

Dr Jo Bishop

School of Education and Professional Development, University of
Huddersfield, Huddersfield, United Kingdom

j.bishop@hud.ac.uk

Jo Bishop is a Senior Lecturer in a range of programmes related to Education, Children and Young People.

Educational paraprofessionals: underpaid, undervalued and now over here.

Abstract

Educational paraprofessionals have had an increased presence in English state schools since the first decade of the 21st century, but research has been limited in terms of who undertakes paraprofessional roles, what they entail and how such work is perceived by others. This paper compares one such paraprofessional role, the learning mentor, with the ‘community agent’, found in the United States of America during the 1960s. It identifies a number of similarities around the lived experience of this work in terms of status, career progression and policy assumptions about the efficacy of these roles. It argues that a historical analysis is invaluable in gaining a more complete understanding of how such roles have an air of impermanency, are subject to the vagaries of policy but nevertheless continue to be recycled as a limited and partial response to deepening social and educational inequalities.

Keywords: Community agents, learning mentors, New Careers, paraprofessionals

Introduction

This paper examines how educational paraprofessionals have been deployed to serve the perceived needs of the socially and educationally disadvantaged in ‘advanced’ capitalist societies, namely England and the United States of America. It offers a critical analysis of how this type of occupational domain has been historically constructed, and how it continues to evolve. The paper argues that the recent trends in the English schools workforce replicates certain aspects of earlier developments in the USA, and that an examination regarding the perceived impact of educational paraprofessionals provides powerful insights into the nature and limitations of such roles. Other notable studies such as Silver and Silver (1991) have reviewed how social and educational policy has

been developed in various ways to overcome poverty in Britain and the US between 1960 and 1980. Their work platforms how concerns regarding education, poverty and disadvantage address the same or similar issues, “and illuminate each other” (Silver and Silver, 1991:4). Like that text, this article does not claim to be a comparative study but it is interested in exploring how education *personnel* have been utilised to overcome poverty and disadvantage in two geographical contexts.

This paper does not seek to set the experiences of educational paraprofessionals against those of teachers, who have their own problematic history of status-attainment.

Questions concerning whether teaching can be understood as either a profession or occupation are long-standing (Ozga, 1995; Reis Monteiro, 2014) based in part on the difficulties of teachers to control their working conditions and in doing so achieve ‘market closure’ (Klein, 2016) or professionalism ‘from within’ (McClelland, cited in Evetts, 2011: 407) 1990). In England, a critical ‘moment’ in this journey was the 1988 Education reform Act which led to a regulation of school performance via technologies of audit such as inspections (Ball, 2008) and the introduction of quasi-market mechanisms (league tables), all of which have limited the scope of teacher freedom and had a profound impact on teacher identity (Jeffery and Troman, 2012). I argue that it is precisely these developments that have led to paraprofessional roles becoming increasingly prominent within both the English state school and post-16 systems from the late 1990s onwards, and why they continue to exist both despite and because of more recent austerity-driven cuts to state-funded education, simultaneously offering something of value and a cheaper option compared to teaching staff.

A recent school workforce census indicates that non-teaching staff with pupil support roles in state-funded schools in England (such as learning mentors, behaviour support workers and teaching assistantsⁱ), numbered 298, 083, with just over 75,000 of these in secondary schoolsⁱⁱ (Gov.uk, 2018). Despite this significant presence there are a relatively small number of studies that have examined different aspects of the work of educational paraprofessionals: some focus on specific roles like learning mentors (Bishop and Sanderson, 2017; Bishop, 2011; Jones et al, 2009) and teaching assistants (Mansaray, 2006); others on particular areas of work common to non-teaching support roles such as behaviour (Lee, 2006). Edmond and Price, (2009) note how although the development and diversification of support roles in schools was initially envisaged as making a significant contribution, their differential status has merely reinforced a segmentation of functions between the academic and the pastoral.

In the secondary state sector, non-teaching roles like the learning mentor involve supporting young people who, for varying reasons, are perceived as unable to access what Martin (2016) calls the ‘standard school offer’ inasmuch as ‘achievement’ is narrowly understood as securing good grades at GCSEⁱⁱⁱ. These then lay the path to further study in academic / vocational higher level study leading on to University. In contrast, the work of educational paraprofessionals is often centred on a ‘compensatory offer’ which attempts to provide ‘new’ solutions to enduring problems of underachievement and disaffection among certain individuals and groups.

