

A Critical Review of the Educational Psychologist's Role in Engaging with Young Carers

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Diversity comes from difference and may arise through factors such as individuals' class, gender identity or ethnicity. The need to consider diversity arises when membership of a diverse group results in disadvantage through a reduced ability to participate within the community. The role of EPs in engaging with diverse groups involves countering discrimination and removing barriers to participation that may arise through perceived incongruence with societal norms. Young carers are a diverse group due to a home life that differs from the expected norm. This paper critically reflected on the implications of this for their ability to successfully engage with their environment and achieve positive psychological wellbeing. Caring was found to have the potential to detrimentally affect attainment and lead to social isolation and reduced wellbeing. However, some more recent research indicated that it is possible to find benefit within the caring role, conferring positive wellbeing for some young carers. The potential role of EPs in engaging with young carers and removing barriers to their participation in their community was explored with reference to critical psychology and self-determination theory frameworks and an eco-systemic approach. Critical reflection on the literature and personal experience indicated that consideration of individual circumstances, the adoption of solution-focused approaches and advocacy through raising awareness and decreasing prejudice can lead to positive change at various systemic levels, promoting autonomy, connectedness and acceptance.

Keywords: self-determination, young carers, solution-focused, eco-systemic

Introduction

Diverse groups within a community are those who show differences to others within that community. These differences may arise through factors such as individuals' ethnicity, gender identity, health or class (Burnham, 2012). They become pertinent when groups are marginalised and members experience disadvantage and reduced functioning, relative to the rest of the community (Brind et al., 2008). For the purposes of this paper, diverse groups are those considered to be placed at a disadvantage through their perceived incongruence with expected societal norms.

There are various reasons why disadvantages may occur, and this paper will first explore potential reasons for their existence, whilst critically examining the role of the educational psychologist (EP) in engaging with diverse groups. Greater understanding will then be facilitated through in-depth exploration of the situation of young carers and how EPs might facilitate community participation by this group. At the time of writing, I am a trainee educational psychologist in my second year of training. I recently had the opportunity to work with a young carer, and reflection on practice is aided through consideration of my own experience of working with this young person.

Engaging with Diverse Groups

Reasons for Disadvantage

Within any community there will be perceived norms and expectations, leading to unspoken rules about how to succeed and achieve within that system (Frese, 2015). These can form barriers to participation when individuals lack the resources to join in with expectations of behaviour and conduct or when others show prejudice towards those that don't conform (Smart, 1993).

Bourdieu (1986) explored the role of capital in offering opportunities to take part and succeed within a community. He considered economic capital (financial resources), cultural capital (knowledge and capability) and social capital (social relationships) to influence access to chances to achieve. Membership of a diverse group can limit an individual's capital and ability to participate. For example, social class may reduce economic capital and limit the ability to obtain resources to facilitate participation (Bourdieu, 1986). An individual's cultural capital and relevant knowledge for community participation may be reduced through possession of different values and cultural beliefs to others, resulting from their class, ethnicity or religious views (Bourdieu, 1986). Such differences may also influence social interactions, reducing their opportunities to form social rela-

tionships across the community and generate social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Inequality in capital can lead to power imbalances and limit individuals' agency (Lazarus, 2018) and therefore their ability to influence their life trajectory.

Relative capital, the comparable levels of capital between individuals within a community, can also influence the perceptions of others and is a source of prejudice and discrimination when groups are not recognised as being equal, with equivalent rights, to the rest of the community (Brind et al., 2008). Foucault identified marginalised people's truths as subjugated knowledge, considered to be inadequate and not valid (Jardine, 2005). Consequently, discrimination and power imbalance can be further manifest through the disregard of diverse groups' opinions when making decisions about their circumstances, raising the possibility that unintentional oppression can arise through enforcement of support that is perceived as beneficial according to the norm, but conflicts with the values of the individual.

The EP's Role in Engaging with Diverse Groups

An EP's role in engaging with diverse groups focuses on removing barriers to participation and countering sources of discrimination and power imbalance; this may be through direct work with individuals or through advocacy within organisations (M. Fox, 2015). EPs work with a range of diverse groups in their local community, facilitating inclusion across multiple settings such as schools, children's centres and support agencies. Consequently, they need to consider multiple systems, be aware of diverse sources of discrimination and be able to critically appraise actions from multiple viewpoints (M. Fox, 2015).

