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Critical Community Education: The Case of Love

Stings

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INTRODUCTION

Community Education is a discrete professional discipline that reaches beyond traditional forms of schooling and college education in order to facilitate the generation of knowledge and action for change among communities that are impacted by inequality and injustice. The Scottish Standards Council for this professional practice, which is also known as Community Learning and Development, identifies our aim as being to 'support social change and social justice [by] challenging discrimination and its consequences and working with individuals and communities to shape learning and development activities that enhance quality of life and sphere of influence' (Community Learning and Development Standards Council, 2017).

Critical community educators work with, not for, communities so that they can learn together in purposefully developing educational praxis that challenges, changes and eradicates barriers to a socially just and good life for all (Wallace and Coburn, 2018). Our analysis of community education as critical is grounded in characteristics for pedagogy that engages learners as actors in their social or political contexts, where learning is collaborative, dialogical, informal and problem-posing (Coburn and Gormally, 2017; Coburn and Wallace, 2011; Martin, 2008; Wallace and Coburn,

2018). Critical community education is aligned with Freirean pedagogy in its aspirations for practice that seeks to establish 'a critical relationship between pedagogy and politics, highlighting the political aspects of the pedagogical and drawing attention to the implicit and explicit domain of the pedagogical inscribed in the political' (McLaren, 2005: xxxvii).

Organised through practice domains of adult education, community development and youth work, Community Education and its incarnation as Community Learning and Development is enacted in communities across Scotland, where 'the focus of the work is always a value laden, social and moral activity' (Coburn and Gormally, 2017: 15). Community Education across the world (Brennan and Curtiss, 2015; Burke, 2004 Wischmann, 2015) is characterised by this social and democratic purpose (Wallace, 2017). Developing critical consciousness in the context of collaborative activity in communities helps to create new knowledge and understanding of the world, underpinning praxis and community development (Wallace, 2017). In this way, critical community education serves its purpose most effectively when challenging contemporary orthodoxies (cultural hegemony) that lead to alternative readings and understandings of how things are so that they might be changed (counter hegemony).

It is these principles that underpin our analysis of a public health education project for young people called Love Stings (Coburn and Wallace, 2009). Drawing on empirical research, involving 66 young participants who were identified as 'vulnerable to exclusion', our evaluation of a community-based youth health initiative considered how youth work, practised as critical pedagogy, created possibilities for boundary crossing and inter-professional practices (Coburn and Wallace, 2011). This amplified claims in the National Youth Work Strategy, which suggested youth

services 'play a vital role in improving the life chances of young people…working collaboratively…[to]…ensure that Scotland continues to be at the forefront globally of innovative work with young people' (Scottish Government, 2014: 18). This strategy emphasised that, working across professional disciplines, youth workers offer joined-up services that enable young people to make informed health choices and to enhance their capacity to flourish. Findings suggested that, where young people had experienced negative relationships in school, family and medical environments, youth work was effective in challenging problematic health behaviours and in contributing to the shifting from naive consciousness among participants and moving to more critical awareness and action (Freire, 1996).

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The capability of young people to be free and to live a good life is impacted by dominant social and cultural discourses and political ideologies (Giroux, 2011). Young people, particularly in impoverished, black and working-class communities, have been subjected to multiple discrimination and prejudice. A negative discourse reinforced by powerful media interests routinely constructs their behaviour as anti-social, contributing to a process of exclusion or marginalisation from mainstream society. Youth work practices seek to subvert these pathologies about young people in the interest of social justice since they impinge on the rights and limit the capabilities of young people to grow as active citizens in their own right. Freire (1996) suggests the concept of marginalisation as 'paternalistic… apparatus… [where]…the oppressed are regarded as the pathology of the healthy society' (1996: 55), noting that no one is marginal or outside of society and in need of integration into the healthy mainstream. People are always inside and part of society but have become '"beings for others"…[and so]…the solution is not to "integrate" them into the structure of

oppression, but to transform that structure, so that they can become "beings for themselves"' (Freire, 1996: 55). Over time, in response to successive moral panics, there have been a series of what could be regarded as experiments in social engineering (Popper, 1961) that seek to control and socialise young people into a neoliberal capitalist job market, proposed as the only way of structuring society and making a good life. The persistence of crises about young people suggests that such experiments in social control are not working!