First, it is necessary to unpack the category of ‘paraprofessional’, a classification which has been employed to describe those groups who in some way occupy the margins of accepted professional status within education and a number of other occupational fields. Colley and Guery (2015) note how the term ‘hybrid professional’ has been utilised as a

political means to inspire public confidence in less-qualified practitioners who experience less favourable salaries and working conditions compared to teachers, lecturers or careers officers. The term ‘associate professional’ is offered by Edmond and Price (2009) to describe a plethora of school-based roles such as Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) and Teaching Assistant (TA), Learning Mentor, Behaviour Support, Cover Supervisor and Parent Support Advisors. In post-16 education generic terms like ‘learning support worker’ and ‘para teacher’ are used to describe similar roles and functions (Bailey and Robson, 2004). Meanwhile, McCann et al (2013) refer to ‘Blue-Collar Professionalism’ to describe the liminal space occupied by paramedics in the English National Health Service. Whilst these terms enable a comparative overview of titles, Stanfield’s ‘paraprofessional’ (1973) is arguably most appropriate to this particular discussion of educational workers. In using the prefix ‘para’ (to signify beside or near), the worker is not identified by negation of their status (as with the terms nonprofessional or preprofessional) but rather as near-professional with no assumed expectation that they will necessarily move into a fully professional role. Moreover, the term paraprofessional is present in literature spanning both time and geographical contexts pertaining to the USA and England (see for example Stewart, 1971 and Kerry, 2002 respectively).

The first section of the paper will examine the policy agenda which gave rise to a number of educational paraprofessionals in England. It will then focus more specifically on the role of the learning mentor, critically examining how it has been constructed and understood in different fora. Included in this section is a more nuanced discussion of the learning mentor role drawn from ethnographic data (Bishop, 2017) which offers critical accounts by those who enact the role; pupils as recipients of the role; and the perceptions of other school staff. The second section of the paper deals with the

historical literature regarding the deployment of US paraprofessionals in the 1960s, in order to illuminate if not direct policy transfer, a policy ‘recycling’ of sorts. Here the discussion critically reviews specific projects which aimed to advance the job prospects of ‘non-professionals’ whilst simultaneously ensuring that services hitherto provided by a professional class that was perceived as detached and distant, were more accessible and credible to their recipients. The third section identifies parallels regarding both the lived experience of paraprofessional roles and the policy assumptions regarding the efficacy of these types of workers. It questions the extent to which the expectations and demands placed upon paraprofessionals can be achieved given the deep-rooted and long-standing societal inequalities which permeate schools; and the nature of roles that come about as a result of policy initiatives from both geo-political contexts. The paper concludes by acknowledging that whilst it is possible to identify some benefits of a paraprofessional presence (particularly within the English performative school), the inequalities of pay and conditions ultimately point to a marginalized group of workers who are shouldered with unrealistic expectations about what they can realistically achieve with those pupils they are tasked to support.

The rise of the English educational paraprofessional

The Plowden Report (1967) provides the first documented reference to paraprofessionals in English primary schools, then referred to as ‘teaching aides’; however, classroom-based assistants have existed since the early 1960s (Clayton, 1993) and in an earlier iteration still as ‘pupil-teachers’ in the 19th Century (Simmons, 2017). By the mid-1990s, the type of educational paraprofessional most commonly established in secondary schools were known as ‘teaching assistants’ or TAs (Mansaray, 2006; Tucker, 2009). The opening years of the New Labour administration (1997onwards),

set the scene for a frenetic period of educational and social policy-making which led to a greater number of school-based paraprofessionals. The avowed intention to ‘overcome economic and social disadvantage’ by eliminating rather than ‘excusing’ educational underachievement (Blunkett, 1997:3) was set out in *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997). This document signified a desire to confront low standards in schools with the stated aim that policies would be designed to benefit the many and not the few. This was followed by *Excellence in Cities* (EiC) which initially encompassed six English cities and conurbations, and was then extended in the form of ‘Excellence Clusters’ to ex-mining communities and coastal towns experiencing high levels of social deprivation (Bishop, 2011). This agenda also sought to make such schools more attractive ‘to those parents who would otherwise abandon them’ thus reconciling the then prime minister Tony Blair’s emphasis on ‘aspirant parents’ with David Blunkett, the then Secretary of State for Education’s desire for equity (Barber, 2007:37). EiC introduced new provision into schools such as In-house Learning Support Units, designed for young people on the brink of permanent exclusion and often staffed by a more recent manifestation of the educational paraprofessional - the behaviour support worker (Bishop, 2017). Interventions to nurture children and young people assessed as ‘Gifted and Talented’ were established and, most relevant to the current discussion, the learning mentor role was also created. By the mid-2000s, there were estimated to be 12 – 14, 000 learning mentors working across the state education sector (DfES, 2005), celebrated in governmental and media circles as the biggest success within the EiC initiative (Bell, 2003; Kirkman, 2004; Stoney, 2005). Despite ring-fenced funding for EiC ending in 2008, the learning mentor role continued to exist in some local authority maintained schools, albeit in a rebranded form with examples including: pastoral officer, transition and child protection coordinator and inclusive programmes manager