Guidance for Non-Discriminatory Practice

Non-discriminatory practice is strongly influenced by the values of autonomy, social justice and beneficence from the healthcare ethics framework (Duncan, 2010), as these values can help counter sources of discrimination. For example, inequality in access to resources can be countered by adhering to the principle of social justice which ensures fairness in action. Respect for autonomy and acknowledgement that diverse groups may have different ideas of what constitutes beneficence can help promote the opinions of others and counter oppression.

Guidance for non-discriminatory practice also comes from legislation, the Health and Care Professions Council (2016) standards and the British Psychological Society (2018) code of conduct. The Children and Families Act (2014) and the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education, Department of Health, 2014) lay out frameworks to consider the needs of children in diverse groups, facilitating acknowledgement of how their circumstances will differ from the norm. The codes of conduct and standards facilitate non-discriminatory practice through requiring awareness

of the use of interpersonal skills, awareness of the beliefs of others and showing cultural competence. They also require awareness of the impact of culture, equality and diversity on psychological wellbeing and a need to adapt practice to meet needs and promote the participation of individuals in key areas of social, economic and cultural life. The requirement to understand the psychological models of factors that lead to underachievement and social exclusion compels EPs to challenge social conditions which contribute to social exclusion and stigmatisation. Consequently, adherence to these codes means that the EP's role in engaging with diverse groups must consider multiple systems, working with individuals and the wider systems around them to promote systemic change.

Relevant Psychological Frameworks

The role of the EP in working with diverse groups fits within a critical psychology framework whereby psychology is applied in a progressive way and challenges assumptions and practices that maintain a status quo which discriminates against non-conforming individuals (D. Fox et al., 2009). This is facilitated by adopting an eco-systemic approach, considering the influence of systems around the individual on many levels, from immediate environmental factors such as family or peers to macro-systemic influences such as social class and political contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Reference to self-determination theory, and the satisfaction of an individual's innate need for competence, relatedness and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2002), will also benefit work with individuals to empower them and counter disaffection. An individual's psychological wellbeing is related to their ability to act with autonomy and experience competence and relatedness in their engagement with their environment (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Therefore, appraisal of these abilities will allow elucidation of conditions that facilitate or hinder positive wellbeing.

Young Carers as a Diverse Group

Young carers are children or young people who look after a relative with a condition such as a disability, illness, mental health condition or drug or alcohol addiction (James, 2017). The 2011 census recorded around 195,000 young carers nationally but estimates put the actual figure closer to 700,000, with many young carers being hidden (James, 2017). They may be considered a diverse group due to their caring role giving them a home life which is different to their peers and the expectations of societal norms (Heyman & Heyman, 2013; Smyth et al., 2011). Young carers may take on significant housekeeping duties, look after siblings or assist directly with care for the affected relative (James, 2017). These commitments may reduce their engagement in more typical age-related activities and increase the possibility of social isolation (Moore et al., 2011).

Historically, there has been a lack of recognition and provision for young carers. The Children and Families Act (2014) gave the first legal definition of a young carer and placed a statutory duty on local authorities to take reasonable steps to identify and support them. However, identification and provision of support are hampered by the invisibility of many young carers and a lack of understanding of their situations (James, 2017). Despite the changes in legislation, there is still ambiguity over where responsibility lies for identification within local authorities, and there is much scope to develop practice related to young carers (James, 2017). EPs are well placed to take a key role in this.

Within my local authority, schools are the primary means of identification, and the current role of the EP largely involves signposting to local and national support agencies. It is hoped that this paper will enable development of the EP's role to be more systemic, helping schools become more aware of young carers and identifying ways to facilitate their community participation.

Risk Factors for Young Carers

Studies examining the experiences of young carers suggest that caring can have a detrimental effect, including negative impacts on school attendance and performance, the completion of homework and the ability to concentrate in school (Lakman et al., 2017), and an association of caring with insecurity, distrust and worry (Lloyd, 2013). Acton and Carter (2016) reported that young carers are at risk from poor mental health outcomes and low wellbeing. However, as these studies were correlational, causation can only be inferred. A study comparing adolescent young carers to peers without a caring role found an increase in internalising problems and reports of daily hassles and stress, as well as decreased attainment (Sieh et al., 2013). Other risk factors include an association with bullying at school (Lloyd, 2013), limited socialising opportunities and fatigue (Svanberg et al., 2010).

