, was not done with significant frequency or degree of introspection regardless of experience. One participant, after sharing with the researcher that an interview was challenging because she had never been asked to think about her role as an indigenous peer educator in such a way, wrote in an email: “you gave me something to think about. For instance, who am I as a [paraprofessional], co-worker, mom, wife, and member of the community? Should I be doing more, can I do more, am I effective, plus many more questions. After speaking with you I do feel a sense of pride about my job.” Pride and a sense of social adequacy were not part of this woman’s self-identity to that point.

The paraprofessionals’ comprehension of contextual experience as socially situated and mediated individuals within their program impacted how they perceive and execute the duty of impacting client knowledge and behavior change. With perceived ideas about the strengths of their programs and areas of potential growth, as well as a sound perception of level of connectedness with others, these women are operating in personal best-known ways toward the service of others.

### **Implications for Adult Education 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. Findings enhance and highlight the role of critical reflection and narration for future community-centered adult education program development.

Specific adult education practice considerations resulting from this empirical work are to:

1. reevaluate the link-pin practice model, which currently leads to diminished voice and is challenged by individuals desiring opportunities to go beyond limited directives;
2. identify community influentials with an aim to continue professional development for individuals desiring increased presence in a community while teaching dialog and critical reflection practices;
3. continually facilitate learner-centered approaches by using experiential learner-centered styles to both assess and acquire examples of ethical and emotional dilemmas and teach paraprofessionals and volunteer advocates how to prepare for such issues;
4. foster critical-reflection on identity formation and social context as a way to facilitate behavior change and potentially benefit other community-based programs;
5. clarify the implied/understood meaning of “community” since it is a multi-faceted term that carries weight differently in various settings.

In working further with similar adult populations that serve as adult educators, narrative inquiry that evolves out of interview methods may be the most appropriate way to examine *experience* while honoring feminist and constructivist pedagogies and viewing participants as holistic beings. Several opportunities for adult practice research exist as a result of this study. Holistic and narrative qualitative research approaches can be expanded with this, and similar, populations. Research can be conducted to justify creation of a new or modified practice model to replace the Likert Link-Pin (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Gehrt, 1994). Further, an assessment of the role of “boundary spanner” in this population may warrant an adjusted program structure that fosters boundary-spanning leadership (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011) in a contemporary evaluation of peer education in communities with socially mediated individuals.

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