The chapter is developed in three sections. First, it outlines the research design and context in which Love Stings was developed. Next, it examines findings that, according to the young people, helped improve their physical and emotional position, in ways that were different to their earlier involvement in school or mainstream health interventions. Finally, we argue that an alternative discourse of critical community education, incorporating youth work, can contribute to improving young people's sexual health and subjective well-being.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This qualitative case study incorporated rapid response ethnography (Finlay et al., 2013). Working with participants in six half-day sessions over a two-year period, data were generated through group discussion, decoding of collages and individual interview. Participants provided individual data but also contributed to collective discussion about the programme. The researchers were present during these discussions and made detailed field notes. Secondary-level data were gathered through content analysis of documentation provided by the project and a review of contemporary literature, strategic plans for sexual health improvement and policy contexts.

Responses were analysed through simple inductive coding (Boyatzis, 1998), meaning that themes were generated from the data provided, rather than from existing theoretical ideas. As such, findings are descriptive of the young people's experiences of practices in one case setting. Although not replicable to other projects, findings offer an indication of the extent to which learning and action in this setting may be adapted for use in similar contexts.

Collage and Interview Sessions

The collection of visual data (Prosser, 1998) has been used in qualitative research investigations. Collage making is an extension of this method, utilised by researchers in situations where participant evaluation and reflection on experience are called for (Finlay et al, 2013; Gormally and Coburn, 2014). Collage provides an opportunity for participants to portray their own experiences and perceptions through metaphor. Using magazines, leaflets and other printed matter, participants were invited to cut out images or text that represent ideas, emotions or reactions about their experience of Love Stings. The materials were assembled together into one collage as a visual artwork that helped participants to offer a story of Past, Present and Future experiences of the Love Stings programme (Figures 86.1 and 86.2):

[TS: Insert Figure 86.1 Here]   [TS:Insert Figure 86.2 here]

These images exemplify the kind of collage-art as data. Gauntlett (2007: 96) refers to activity where participants are given something to do and are observed in the process of doing it as 'activity-based ethnography' and 'ethnographic action research'. Moss suggests this process as a means of making 'implicit knowledge explicit' (Moss, 1993: 179). Like Gauntlet (2007: 102), we made observation notes, recorded participants explaining their collages and obtained a digital photograph of

each for further analysis. Recorded data were transcribed and used to develop a thematic analysis in which content was drawn together and categorised to identify recurring themes.

Collage Work as Focus Group

The making of collages, although an individual activity, was undertaken in a group setting, as shown in Figures 86.3 and 86.4. Groups ranged from three to five young people, involving a total of 19, selected through convenience sampling, from an overall observed cohort of 66 participants. Sharing collage resources and drawing on collective reflections provided both a degree of dialogue and a collaborative element to the data-gathering process that is akin to a focus-group process (Forrest-Keenan and Van Teijlingen, 2004). Experiences were shared, recounted and compared in an iterative dialogical process of meaning making that was clarified and extended through participant use of visual and verbal prompts. Johnson (1996) argues that focus groups raise consciousness and help to empower participants in, for example, collective resistance to being led by the researcher.

Individual Interviews

Individual interviews involved participants offering an explanation of the story told through their collage, and comprised 15 of the original 19 participants. Interviews were recorded for transcription and thematic analysis, to explore the detail and identify emerging themes (Hart, 2007). The selection criteria involved individual participants, 'whose main credential is…[was]…experiential relevance' (Rudestam and Newton, 2001: 93), which meant they had direct experience of participating in the Love Stings programme. In this instance 'experiential relevance' also meant the

sample was largely self-selecting and opportunistic in terms of who was available or inclined to take part.

Ethical Considerations

Adopting the notion of ethical symmetry (Christiansen and Prout, 2002), we approached this research from a position that views young people not as objects of research but as co-participants in the research process, stressing their competency and agency (Sime, 2006). Ethical procedures were followed to ensure they did not come to harm as a consequence of engaging in the research process and all names were changed and details omitted during reporting, to protect anonymity. All participants gave informed consent and were advised on how to withdraw this consent at any stage. One participant declined to have their collage photographed. All remaining participants gave full consent for all data, including the collage-art recorded interviews, to be used to generate findings.