(Bishop, 2011). Such titles reflect not only the old and new language of these types of interventions but also the greater legal responsibility placed on schools for the safeguarding of children and young people. However, over time and in what has become a more fragmented system of school provision (Mortimore, 2013), the persuasive power of youth mentoring that originally underpinned the learning mentor role has arguably waned, signalled by a shift to roles focussed more narrowly on behaviour correction and management within more punitive ‘support’ systems (Gillies, 2016; Lee, 2011).

Two key initiatives running parallel to EiC further contributed to the increased presence of educational paraprofessionals. First, a governmental push for a more flexible approach to teacher deployment (DfES, 2001a), resulted in a national restructuring of the teaching profession. Formalised through Section 133 of the Education Act 2002, this led to a remodelling of the teachers’ role in which pastoral and/or ‘inclusion’ aspects of their workload were handed to those non-teaching, paraprofessionals listed above. This was despite such activities having been previously viewed as an integral part of the teacher role (Best, Jarvis and Ribbons, 1980; Williamson, 1980). Tensions between the pastoral and the academic have continued (Power, 1996), and the stance that pastoral interventions should remain within the remit of teachers is still vehemently defended (Purdy, 2013).

The second initiative was the establishment of the Children’s Workforce Development Council^{iv} (CWDC) which oversaw the introduction of a new qualifications framework encompassing mandatory training for both learning mentors and behaviour workers new in post. These were nationally-accredited training programmes linked to National Vocational Qualifications, and a suite of new foundation degrees^v reflecting different areas of work undertaken. Such courses enabled educational paraprofessionals to gain qualifications whilst in paid work, and reflected the government’s attempts to provide a

greater sense of permanence to these roles given the remodelling agenda outlined above. Initially, it appeared that there were genuine opportunities for career progression via these new jobs, which were intended to offer a different type of support to children and young people. One school leader notably described the learning mentor as “something other than a teacher” for pupils who needed “... the additional back-up of an interested adult, [and] a critical friend who could guide their learning in a non-threatening way” (cited in Kerry, 2002:3). Estelle Morris, the then Secretary of State for Education envisaged that a decade on, schools would be ‘rich in the number of trained adults [other than teachers] available to support learning to new high standards’ (DfES, 2001a:15) and some years on academic commentators refer to a ‘diverse cast of “other adults” working in and around schools’ (Ball et al, 2012:2). Importantly, such developments led to the employment of individuals previously seen as members of ‘outlier’ groups in formal education settings. For example, concerns about the high numbers of African-Caribbean boys excluded from school (arising in part from a wider societal discourse about boys’ underachievement (McDowell, 2001)), gave rise to a number of Black and mixed-heritage males being employed as mentors, due to being perceived, although not uncritically, as credible figures who could turn the tide of disaffection linked to this particular group (Odih, 2002). Paired with the heightened levels of optimism invested in mentoring as a vehicle to engage young people at this time (Colley, 2003; Philip, 2003), it is possible then to see how greater numbers of people from working class and/or Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities were recruited into these new occupational roles, as opposed to the ancillary jobs of cleaning, catering and administration they had traditionally been assigned to.

To examine the educational reforms outlined above in isolation from their broader policy context, enables only a partial understanding. Such initiatives were encompassed within a broader agenda based on the prevention of ‘risky conditions’ such as teenage parenthood, long-term unemployment and welfare dependency. Of significant relevance is Every Child Matters (ECM), an initiative central to New Labour’s desire to invest in childhood at previously unprecedented levels (Frost, 2011), or at least engage in a limited redistribution to address the needs of children hitherto overlooked. Within ‘high-implementation schools’ (where ECM was embraced most fully), head teachers redesigned staffing structures so that paraprofessionals could work alongside teachers to offer support through ‘just in time’ interventions to certain young people’ (cited in Harris and Allen, 2009: 344). Amongst paraprofessionals there was a palpable sense of enthusiasm regarding the contribution that their work would make to the school experience, seeing it as premised on a holistic view of children and young people and providing an anti-dote to the increasing drive for attainment and achievement within a culture of performativity (O’Grady, 2006; Stephenson, 2006; Ball, 2008). Other accounts regarding the increase in paraprofessionals were more cautious voicing concerns over the cultural and organisational ramifications of having new groups of workers in schools with quasi-professional identities substantially different to those of teachers (Calvert, 2009). More overtly critical accounts questioned the status and pay of these new workers given that they would most likely be working with the ‘neediest and most problematic children in schools’ (Edmond and Price, 2009:301).

