



Obstacles and challenges to the peers' professionalization in health education projects: case study at a Portuguese NGO

Teresa Sousa

teresa.sousa@apdes.pt

Maria João Oliveira

maria.joao.oliveira@hotmail.com

Ximene Rego

ximene@gmail.com



RECI

Research in Education and
Community Intervention



**LISBON
ADDICTIONS
2019**

What we know (background)

- Systematic literature review points out that peer education have positive changes in participant knowledge and attitudes [outputs], although more research is needed to determine its cost-effectiveness and impact on behavioural changes [outcomes] (Maley& Eckenrode, 2017; Bagnall *et al.*, 2015; Tolli, 2012; Steinmann, 2010; Medley, Kennedy, O'Reilly, & Sweat, 2009; Harden, Oakley, & Oliver, 2001).

Frequently...

- Peer education requires a certain set of skills and the acquisition of technical knowledge, transmitted through a training process properly subject to evaluation - having no resemblance to a leisure activity.
- Peers have formal professional contracts in order to practice peer education.
- Peer education work is cheaper comparing to other professional work.
- Peer education methodology is usually welcome and well scored by funders.

Why do peers keep facing obstacles to their professionalization? What kind of constraints and opportunities are placed?

Two levels for the professionalization:

- Be recognised as a profession (Portuguese classification of occupations)
- Be regulated: whose access and exercise depend on the fulfilment of professional requirements.

Case study (methodology)

■ **Intensive research:** in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information.

■ **Case:** Portuguese NGO (APDES) that applies peer education methodology since 2004.

■ **Objectives:**

- Identify the factors that contribute to the phenomenon;
- Describe the interaction of these factors;
- Achieve a possible interpretation to the phenomenon as a whole.

■ **Two phases**

Exploratory: documental analysis

Case study: in-depth interviews and observation.

Documental analysis

■ 15 projects were screened:

- HR projects - people who use drugs, sex workers and inmates
- Health Education projects - adolescents
- Cooperation and Development projects – HIV/AIDS population

■ A total of **56 documents** (among applications, reports and manuals) were identified as having references to peer education approach in the design and implementation of the projects.

■ **Content analysis** about peers' work: formal and non-formal characteristics, roles, expectations, evaluations, limits, etc.

What we found (results)

- **Contractual relationship:** peers emerge either as technicians, collaborators or volunteers.
- **Peers' profile:** they belong to the target-group; are recognized as a leader within its peer group; are motivated to play the role.
- **Peers' skills:** personal and social general skills (communication; self-control; empathy; self-esteem; sense of responsibility; ability to listen; ability to work in a team); basic knowledge on health related issues.

What we found (results)

- **Peers' tasks:** adapted to population needs (mainly, stuff distribution; provision of information; facilitator; emotional support); activities record; needs assessment; participation in decision-making processes.
- **Peers' role:**
 - They are referred as “bridges” between the team, formal services and the target-population.
 - They “support” the technical team in various tasks.
- **Peers performance** is monitored and/or supervised by others (colleagues and/or coordinators).

What we found (results)

■ **Peers' added-value** is recognized and emphasized regarding:

- Accessing populations (specially, hidden populations);
- Developing relationships of trust;
- Transmitting clear/understandable information;
- Collecting updated data (needs assessment);
- Developing tailored interventions;
- Changing other peers' behaviours;
- Reaching people beyond working hours.

■ **Empowerment** of peers themselves – a big advantages of this strategy

In short...

In practice:

- **Peers' role tend to be defined in line with the peers themselves/ target-groups**, rather than according to its function in the technical staff – even when the peers are professionals and regardless of their contract or position.
- **Peers do what others also accomplish** (even if peers are conceived as more effective and do it in places and moments that teams can not).
- **Peers' contribution is not irreplaceable**, contrary to the contribution of nurses, psychologists or social workers.



Peers do not do any different, they do differently.

Preliminary conclusions

Coupled with the fact that...

- there isn't a single and consensual definition about the peers' role - which can also be perceived as one of the advantages of this strategy
- and the lack of consistent research on peers cost-effectiveness and impact (namely, comparatively to other professionals),

...

The dynamics established within the projects/teams and the organization as a whole, seem to contribute to the frailty of peers professionalization, namely concerning their acknowledgment as 'specialists' among other specialists.

Bibliography

- Maley, M., & Eckenrode, J. (2017). *Systematic Translational Review: Peer Education for Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health*. Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research.
- Bagnall, A.M., South, J., Hulme, C., Woodall, J., Vinall-Collier, K., Raine, G., Kinsella, K., Dixey, R., Harris, L., & Wright, N.M., (2015). A systematic review of the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of peer education and peer support in prisons. *BMC Public Health*, 25(15), 290.
- Tolli, M. V. (2012). Effectiveness of peer education interventions for HIV prevention, adolescent pregnancy prevention and sexual health promotion for young people: a systematic review of European studies, *Health Education Research*, 27(5), 904–913.
- Steinmann, P. (2010). Is peer education effective for HIV prevention in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs)? A SUPPORT Summary of a systematic review.
- Medley, A., Kennedy, C., O'Reilly, K., & Sweat, M. (2009) Effectiveness of peer education interventions for HIV prevention in developing countries: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *AIDS Education and Prevention*, 21(3), 181–206.
- Harden, A., Oakley, A., & Sandy, O. (2001). Peer-delivered health promotion for young people: A systematic review of different study designs. *Health Educational Journal*, 60(4), 339-353.



Teresa Sousa

teresa.sousa@apdes.pt

Maria João Oliveira

maria.joao.oliveira@hotmail.com

Ximene Rego

ximene@gmail.com

APDES | PORTUGAL

www.apdes.pt