MODERN YOUTH AND PEER EDUCATION

Landsforeningen Ungdomsringen.

Research Organisation

Landsforeningen Ungdomsringen, the Danish Association of Youth- and Leisure Time Centres, is one of the largest non-uniformed youth association in Denmark, and the major association in the field of open youth work. It has more than 1,200 leisure time, youth-, and community centres as its members, and offers educational and cultural activities for children and young people, as well as training and education for professional and volunteer youth workers.

Research Director / Co-ordinator

- Sven Mørch, Magister of Cultural Sociology, Doctor of Philosophy, since 1975 Assistant Professor in Social Psychology at the University of Copenhagen. Sven Mørch, among other topics, has extensive experience from empirical youth research and lecturing, as well as a long record of publications.
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Key words

- Peer Education, peer groups
- Pedagogical method / theory
- Youth clubs
- Modernity
- Pal versus youth worker

Research subject

This study focuses on the concept and methodology of peer education in Denmark and is complemented with a comparative analysis of its application in other European countries.

Peer education is a pedagogical working method applied to the education of young people, in which the young people themselves are active players and decision-makers in the learning process. It proposes education among equals and aims to encourage the active involvement and development
of young people through information-sharing, debate and interaction.

The study analyses the practice of this innovative method in Denmark in relation to the changes, particularly in the lives of young people, which have been brought about by modern times. Specifically, it studies six youth groups, both with and without organisational support, with a variety of aims and content.

The study provides a more theoretical consideration of both the potential and the limitations of peer education, and also introduces the European dimension through a comparative description of experiences in the Anglo-Irish zone (England, Scotland, Ireland and Northern Ireland) and the northern European zone (Norway, Sweden and Iceland).

Abstract

Peer education is an innovative method for working with young people. The aim of this study was to design a peer education model based on shared practice as an instrument for working with young people in need of support.

The study analyses the practice of peer education in Denmark, and its theoretical development. The research is supplemented by description of peer education programmes in other European countries: England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden and Iceland.

The work was based mainly on interviews with the various players in the subject area, using a participative methodology.

The main contributions of this teaching method are in the area of active involvement, shared responsibility, personal and social development, self-reliance and motivation.

Methodology and Methods

The study is based primarily on interviews conducted with the different players involved in the field: young people participating in peer groups, educators who use this method, youth centre workers, those responsible for projects providing support to young people, as well as others who have played an important role in developing peer education processes.

The study of the application of peer education in Denmark has focussed on six youth groups, three of which are supported by adult organisations and three of which are self-organised. The cases are as follows:

- Youth groups with organisational support:
To carry out the comparative analysis with other European countries, we contacted youth workers, social workers and researchers in the field from London, Cardiff, Belfast and Dublin. We also had discussions with specialists from Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Finland.

The material from the interviews was processed and analysed, while the team of researchers formulated a theoretical appraisal of the contribution of peer education to the field of youth work today.

The research study combines the two parallel activities of theoretical development and analysis of the peer education method in practice.

**Initial Research Objectives**

The study has two main objectives:
- to describe and gather together the existing experience in the field of peer education in Denmark in order to build a framework within which to carry out an analysis and conduct a coherent consideration from the point of view of pedagogical theory;
- to research and compare the development of peer education in various European countries (Anglo-Irish zone, Nordic zone), with a view to learning about and exchanging experience.

The aim of the study was to design a peer education model based on shared practice as an instrument for working with young people in need of support.

Moreover, the material is intended to provide a contribution to debate and to the international development of peer education.

The departure point for the present study was: "How does peer education as a pedagogical method contribute to enabling young people to deal with modern life?"

**Changes in the initial Research Objectives**

The initial objectives of the research project have not been modified. However, after beginning the study, and given the breadth of its scope, it was decided that some adjustments should be made in the organisation and presentation of the final documentation. The material is divided into two publications:
one, published in Danish, focusing on the practice of peer education in various European countries;
the other, published in both Danish and English, is a theoretical consideration of the concept of modernity in relation to peer education, with a view to clarifying the potential of this method applied to youth work.

The two publications complement each other.

**Main Research Results**

1.-Analysis of peer education in Denmark

1.1.-Study of the six peer education groups

Although there are no major internal differences among the peer education initiatives analysed, differences can be detected between youth groups which receive organisational support and those which are self-organised.