THE CONTEXT FOR LOVE STINGS

The underpinning context for Love Stings recognises that structural inequality, discrimination and exclusion impacts on young people's aspirations for social justice, active citizenship and well-being. Located in an established youth project, with a credible track record in working with young people experiencing poverty and exclusion in inner city areas, the Tackling Sexual Health Inequalities programme (named by participants as 'Love Stings') sought to mitigate the impacts of inequality and exclusion by improving young people's health and well-being to:

- help young people become capable of taking responsibility for their sexual health and to be confident and interested in accessing mainstream health providers;

- provide opportunities for young people to understand the issues (and make positive, informed choices) around contraception, relationships, pregnancy and parenthood; and

- use informal education as means of engaging young people and offering intensive support to reduce their participation in risky sexual health behaviours.

Developed through outdoor and youth work education, the programme intended to build young people's confidence as a pre-cursor to making a positive contribution to society. A programme of activities was designed in collaboration with young people to equip them with knowledge that informed behaviour choices and assisted in building confidence that helped them to articulate their reasons for making particular choices to a potential sex partner. Incorporating problem-posing education, groupwork and fun activities, Love Stings was participative, collaborative and experiential. It included a residential experience, facilitated by experienced youth workers and regular group sessions involving health professionals. Over a two-year period, 66 young people participated in Love Stings, with 57 of them successfully completing the whole programme. Of those who engaged in the programme, 38 remained involved in the wider youth work setting for at least a year after completion.

The Challenge of Showing how Learning is Developed: Youth Work as Critical Community Education

Dewey (1859–1952) argued that learning must be active and suggested that education for young people went beyond schooling. Real, guided experiences fostered their capacity to contribute to society and to be active community members. However, for such a contribution to be meaningful, an approach to education that goes beyond an instrumental process of learning as training is required. Further, this approach is not bounded by the confines or power imbalances manifest in institutional learning (Wallace, 2017). Fostering participation and engagement as educative processes in this way represents aspirations for a particular type of society, one in which democratic and empowering education is nurtured and cultivated. Drawing on Dewey (1938), Apple and Beane (1995) and Giroux (2001), this process can be connected to empowering practices such as those observed in Love Stings. Further, in providing a catalyst for reflection and building on mutual experiences, the process of active learning at Love Stings aims to promote societal improvement in the interests of all (Rosales, 2012). The work at Love Stings appears therefore to be a corollary of such Deweyan sentiment for critically participative and experiential education:

> *To say that the welfare of others, like our own, consists in a widening and deepening of the perceptions that give activity its meaning, in an educative growth, is to set forth a proposition of political import.*
>
> Dewey (1922) as cited in Boydston (2008:202)

Ord (2009) has emphasised the importance of Dewey's ideas in thinking about experiential learning in youth work. Dewey saw the construction of knowledge as a two-way transaction, involving the learner and the environment in which they are located, at a particular time and place. Activating participation, learning is located with the lives and interests of young participants and is explicitly intended therefore

to be responsive to their cultural milieu rather than a dominant and imposed narrative (Wallace and Coburn, 2018). It is this social and experiential engagement that is a cornerstone of critical youth work practice and it is this that appears to connect to what Dewey described as processes of trying and undergoing (Dewey, 1916). The core impulse in practice is one in which participation in activities explicitly builds from and extends experience. The legitimacy of such reflexive experience – the trying and undergoing – provides a means of developing really useful knowledge (Tett, 2010) articulating identity and agency as contestation of official and hegemonic constraints. Thus, by engaging in activity and interacting with the environment, education becomes an act of continuity, where:

experiential education locates lived social experience at the heart of the educational process and cannot be subsumed as an abstraction solely of the psychological or cognitive. For Dewey, experience involves a dual process of understanding and influencing the world around us as well as being influenced and changed ourselves by that experience.

Wallace (2017: 41)

Thus, learning in youth work is suggested as part of a continuum. Drawing on experiences from wider contexts, learning about sexual health in youth work, as in schooling, involves young people in interaction with the environment in which learning happens. Learning is developed by decoding specific experiences and considering what these might mean in a wider context. Yet the extent to which learning may be claimed as a direct result of a particular set of experiences, in a specific setting, is difficult to evidence. This is because learning is a cumulative process that builds on learners' existing knowledge and understanding of the world

and is derived from a variety of sources, settings and experiences (Dewey, 1938; Illeris, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978).