The post-16 period is significant for young carers. Whilst non-caring peers may be experiencing increasing autonomy and possibility, continued caring duties may cause young adult carers to feel dismay and isolation (Day, 2015). Family commitments may close some routes for personal growth and education (Boumans & Dorant, 2018), and caring may negatively impact future expectations and ambition (Lakman et al., 2017).

A significant risk factor for young carer wellbeing is that their role can be unidentified, leading to them not receiving the support they need. One reason for this is that some children and young people may not identify themselves as young carers as their experiences are the norm within their family (Smyth et al., 2011). This is especially true in certain demographic groups such as females and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals (Spratt et al., 2018). Another reason is that the role is deliberately hidden to avoid scrutiny from

outside agencies (Kennan et al., 2012; Smyth et al., 2011). Reported fears include the risk of stigma, shame and embarrassment of the family's circumstances, and a fear of children being removed from the family (Barry, 2011; James, 2017). This is most likely to affect young carers in the most challenging situations (Cassidy et al., 2014), who may be most in need of support. Moore et al. (2011) found that young carers looking after parents with substance abuse issues were more likely to have additional risks of experiencing trauma, poor housing and exposure to criminal activity, compared to carers whose parents had medical conditions. A significant consideration is that the voices of these individuals will be missing from studies into the experiences of young carers and this is an area that will benefit from further exploration.

Identity in Young Carers

A number of studies have pointed to identity as an area of concern for young carers. A meta-synthesis by Rose and Cohen (2010) highlighted that some young carers can face confusion in reconciling their different roles at home and school, wanting to belong but also feeling misunderstood. This means that school can either be a place of escape where they can be themselves or an additional source of stress due to feeling they don't belong (Rose & Cohen, 2010). A non-normative position within the family can also lead to identity confusion over parent-child relationships (Sieh et al., 2012).

Some young carers have reported feeling ambivalent to the label of young carer as they do not necessarily want to acknowledge their role (Moore et al., 2011) but recognise that the label makes it easier to explain their situation to others (Smyth et al., 2011). However, some young carers feel more positive about having a carer identity, independently recognising the benefits and regarding themselves as competent and in charge of their own futures (Heyman & Heyman, 2013). Such diverse findings highlight the importance of establishing how individuals view their caring role before deciding on what support should be offered.

Benefits for Young Carers

More recent studies have shifted from focusing on the risk factors of a caring role to exploring the benefits that may be experienced by young carers. A study by Cassidy et al. (2014) found that where their caring role was recognised and valued, young carers were also more likely to report higher levels of resilience and support and better mental health. However, the implications of these findings may be limited by the fact that participants were recruited from support groups and therefore not representative of all carers. Pakenham and Cox (2018) found a correlation between finding beneficial aspects within the caring role, such as increased self-sufficiency, and positive effects on carer adjustment, leading them to caution against interventions that may place undue focus on the costs and risks of caring. Doutré

et al. (2013) have highlighted the importance of recognising the function and significance of the caring role for the young person, and not just assuming that it is a risk to wellbeing.

The Role of the EP in Engaging with Young Carers

In summary, being a young carer exposes children and young people to various factors that may lead to underachievement, disaffection and exclusion. All three types of capital (economic, cultural and social) are likely to be negatively affected for young carers experiencing non-normative family circumstances and social isolation from peers (Barry, 2011). Stigma, real or feared, may result in exclusion or discrimination, and power imbalances may arise between school staff and young carers and their families where the latter are judged for their non-normative circumstances, or feel the need to hide them from external scrutiny. A caring role can also be associated with negative impacts on school attainment due to time pressures and mental load, and ambiguity and confusion over identity may impact self-efficacy, negatively affecting resilience and leading to disaffection and underachievement.

Consequently, there is much scope for EPs to positively engage with young carers and their families, reducing barriers to participation and increasing awareness of their situations. As discussed above, this will be facilitated by reference to critical psychology and self-determination theory frameworks, and the adoption of an eco-systemic approach that considers the different levels of an individual's environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). At every level of engagement, there is the need for reflexivity and critical reflection on the EP's own values and assumptions of the status quo.