Involvement in peer groups encourages the following in young people:
- active participation
- involvement and familiarity with the group and society
- interest in social experience
- independence and assertiveness
- improved relationship with themselves, peers, family and other areas of society
- greater self-reliance; adults as a point of reference
- greater awareness of their own potential and limitations (strengths and weaknesses)
- development of skills

Reflection on the pedagogical value and methodology of peer education in the field of youth work is increasingly important in Denmark. This process is the fruit of practical experience. However, in general terms, it is the result of sporadic initiatives leading to isolated activities, in which little attempt is made to advance the theory and methodology involved.

1.2.- Peer education and modernity

The increasing use and development of peer education is taking place in the new context of modern society, with the new demands and needs of young people. Peer education is a pedagogical response to the new situation experienced by young people, and is a process in which young people themselves are players and decision-makers:
- the challenges posed are subjectivity, democracy and shared responsibility;
- it promotes young people's active participation in modern life;
- it is grounded in debate and reflection as methods of learning from one another;
- it encourages the development of young people based on qualification and self-determination;
- it is an instrument for involving young people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.
Most professionals in the field, however, do not work within the framework of the modern life of young people.

1.3.-Reflections on the limitations

Peer education proposes a new role for adults as guides and providers of support. The adult is a necessary figure whose role it is to motivate and activate the process, while delegating the role of principal player to the young people themselves. There is a risk that the adult's role may be seen as manipulating the process.

The professionals interviewed state that the method is appropriate, but a need was detected for a more in-depth study of its potential strengths and weaknesses. The method has potential, but requires a number of favourable conditions if it is to bring about the desired results.

The features mentioned occur in the majority of peer education projects, although they are explicitly stated as objectives and pedagogical methodology in only a few cases. Peer education as it is actually practised is more a result of day-to-day practice than of any structured prior reflection.

2.-Peer education from the European perspective

The origin of this pedagogical method "among peers" is similar throughout Europe and derives chiefly from England. It was born out of a desire to tackle several health issues (e.g., AIDS) affecting young people in the '80s, at a time when the effectiveness of traditional teaching methods was being questioned. The common objective was to inform and involve young people.

Peer education projects have subsequently evolved in different directions, depending on the country concerned.

- Modernity: In Denmark, the emphasis has been placed on the importance of change and the challenges involved in modernity in the lives of young people, whereas in other countries, such as England, interest has been focussed more on promoting social skills, the transformations taking place in the social context being regarded as a less central factor.
- Youth as a life-phase in its own right as opposed to a transitional phase: In Denmark, youth is seen as a distinct phase, and the aim of peer education is to assist in "the construction of oneself as a young person". In other countries, indeed the majority of them, youth is conceived as a transition to adulthood and emphasis is placed on learning the skills appropriate to adult life.
- Intrinsic characteristics: Another element which influences the diversity of conceptions and applications of peer education is its adaptability to the characteristics of each given community and its own historical traditions.

In countries with various cultural traditions, such as Scotland or Northern Ireland, peer education has incorporated the promotion of local values as a distinguishing factor.

In Nordic countries, for example, where the welfare state has a broader base, the introduction of peer education projects has been slower, since many needs are already
covered by the public authorities and there is a greater degree of social stability and control.

In all the countries studied, there was a concern to promote new methods for working with young people along the lines of peer education, although the evolution of these methods has varied in each country, depending on the context.

**Conclusions from the Main Research Results**

Peer education is an innovative methodology in the education of young people "among equals", within the context of modern European society.

The main contributions of this pedagogical method are in the area of such concepts as active involvement, shared responsibility, personal and social development, self-reliance, motivation, and others.

Peer education has not been directly developed as a pedagogical instrument, but rather has emerged from the day-to-day practice of different initiatives.

We have detected a need to formulate a pedagogical definition which reflects the challenges facing young people in the modern world as well as the new practices which are being carried out. There is a need for an in-depth study of the methodology's strengths and weaknesses, its appropriate target group, the skills to be developed, and the role of the adult professionals involved.

Peer education is a valid instrument when conditions and opportunities for qualified development, self-determination and democratisation are created for young people, as an integral part of their lives.

Peer education has great overall potential, but as a method it must be adapted to local needs and requirements, catering to the specific characteristics of young people in each individual country.

**Main contribution to the objectives of the YFE Programme**

Above all, this research has provided a theoretical approach, based on existing practice, to the pedagogical principles involved in peer education. The principal considerations raised are as follows:

- the importance of developing pedagogical methods for working with young people that are coherent and appropriate to the current European context;
- increasing the protagonism of young people in their own learning process as a means of achieving a greater degree of enablement and development;
- the need to exchange and share experiences and knowledge on these innovative methodologies at European level;
- the need for more in-depth international debate on the theory and pedagogical practice of youth work today.