The health education practices and principles underpinning Love Stings were notably consistent with the empowering philosophy of education set out by Dewey (1938). Taking a social and informal approach to 'new learning' (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Freire, 1996; Sommerlad, 2003) contrasted starkly with participants' views about their experiences of school learning (their main source of sexual health education prior to participation in Love Stings). Their reaction to more formal settings and instructional approaches was characterised by non-participation and non-learning:

> in school like teachers just telling you …don't really want to listen to what teachers say ...Love Stings workers give you choices, choice to be there, a choice to say what you want and how you feel, not like school, I always come here I never miss it.
>
> John
>
> Love Stings treats you more like an adult. A lot better (than school) not like a daft wee wean (foolish small child)…not looking down on you…so I listen more and pick a lot up, whereas, at school I didn't listen!
>
> Claire

These extracts show that having choices and the freedom to act in a particular way was important and that not feeling patronised was central to their learning (listening more and picking up a lot). The young people suggested that the youth work environment facilitated learning in ways that were different to their experiences of schooling education. In this sense, youth work could be positioned as a boundary-crossing pedagogy. Working across formal and informal boundaries, with young people who were on the edges of formal health services and mainstream education (some were already excluded from school and were disengaged from health services).

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Utilising a critical pedagogy, youth workers engaged with young people in critical conversations about their lifestyles and life choices. This shifts practice from a formulaic response that offers instructional classes on safe sex, towards a more critical social praxis. According to Coburn and Wallace (2011: 13), functional youth work is defined by its 'explicit socialising of young people to meet preconceived norms', where young people are perceived as deficient and involved in 'risky' behaviours. Alternatively, a more critical pedagogy for youth work takes problem-posing as the starting point for learning where power shifts towards young people as capable social actors, as 'young people are encouraged to learn by probing common-sense views of the world, to facilitate understanding of the justice and injustice, power and oppression, and…to promote social transformation' (2011: 15). Love Stings exemplified this more critical praxis in its use of conversational and experiential methods to engage young people in learning about themselves and the steps they could take, to enhance their well-being.

Jane's Story – a Typical Example of the Love Stings Process

Collages provided data on the changing nature of participants' lives. While there was diversity in specific experiences, the young people's lives were typically impacted by multiple and complex issues and they were either sexually active or vulnerable to sexual exploitation. The typical nature of the young people's lives is exemplified in Jane's collage (Figure 86.5):

Jane's collage

[TS:Insert Figure 86.5 Here]

Past

Jane used her collage to explain her perspectives on sex and sexual health. Images included a wine bottle that she selected to represent her consumption of alcohol, and an image of a pregnancy testing kit to signify tests she'd taken when she thought she was pregnant. These images characterised her life prior to participation in Love Stings:

> *When I was younger, I didn't really bother about sex when I was going out with people... it didn't really bother them too much...now that I'm getting older and boys are wantin' sex...it's just a bit harder to deal with relationships...if you're not havin' sex with them...'cause it [the relationship]wouldn't survive that long would it?*

> *In the past I thought I knew hunners [hundreds, meaning 'a lot'] of stuff and before I came on the sexual health...I thought I knew everything...*

> *I was running about doin' everything...doin' it ['it', meaning 'having intercourse'] without using protection...I didn't know I could cause myself a lot of bother through it...I wasn't very confident before I came on the course... but I was confident enough to run about thinking I knew everything... I'm confident around boys 'cause I've got two wee brothers...*

> *I used to run about getting drunk and having unprotected sex which wisnae [was not] too bright, 'cause it could've turned into a pregnancy, disease or anything.*

In this final comment, Jane's thinking was consistent with the health belief model (Janz and Becker, 1984), whereby people who believe there is a problem or risk to themselves (such as pregnancy or Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), as distinct from more communal or societal concerns, are more likely to take preventative action.

Jane's comment is a reflection on her past, in light of what she now knows about sexual health, following participation in Love Stings, where she was capable of informed reflection on past behaviours and her comments were consistent with evidence of changing health behaviours in terms of the age at which people engage in intercourse for the first time (Wellings et al., 2001).