The English learning mentor

The original objectives assigned to the learning mentor related to raising standards and helping to reduce truancy and school exclusion (DfES, 2005:12). The phrase ‘removing barriers to learning’ became synonymous with learning mentors and was expressed

frequently in policy documents (DfE, 2005) as well as being echoed in the educational news media (Jewell, 2010; Morrison, 2008) and eventually entering into the lexicon of mentors themselves (Bishop, 2011; Davies and Thurston, 2005). From a government perspective, such barriers were constructed as individualised deficits, with official documentation citing: ‘behavioural problems’, ‘persistent absenteeism’, and ‘difficulties at home’ (DfES, 2001b:8) as well as ‘being from a community which has a disregard for education’ (Hayward, 2006:2). Learning mentors were to be viewed as a new resource which would provide a more individualised approach to those considered to be struggling in, and with, formal education. They were to be understood as a ‘professional friend’, a ‘role model’, and a ‘challenger of assumptions’ but not a ‘disciplinarian’, ‘counsellor’ or ‘classroom assistant’ (DfES, 2001b:8), which was a deliberate attempt to distinguish them from the more established role of the TA (Cruddas, 2005).

Learning mentors were characterised as having the ability to connect with ‘hard to reach’ families and communities in a way that had hitherto proved challenging for teachers, because learning mentors were frequently identified as individuals who had themselves overcome challenging life experiences such as growing up in ‘tough areas’ and under-achieving at school (Jones et al 2009). Hence, recruitment to this work was often premised on assumptions regarding mentors’ own biographies of ‘coming good’ despite a life history often marked by disaffection (see for example Jewell, 2010). They were further cast as ‘less daunting’ to parents whose memories of their school days were ‘less than fond’ (Morrison, 2008:3). Other accounts noted how mentors often lived near to the school in which they worked (in contrast to teachers who by implication often did not) so had a more immediate and greater understanding of the locality (Jones et al, 2009) which enabled them to ‘act as a go-between if problems arose with parents’ (Allison, 2008:2). An example of this ‘bridging’ characterisation, which shall be

explored further in due course, is illustrated in the following comment made by Russell Hobby, then President of the National Association of Head Teachers:

[Learning mentors] are valued members of *their* communities who can translate things to their communities that [the] middle-class teacher can't (cited in Garner, 2010:3, my emphasis).

Academic analyses of the learning mentor role offer a wider spectrum of viewpoints. The majority are premised on more agentic accounts of mentors' work with a tendency to downplay the social, economic and political context in which they operate. Cruddas describes learning mentors as a 'fledgling profession in a changing children's workforce...' with the capacity (power) to question and disrupt institutional culture (Cruddas, 2005: 83). Similarly, Jones et al (2009) claim that neither money nor job security appear to motivate learning mentors; rather it was concern for the well-being of young people which (apparently) took precedence over concern for an uncertain future in terms of the permanence of their employment:

There was a clear sense of a shared vocation [in their responses] engendered by working with challenging young people in challenging circumstances [And] This was not a nine to four job but one charged with a real sense of vocation and energy (Jones et al, 2009: 48).

They further stated:

This may prove to be a double-edged sword that on the one hand leads to the development of an effective service founded upon the commitment of the individuals involved, but that could also lead to the exploitation of these colleagues and a limiting of their impact as a result of low status (Jones et al, 2009: 50).

These analyses contrast sharply with the foregrounding of structural factors of unemployment and social inequality that characterised earlier critiques of youth mentoring in other contexts (Piper and Piper, 2000; Colley, 2003).

An earlier reconnaissance study aimed to ascertain how the work of learning mentors had developed some eight years after the role was implemented (Bishop, 2011) . Data generated through self-completion questionnaires began to capture the multiple ways in which learning mentors described their work:

1: 1 general *emotional support*—concentrating mainly on *attendance* and *behavioural* issues.

Emotional support is linked to each student who is *targeted* for support.