Discerning and advocating for the individual's voice is a key role for EPs engaging with young carers (Doutre et al., 2013). The research literature highlights diversity within the situations, needs and feelings of young carers, and it is important that those working with young carers see the individual, not the label, when deciding on support (Spratt et al., 2018). Reflexivity and non-judgemental listening are important to avoid problematising normative familial processes (Doutre et al., 2013) and empowering individuals to identify their needs without inhibition.

At an individual level, EPs can use the principles of personal construct psychology (Kelly, 1955) to work with young carers in exploring what being a young carer means to them, working through potential identity concerns and helping them reconcile them. The use of positive psychology principles to focus on what is already working well (Joseph, 2016), and a solution-focused approach that identifies the resources already available (Harker et al., 2016) can help promote resilience and competence through elucidating interpersonal resources such as family, friends and personal experience (Liu et al., 2017). This, in turn, can facilitate the development of autonomy and feelings of connectedness, counter-

ing disaffection.

At micro- and meso-systemic levels, the EP has an essential role in facilitating engagement between family and school systems, and helping schools understand the complexities of young carers' situations. Many professionals may not fully understand the challenges facing young carers, and there is also a danger that consideration of their circumstances focuses on rights and wrongs according to social constructs, rather than their individual needs (Gray & Robinson, 2009). Taking a collaborative approach, involving the young carer, their family and the school, facilitates greater understanding (Doutre et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2011) and provides opportunities to counter judgement and power imbalances. Combined with solution-focused and positive psychology approaches, a whole-family approach that helps school staff to see the young carer within their context can empower young carers and increase their self-efficacy (Doutre et al., 2013).

My own recent piece of work with a young carer and their family gave insight into the usefulness of collaboration in raising understanding. Following a meeting between the child's SENCO, teacher and mother, and the use of a collaborative, solution-focused method to identify ways forward, the school staff reported that the chance to explore the family's circumstances, needs and successes provided valuable insights and was useful in developing their understanding of the child's situation and how to offer support.

However, adoption of positive psychology principles must involve critical reflection on the young carer's circumstances. Whilst there is a need to be open to accepting a family's norms, there is also a duty of care to ensure that the young carer's experience is not having a detrimental effect on their welfare. In some examples this will be clear cut, but other cases may be ambiguous. In the case above, the child was given a lot of independence, including walking to school alone. This prompted internal reflection as it was counter to my own parenting principles but was identified as a strength in the collaborative meeting. Separately, the child's keyworker expressed strong views that it should not be celebrated, as it meant they were not having a good start to the day. This led to debate on societal norms, the child's views and compensatory factors that school were providing. It was hard to confidently separate a focus on the rights or wrongs according to expectations, and the safety implications for the child.

In addition to working with individuals and families, EPs have much potential to help schools and local authorities in their statutory duty to identify young carers. This could involve helping school staff be more aware of signs to look out for and encouraging them to be alert to the possibility of parental illness (Sieh et al., 2013), increasing the chances of identification and support. However, from a critical psychology perspective, there is an important role in working for

systemic change and challenging the assumptions and judgements that contribute to young carers and their families remaining hidden. Judgement and stigma arise from comparison of the young carer's situation to a socially constructed idea of what childhood or family should look like. Raising awareness of diversity and celebrating difference, both generally and in regard to young carers, can lead to systemic change and inclusion. Nationally, Care for the Carers promote awareness campaigns and "Young Carers Awareness Day", which could be used as starting points for such discussions. They may also facilitate EPs contributing to change at exo- and macro-systemic levels, influencing political contexts that have a contribution to the situation of young carers.

Conclusion

The role of the EP in engaging with diverse groups is multi-faceted, involving an eco-systemic approach that can affect change at various levels. In order to do this successfully, EPs must have an awareness of the diversity of sources of discrimination and be able to reflect critically on their own practice, as well as the practice of others. Seeing each individual's situation as unique and worthy of consideration is key to tackling discrimination and promoting inclusion. When working with young carers, EPs have a role in helping the individual make sense of their own situation, as well as advocating for them and facilitating change at multiple levels. Increasing awareness of these potentially hidden children and young people will be key in reducing stigma, increasing the chances of their needs being met and removing barriers to their inclusion and ability to participate in their community.

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