Present

Some images on Jane's collage depicted her life now. She said that she put '*me*' at the centre because of her increased confidence and self-respect:

> *I wisnae [was not] dead confident in front of people…like when I was out with people that I didn't know...when I came to Love Stings I wisnae [was not] too confident around people...I was like, that shy one that sat back all the time and didn't say anything. But then I...came on the sexual health course and started to learn about myself and I started to get confident and felt a bit good about myself.*

> *When I was doin' sexual health in school…the teachers don't approach it in a good way, because they just tell you that…they tell you all the wrong things or the consequences but they also tell you that it's wrong to do it at your age..[so] I didn't want to talk about things like….em..with people lookin' doon [down] on me like I've got no respect for myself and that I'm just a wee slut, that does anything wi' anybody.*

> *Coming here [for Love Stings]..telling the truth about myself and speaking up about myself and not being ashamed of everything else 'cause no one else was ashamed…so why should I be ashamed…That was the best part, 'cause when everyone was speaking I was thinking…and we were all…telling everybody about ourselves and our lives…[I think]…that's good, I could tell somebody about what I*

do, without them looking down on me, and me thinking that it's not right for

someone at my age. That's the best bit about coming.

Jane's lack of confidence was consistent with findings on the impact of national identity on sexual health statistics in New Zealand (Braun, 2008). Braun found a characteristic lack of capacity and inclination to communicate about difficult or sensitive issues, making it difficult to communicate about sex, particularly during complex communications with a sexual partner. Jane's comments typified a view that informal conversational methods enabled participants to feel more confident about how they might discuss sex with a partner. Increasing confidence and self-efficacy were explicit programme aims and were consistent with policies for youth work and sexual health but, importantly, they also underpinned development of knowledge, skills and attributes that could enable the young people to flourish beyond the project.

Future

Looking to the future, Jane chose images of vibrant people, looking fit and healthy, full of energy and fun:

That's me now...[woman in pink dress]...dead [very] confident and happier than

everybody...and I know what I want in life...even if I'm still young, I have got plans

of where I want to go soon...'cause I'm goin' to college soon to train to be a

hairdresser...so I want to get far on in life.

Jane's selection included the image of a woman in a traditional wedding dress, a young baby and an older couple. She suggested this as her future vision, beyond college, when she would like to meet a partner and have a family but not just now.

This was interpreted as showing how participation in Love Stings assisted young people in renewing and reclaiming a coherent life-vision:

I'll look out for myself in future…and think about me…not everyone else. Obviously, I'll think about people around me and have respect, but I'll think about me and care for myself, have more respect for myself…Love Stings has…like when you imagine if I didn't go on that course… I could've ended up with a wee baby that I didn't know how to look after, that I didn't want…it could've ruined my life…it could've stopped my life right there…cause that's what happens when you don't use a condom… you've got responsibilities….and you can get infections.

Like other participants, Jane connected her future aspirations to finding work in a chosen field and settling down with a family. Contrary to negative hegemonic pathologising of young people, Jane projected a happy family unit in which there was stability of income and employment, a productive and stable relationship and a sense of contentment and well-being. Jane connected the lessons she learned in Love Stings with working to achieve this vision.

FINDINGS ABOUT LEARNING, AGENCY AND FLOURISHING

1. *Raising awareness and increasing knowledge and understanding*

Research in public health policy and practice has persistently focussed on teenage pregnancy as a social problem associated with high levels of unwanted pregnancy, excessive alcohol consumption, poverty, social exclusion and poor physical health through Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) (Arai, 2009; Cense and Ganzevoort, 2019; Monasterio et al., 2007) It is further reported that experiences of sexual

relations among young people are linked to alcohol consumption, which increases the likelihood of engaging in unsafe sex (Braun, 2008). Noting the dominance of a stigmatising discourse, Arai (2009) argues for an alternative policy direction to offer more supportive responses to young mothers, while Cense and Ganzevoort (2019) call for further research into the use and development of peer education methods for improving sexual health. Love Stings sought to offer a more positive than stigmatising response to participants and engaged young people in critical and reflective conversations with their peers. This included consideration of their experiences of a suggested link between sex and alcohol consumption, and the impact of alcohol on feelings of confidence or in the loss of inhibition as part of wider conversations about making a good life.

Despite the sensitive nature of this topic, discussion was facilitated by using creative youth work methods such as 'beer goggles', whereby participants are asked to wear a set of spectacles that distort vision (as a simulation of drunkenness). Participants then accomplish tasks such as checking, opening and applying a condom to a banana. Young people specifically highlighted this exercise as having a 'sobering effect' on realising how little they could accomplish of the safe-sex tasks:

And then what did you do? Why did you have them on (Booze Goggles)?