Pupils also ask for this support through drop in sessions. Workbooks, *target setting*, goals, competitions, *talking*, *art therapy* etc (cited in Bishop, 2011:34. Emphasis added).

A dual role of offering emotional support whilst monitoring academic progress and attainment is discernible in the voices of the mentors' own descriptions of their work above. However, this study also demonstrated that, in some settings, learning mentors (such as the one quoted below) were given a greater degree of autonomy than their teaching counterparts:

Engaging with young people is my key focus. This takes me into all sorts of areas such as car mechanics, coaching rugby teams, gym work, routine building maintenance, visits to local businesses etc (cited in Bishop, 2011: 39).

A more recent ethnographic study interrogated the official prescriptions of the role, given that they conveyed little about the way in which such texts were mediated in the actual sites where they were enacted (Bishop, 2017). It focused on a learning mentor team of three, which had been reduced from a team of six since the New Labour era. The learning mentor team, two women and one man were of African-Caribbean heritage situated in a predominantly White-British teaching and leadership staff, serving an ethnically and socially diverse pupil population. Another key participant in this study had previously worked in the school as a learning mentor and pastoral year manager before becoming a TA in an internal facility which accommodated pupils at risk of permanent exclusion. The data generated information regarding the day-to-day work activities of learning mentors in specific provisions which operated outside the 'normal' institutional frameworks of the school, such as Breakfast Club, an initiative run by the learning mentors prior to start of the school day; and the Mentor Base, a facility converted from a storage room and office, which served as a mini youth club at break times and facilitated one-to-one interventions which were held during lesson times. Contact through home visits and telephone calls with parents and families - some of whom were considered 'hard to reach' by school managers - were also part of their role.

Contradictory elements regarding the voluntary and involuntary nature of the mentors' work could be observed through these interventions. For example, pupils voluntarily accessing the Breakfast Club and Mentor Base could experience a consistently warm welcome and positive affirmation of their individuality, be that through an acknowledgement of their food preference, a new hair style being commented upon or the recognition of an out-of-school achievement. As the learning mentors were the only staff that pupils could refer to by their first names, such provision enabled an

environment which could be likened to a ‘youth work’ style of ‘informal’ education which afforded pupils the opportunity to relax, share and reflect on problems, and seek advice either before or during the school day. In contrast, some pupils were selected for one-to-one official interventions with a learning mentor by a third party ‘gatekeeper’ group of senior and middle managers for a designated period of six weeks despite mentor requests to extend this time-frame. However, it soon became apparent that a number of ‘unofficial’ one-to-one meetings ran alongside those which had not been formally sanctioned, coming about through a variety of channels including the intentional by-passing of formal referral mechanisms by some pupils, in order to seek out a more autonomous form of support and perceiving the learning mentors as the most suitable and credible adults to provide this. As was shown with the ‘dual role’ in the earlier study, it was clear that the role had both regulatory and transformatory elements: on the one hand, keeping pupils ‘on track’ by ensuring they adhered to what was required within a performative system; but also using their own peripheral, liminal position in the school hierarchy to take troubled and/or ‘troublesome’ young people under their wing before they were channelled into more formalised or punitive systems. When asked to describe the learning mentor role, pupils participating in the research made comparisons with family referring to mentors as being ‘like an older sister... or maybe mother...’ and ‘Paul’^{vi}, the ‘elder’ of the mentor team often being affectionately called ‘Gramps’ by male pupils. A type of ‘friendship’ which was both constant and enduring in nature also featured in other accounts:

They are always there ... When I needed ‘Angie’ [the mentor] in Year 10, I would come down here [the mentor base] and I would just sit with her. When I first came here to Angie it was then, like hard times, yeah? But now I can just come in and say ‘hi’ and end up talking for about 20 minutesso it’s just

somewhere you can go to talk. It's like it doesn't feel like you're at school ('Teisha').

Pupils' responses to learning mentors have also been critically examined in the post-16 sector, where Robson (2008) draws on psychoanalytic understandings of anxiety to show how pupils can project an idealized version of a parental figure onto educational paraprofessionals, seeing them as offering a safe and secure environment in which students could view themselves positively as learners. The availability of paraprofessionals in contrast to teachers, was also recognized in both studies reflecting how pupils and students were experiencing the impact of this stripping away of the pastoral aspect of the teacher role due to its restructuring referred to earlier.