They passed us a condom which was still in the paper, still in the wrapper, so we had to like check the wrapper to see if it was pierced or anything and then we had to check the date, which I never knew they had. So then I checked the date and the date was out [of date]. So then I said, I can't use that one so they gave me another one, I had to check it and see if it had any holes or anything, it looked ok, but it wasn't really…I opened it and then we had to fill it with water and my condom started leaking.

So how did the course help you to get to the stage where you could talk about it with confidence, because you obviously do?

It made us learn more about one subject, sexually transmitted diseases also known as STIs…erm… they went over things with every one of us and told us the symptoms, told us how you can get rid of them…it like raised me [my knowledge] up a bar so that I knew what I was talking about.

Davy

In this way, Love Stings facilitated participant learning. The young people offered informed responses when asked about what they had learned, which included detailed knowledge about sexual health, sexually transmitted infections and the availability and increased use of wider support services for sexual health improvement. Participants routinely commented on increased confidence as beneficial in short-term practical outcomes but also in promoting deeper-level thinking that would inform future decisions:

They taught you to get checked out…before you do anything or if you catch anything, even if you have a wee [small] cut…then an STI can be passed on to you and you can pass it to other people.

Jim

They showed us pictures so that if anything happens to any of us, we would know exactly what it looks like…so we can go and get it checked out…I found out that condoms have expiry dates…I never knew that!

John

It made me think about things…not just the sex stuff…it makes me think about things before I do them. It makes me think a lot more about doing stuff and just keeping me out of trouble.

Eric

The above comments show that Love Stings worked on both a physical and emotional level in that young people's learning about STIs and avoiding a specific physical health condition also led to them thinking about the feelings of others and to consider the consequences of their wider actions in terms of personal feelings, beyond 'the sex stuff' and staying 'out of trouble'. In this sense, critical dialogue was aligned to the content of their learning but also offered a process for personal transformation, in beginning to think about the person they were becoming, and the kind of life they wanted to live.

In committing to working with young people and focussing on aspirations that challenged orthodoxies on their existing ways of being in the world, Love Stings presented a critical community education model for sexual health education that was in keeping with the kind of supportive response that was advocated by Arai (2009) and challenged dominant narratives around young people in some contemporary societies (Coburn and Gormally, 2017; Wallace, and Coburn, 2018; Finlay et al., 2013; Giroux, 2011). Love Stings met outcomes related to aims, and called into question taken-for-granted perspectives on how to engage young people in making informed decisions now and in future. Participants believed that learning through critical conversation had a more lasting effect than their experiences of sex education in schools.

Love Stings exemplified responsive practices in which positive working relationships and trust were central to success. As Milburn et al. (2003: 10) argue:

> Youth work is required to be responsive to those young people who are alienated, excluded and in some cases rejected by other adults and public services. It has to start 'where they are', not with unreasonable expectations of conformity to structures and unreal demands for results. The creation of varied youth work opportunities is an enormous challenge, made more demanding yet supremely unique by the fact that young people come forward voluntarily to participate. Youth work is not compulsory. (Milburn et al., 2003: 10)

This was consistent with the views of young people at Love Stings who routinely noted the relevance of the process, the willingness of staff to speak in their own terms and share their experiences. The young people highlighted another advantage in claiming that this programme was empowering in assisting their future decisions.

2. *Self-efficacy – choosing to do the right thing*

Love Stings participants engaged in various activities connected to aspects of sexual health. This enhanced their capacity to think critically about other aspects of their lives, beyond the immediate concerns for sexual health improvement. Young people reflected on learning discussions and activities within the group to inform future decisions beyond sexual health matters.

> *(Love Stings) gives you the facts and how we could help ourselves. Advice that stays for life…it could change your whole life…*
>
> *Sharon*

> *When I'm older I'd like to settle down….meet a woman and have a family…get a job.*

John

Love Stings is not just about sexually transmitted diseases, it's about things we do that concern our health ...[get into]...fighting and that...Love Stings made me think...get a clear vision...I don't want to be doing these things when I'm older...