Returning to the study under discussion (Bishop, 2017) in contrast to those pupils above who talked confidently about what the mentor role involved from their perspective, staff views were characterised by a lack of understanding which was felt by the mentors to result in a trivialization of their work. As one mentor stated:

... they [teachers] would think that we were just, you know, mollycoddling them [pupils]

Other paraprofessionals such as the behaviour support worker cited below, also found it hard to articulate what learning mentors did, but nevertheless felt strongly that the work of each (paraprofessional) group was premised on entirely different approaches:

I guess they [learning mentors] deal with the more emotional and social aspects ... I don't really know how to define it in this school, ... and because we do the

sanction-based side of things they [pupils] see that But we couldn't ...do how they [mentors] work...it wouldn't work, it wouldn't!

Senior Leadership views also differed in terms of how and where learning mentors were most effective. In this example below, the bridging role, seen earlier in news media accounts, is identifiable as the school's head teacher sees learning mentors as having the ability to access places, people and contexts within the local community that other school staff could not:

...they [mentors] can quietly get in, without suit and tie ... Because I look official I think that there is [a need for] a tier that needs to be not in the face, but getting in there, finding out what those core issues, underlying things are...
(Head teacher).

However, other views within the senior leadership team saw learning mentors' primary strengths as their ability to deal with school-based incidents which potentially disrupted learning. At a middle-management level, understandings were developed from the perspective of their specific area of responsibility which had been organised around a clear academic and pastoral divide. Thus Progress Leaders saw the mentor's main task as getting pupils 'learning ready', whilst Year Managers cast mentors as their pastoral 'assistants'. This led to conflicting views regarding the mentor's work practices and confusion for the mentors themselves, factors which cast doubt on the role's supposed level of influence suggested by governmental prescriptions set out earlier.

The rise of the US community agent

The paper now turns to examine a historically helpful precedent of the US educational paraprofessional. It will show that, as in England, working-class women and men,

largely from Black and minority ethnic communities were also recruited into areas of 'human service' (Pearl and Reissman, 1965) traditionally dominated by professional groups.

Educational paraprofessionals are documented within schools in the USA from the 1960s onwards. The rationale for their introduction was due to an important but nevertheless neglected strand of Great Society legislation which recognized a shortage of professionals in the human service sector alongside a number of unemployed and unskilled poor arising from de-industrialisation (Dunning, 2018). The Economic Opportunity Act (1964) signalled a desire to implement alternative programmes that deviated from those already provided within conventional human service organisations (HSO) and the professionals who staffed them, both of which were criticised for their increasing disengagement from, and insensitivity to the poor (Katan and Etgar, 1998). For example, *New Careers for the Poor: the Nonprofessional in Human Service* (Pearl and Reissman, 1965) argued for projects which would simultaneously eradicate poverty and fill predicted labour shortages in health, social work and education. This book questioned the orthodoxy of the Johnson administration which had responded to deindustrialization with policies which emphasized training in preparation for employment, and framed poverty as the product of cultural failing rather than as an economic problem of resource allocation and wealth distribution.

The New Careers thesis proposed, first and foremost, a sufficient number of permanent jobs for all persons without work, but also an opportunity for the 'motivated and talented poor' to advance from entry-level jobs to 'any station available to the more favoured members of society' (Pearl and Reissman, 1965:2). Within education, it was argued that, like the English restructuring agenda, some of the functions of the teacher could be assumed by less-qualified personnel and just a few years later it was possible

to identify seven categories of secondary school paraprofessional (Stewart, 1971). One of these was the 'student supervision aide', detailed biographies of which provide a clear picture, bearing a striking resemblance to the English learning mentor in terms of who occupied the role, what their work entailed and the relationships with students that arose as a consequence. Many were from African-American backgrounds working in schools with a significant proportion of Black students but few or no Black teachers. Observations of their work document these aides as having high levels of rapport with students with one individual being described as 'a communicator between the Black students and the faculty' who counselled the students and 'reasoned with them' (Stewart, 1971:28). These particular paraprofessionals were also referred to as 'community agents', a description based not so much on their activities within the school, but on their links with parents and others beyond the school:

All community agents visited homes, day or night, to foster mutual understanding. They accompanied sick students home and saw that they were taken care of. They accompanied suspended students home and explained the school's actions to the parents. They sat in on conferences between parents and school officials (Stewart, 1971:28).

Also of note was their apparent capacity to serve as a 'bridge' between the middle-class institution (the school) and the low-income population:

Indigenous staff are [...] able to interpret community life and values to professionals...as well as serve as interpreters of the professionals, and role models for lower-income persons (Brager cited in Pearl and Reissman, 1965:77, my emphasis).

With an ability to:

... [S]huttle effectively between the school and the community helping each know more about the other (Saltzman, 1965:48, My emphasis).

This builds on the work of Gans (1962) who argued that ‘nonprofessionals’ should be people who in coming from a ‘lower-class culture’ have ‘successfully moved into a more stable way of life without rejecting their past’ and therefore had ‘... a considerable amount of empathy toward both old and new culture’ (cited in Pearl and Reissman, 1965:186). Another description of paraprofessionals as ‘Bridge agents’ further illustrates this premise on which the role was based (Field and Gatewood, 1976:185).

A more recent account (Lewis, 2003) similarly notes how teaching aides (the US equivalent to English TAs) are often called upon to be bridges and cultural brokers to the school community, based on an assumption that because they are similar in race, ethnicity, or class with pupils and their families, they can bridge a cultural gap between home and school.

Essentially, the ‘New Careers’ project argued for a fresh look at the status and functions of the nonprofessional worker. This it was argued would lead to a different perception of his/her potential contribution to the functioning of HSOs, a belief which was premised on their apparent ability to provide ‘qualitative and meaningful services to their clients’ (Katan and Etgar, 1998:128). Various arguments were presented to support the assertion that their ‘(peer) status attributes’ meant that they had similar if not the same life experiences as the clients of HSOs, so consequently had far less need to validate themselves to those they worked amongst, thereby allowing ‘considerable advantage over the professional from the outset’ (Pearl and Reissman, 1965:85). Such

workers were credited with knowing how to deal with problems from the ‘inside’; their style was also noted to be rather informal: ‘They will hug clients, accept – and repay – their hospitality, and share first-name designations ...’ (ibid). A report designed to look at manpower [sic] needs for professional and paraprofessional social work personnel, provides a further meta-commentary by which one can gauge the enactment of New Careers:

The human sectors of health, education and welfare have recently expanded to include new faces, old allies, and in some cases former consumers, the working and the non-working poor. The largest number of new faces is found in the work force of paraprofessionals ... those persons who tend to live in the areas of our cities needing the greatest improvement in human services, whether in the hospitals, schools or social agencies. Some of the paraprofessionals have high school diplomas, some do not. *Many are members of the Black Community, some are not. However, all of them have had personal experiences with poverty and the majority have come to recognize their extensive knowledge of their neighbourhood or community* (Austin, 1972:59, my emphasis).

The afore-argued ‘peer status attributes’ appear starkly in this extract, demonstrating the importance that was placed on the recruitment of people whose ethnicity and/or lived experience of growing up within a particular locality, whilst experiencing social and economic deprivation, were considered as enablers to ‘doing the job’.

Discussion

By adopting a purview of the respective policy climates and their associated objectives, it is possible to draw a number of parallels in relation to how educational

paraprofessionals have been understood and utilised across time and geographical contexts. The US Economic Opportunity Act (1964) gave rise to federal programmes such as Head Start (Gray and Francis, 2007) and provided the impetus for new initiatives like ‘New Careers for the Poor’ which sought to simultaneously resolve unemployment in post-industrial contexts and enable social mobility whilst eradicating poverty amongst the ‘indigenous poor’(Pearl and Reissman, 1965). Three decades later, New Labour’s policy agenda, premised on the identification and elimination of risk and the centrality of work gave rise to initiatives like Sure Start Children’s Centres which sought to provide volunteering and employment opportunities for local, working-class women as well as the creation of new paraprofessional roles in educational settings under *Excellence in Cities*. Initiatives such as these are based on the assumption that it is possible to ‘educate your way’ out of social problems; a view that did not go uncriticised either at the time (Bernstein, 1970), or in more recent arguments which point to the increasing “‘work of learning’” that takes place outside of school, and which requires a significant level of resources not available or achievable to many families (Ball, 2010:158).

Bridgers and Disruptors?

The creation of paraprofessional roles has been predicated on the notion that the socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds of those recruited into this work constitutes a type of organic skill-set. In the case of the US, the utilization of community agents (Stewart, 1971) as persons only ‘one step removed’ from the client, were seen as having the capacity to improve services (HARYOU cited in Pearl and Reissman, 1965: vii). In England, the atypical school-to-work transitions of many learning mentors were assumed to offer a form of empathetic support to marginalized young people that

teachers, in their newly restructured role driven by the rigours of performativity would struggle to deliver. Lewis (2003) shows that such assumptions are highly problematic in that even when issues like poverty are identified by frontline staff, they are then subsumed within cultural deficit views of communities. For example, Educational paraprofessionals in her study perceived mothers as having destructive relations with their children and lacking an ability to support their children's academic endeavours. Such constructions lead the author to conclude that far from being cultural brokers, these particular paraprofessional's relationships with parents were 'neither automatic nor bound by race, ethnicity, or class' (Lewis, 2003:106).