Jack

Participants used the skills and knowledge learned to reflect on their lives and to take responsibility for decision making that was consistent with a theory of empowerment as 'capacity to make effective choices…and then transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes' (Alsop et al., 2006: 10). Alsop et al. (2006) suggest that the capacity for decision making and action relies on both agency and opportunity, where agency is linked to the ability to make choices, and opportunity is tied to the structural contexts in which the social actor, or social group, lives. This was consistent with core elements of practice at Love Stings, where young people were able to develop confidence and use their power to choose a course of action that would allow them to envision their futures as different to their current contexts. Engaging in dialogical processes helped facilitate learning, confidence building and self-efficacy in a personal capability (Bandura, 1997; Carr, 2011). In turn, this enabled them to commit to change, in order to make a better life for themselves and also for the wider group of young people involved in the project.

These ideas on self-efficacy and agency resonate with a critical community education that does not 'give answers or solutions' to empower people, but rather uses problem-posing methods to raise questions and promote critical dialogue through which people recognise their power and use it to develop their knowledge and understanding of the world, and how it might be changed. Participants were able to

take responsibility for their own affairs and this continued into their home and community lives. This suggested that young people involved in the Love Stings project took decisions about their health behaviours which facilitated their development of alternative life trajectories.

3. *Building relationships and the importance of place and conversation*

Location and context were identified as influential in determining learning and teaching conversations. In particular, the Love Stings residential was highlighted as a positive learning environment, where much of the learning was built around a day of physical outdoor activity whereby 'the daily routine gives staff close proximity…[in]…presenting a rich array of openings for conversation and dialogue' (Jeffs, 2017: 71). Conversations that began on a hill, or in preparing a meal, were returned to or extended in the evenings and according to participants this enhanced their relationships with youth workers:

> *They were open about like their experiences as well, they didn't just want us to talk about our experiences. They shared their experiences with us as well, if you know what I mean?*

> *Millie*

As youth workers gave something of themselves and their own experiences, this contributed to the development of relationships that helped young people to understand things more than their in-school learning experiences:

> **Was there a difference between coming here and a sexual health talk in school? Were they different or the same?**

Aye. They [youth workers] helped you remember 'cause if you didn't understand they talked to you like individual. And then they helped you to understand…more than school would.

<div align="right">

Karen

</div>

In a study of how youth workers defined the work they do, participants were strongly supportive of process-based relationships, rather than product-orientated outcomes, where 'the process of youth work was generally seen to be contingent on the quality of relationship between a young person and a youth worker' (Harland and Morgan, 2006: 10). The importance of this relationship was also exemplified by participant comments that youth workers were open to talking on young people's terms and ensuring that no one was singled out because of either limited knowledge or extensive experience.

According to the young people in this study, the importance of place was another core aspect in their experiences. School was viewed as a place where sex education was explained in science terms and did not consider relationships or sexual good health:

In school you didn't get told a lot…I didn't think science was a thing for sexual health…it was just about flowers and plants and then…it turns into a baby inside you… and you were like…aye right…I don't even know what's going on here…you didn't get told about all the things that could happen, all the diseases you could get and the consequences that could come...

<div align="right">

Lynne

</div>

At Love Stings, they felt comfortable in asking or talking about anything. The conversational basis for this educational youth work signified the construction of

relationships as a priority in working with young people which required a level of skill among youth workers, in order to maximise these learning opportunities (Batsleer, 2008).

4. *Building positive relationships in critical community education*

Our observations of youth workers interacting with young people during collage making and other routine activity at Love Stings confirmed the importance of positive relationships in creating an environment for critical community education. Young people were challenged to think about sexual health problems or respectful relationships and to discuss the consequences of their actions by workers who took time to explain the why and how of such problems, rather than simply issue statements of fact, instruction or judgement.

Smith (1988, 2003) has identified characteristics for youth work that suggest a commitment to association and positive relationships with others, development of friendliness, taking an informal approach and a concern for well-being. Participants identified family members, teachers and friends, who had 'been there' during especially difficult times in their lives, as important associations. They also suggested that having fun, choosing to participate and learning something were positive features of their involvement. This is consistent with Smith's additional characteristics of voluntary participation and educational progression.

This use of humour helped maintain an ethos that encouraged the normalising of taboo conversation topics. The importance of informal and educational methods to overcoming barriers to participation suggested youth work as a potentially important and largely unexplored method of developing sexual health education. Love Stings

was consistently inventive in the use of music, arts, technology and outdoor education. This facilitated engagement in critical and meaningful learning.

Yet, while these activities are the means, they are not the ends of youth work. Arguably, the gains in confidence and knowledge evidenced in participants' responses cannot be readily quantified or evaluated and in any case may not be systematically judged until some future point. However, a range of soft indicators suggest that the youth work paradigm provides an effective engagement strategy based on the overwhelmingly positive reaction of participants to the programme. In this sense the value of input costs (staff time, transport, funding) may be judged against the value of the outputs Love Stings delivered, to 66 young people who had been involved in, and rejected, 'interventionist' programmes despite being identified as having multiple and complex life circumstances. For example, the cohort included young people who were single parents living in hostel accommodation or involved with police and social work 'interventions' which isolated or excluded them from forming lasting positive relationships. Yet they reported a positive impact on knowledge and learning among peers at Love Stings.

CONCLUSION

Building on our earlier assessment of youth work as critical pedagogy (Coburn and Wallace, 2011) which facilitates young people's agency through creation of a positive and creative discourse, this chapter discusses research findings from an evaluation of 'Love Stings', a youth work programme that engaged young people in education and personal development related to their sexual health and well-being. Over 12 weeks, Love Stings offered a positive and proactive response to health inequalities, improving young people's capacity to flourish and to take action towards developing a good life (Sen, 1999). The findings enhance understanding of youth work as critical

community education that offers a counter hegemony to mechanisms of compliance and conformity. This alternative paradigm prioritises young people's voices as equal to those of people who currently seek to direct their lives. In this case study, young people's capacity to take control of their lives was extended by their engagement in critical dialogical processes that helped them to construct new knowledge and understanding about their lives.

Rather than take a deficits view of young people, critical community educators see young people as assets in their communities. In seeking to develop and sustain a useful level of criticality, we assert that learning should be constructed through dialogical, rather than deficiency-driven, processes.

Love Stings ticked boxes in terms of 'fixing' problematic sexual health behaviours. Yet, by taking a critical focus that utilised dialogue and problem-posing methodologies, outcomes could not simply be measured in terms of behaviour change. Instead the findings suggested that collaborative and purposeful conversations between youth workers, health workers and young people appeared to enhance learning for the longer term.

However, findings also raised deeper questions aligned to a wider hegemonic and patriarchal discourse on sex education. For example, learning was aligned with ideas from gay awareness training (Kitzinger and Peel, 2005), whereby young people at Love Stings were challenged to consider definitions of coercion, control and homophobia. However, outside of the facilitated sessions, there was limited evidence that homophobic comments were challenged, nor were dominant heterosexual perspectives. This suggested room for deeper consideration and understanding of how sex education is developed in a patriarchal society rather than reducing it to hegemonic and formulaic learning (Beggan and Coburn, 2018).

Further, while the need for safe sexual health practices for ALL young people was advocated across the programme, the needs of LGBTQI+ young people were underplayed, and all participants openly identified as heterosexual within what appeared as a heteronormative space. There was also no evidence of engagement with Black and Minority Ethnic young people (BME as routinely used to denote people of colour and range of minority ethnic people). Although there is a limited literature or data about sexual well-being of BME young people in Scotland (Simkhada et al., 2006), the latest census figures (2011) show that 12% of the total population in the city that hosted Love Stings identified as BME. Thus, it would also have been expected that the sexual health needs of BME young people would have been included via development of a more culturally sensitive programme. This again suggested heteronormative focus and lack of recognition of specific LGBTQI+ and BME young people's needs offers a challenge for anyone involved in developing such programmes, to find ways of subverting contemporary orthodoxies in order to ensure that important conversations are not missed in terms of understanding the intersectional nature of sex education.

Despite the above challenges, this study has shown that youth work does offer an alternative and challenging discourse through engaging young people in learning that enhances their capacity to make educated, informed choices, to act as agents for themselves or in collaboration with others to shape alternative futures. While more critical questioning of the patriarchal tensions inherent in development in sex education would assist in a deeper analysis of power, Love Stings did offer a critical community education that was discrete from mainstream schooling or formalised social work and police interventions. Youth work creates possibilities for transformational education. As part of a wider continuum of education, critical

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community education sees salutogenic potential (Beggan and Coburn, 2018; Coburn and Gormally, 2019) rather than pathological problems in meeting the aspirations of young people and communities for making a good life.

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