A further contradictory element of the Bridging function is the juxtaposing of an implied 'disruptor' function. For example, we saw earlier how learning mentors were viewed as paraprofessionals with the power to "question and disrupt institutional culture" (Cruddas, 2005:83). Similarly, those espousing New Careers projects spoke of the need to maintain professional / paraprofessional distinctions in working practices and that paraprofessionals should be rewarded for their 'deviance' in questioning the goals and objectives of the services they were being expected to deliver. The resulting strains which arose between professionals and paraprofessionals were presumed to be functional in maintaining the integrity and skills of the latter; but paraprofessionals soon found themselves experiencing 'psychic stretch' - a phenomenon occurring in two interconnected ways. First, people were selected and recruited for new roles based on questionable and spurious assumptions:

They [paraprofessionals] were recruited and hurriedly trained, if at all, and told to help both the agencies and their clients unscramble the web of human needs and misery. They were selected on the basis of their low income, if they had any

at all, the color of their skin, their political connections, and their presumed knowledge of the low-income community and the related agencies serving the community (Austin, 1972:59).

Then once working as an intermediary between organization and community, they were pulled by the demands of the agency and those of the community; so that returning to their neighbourhoods as salaried members of the establishment produced “immense personal strain” (Austin, 1972: *ibid*). This representation stands in contrast to earlier constructions of the paraprofessional moving smoothly and harmoniously between the domains of work and community, supplying each with increased wisdom and understanding of the other.

The realities of paraprofessional work

The experiences of the US community agent and the English learning mentor both demonstrate that such roles can inhabit a contested space, have an air of impermanency and are subject to the vagaries of whatever policy initiatives are in vogue. For example, at the time of author’s study (2013 – 2015) the school was experiencing the effects of a poor inspection outcome leading to reduced pupil numbers, staff redundancies and changes in personnel including fewer learning mentors and more (lower paid) behaviour workers. One learning mentor facing redundancy was eventually redeployed into a temporary, newly-devised paraprofessional role of Parental Advisor. Thus, a key finding was the existence of an ‘arena’ of pastoral care; a space which was ‘fought over’ by paraprofessionals competing for secure employment. In this and other studies (Bishop, 2017; Rhodes, 2006) learning mentors expressed frustration at a reluctance by schools to fund or enable career progression opportunities that were afforded to and expected of teachers. Thus, Cruddas’s earlier prediction of learning mentors as a

“fledgling profession” has not been realised and learning mentors continue to be a feminised and/or racialized and classed groups of workers who, with the combined impact of a decade of austerity, face an uncertain and precarious future.

Similar themes can be found within the US literature in terms of how when the New Careers project was taken up disingenuously, it led to a rapid turnover of personnel, ‘burning out’ and watered down training. Stewart (1971) reports that the work of student supervision aides was highly stressful and considerably more complex than the title suggested; as such, individuals occupying this role either transferred to another position in the school or resigned within the first year. Fears that paraprofessional positions provided jobs, but not careers, were realised by the mid-1970s as social, political and ideological changes signalled a more limited role for the state in the welfare arena, along with an erosion in public awareness of the problem of poverty and its readiness to cope with it (Katan and Etgar, 1998). With project funds disappearing, paraprofessionals started to experience the ‘last in, first out’ rule of hiring and firing, meaning that “... while they were hired as their brother’s keeper, they soon found that the realities of organizational life that required them to look out for themselves” (Austin, 1972:60). By this time one of the original proponents of the New Careers project argued that paraprofessionals were being used as ‘cheap labour’, ‘cosmetics’ (in terms of supplying ethnic authenticity to programs that remained dominated by traditional thinking), and as ‘pacifiers’ (Pearl, 1974: 266).

Conclusion

Although not a direct descendant, the English learning mentor can be understood as a structural correspondent of the US community agent. Each occupation, exemplifies how ideas are often recycled, leading to roles whose titles might suggest a progressive

rationale for their existence, but are actually designed to prop up or fill the gaps within more formal structures, serving the needs of the state as much as those purportedly in need to support. The connection between both approaches is that despite trying to ameliorate the problems of the poor and their perceived disengagement within institutions, both models of a paraprofessional workforce have failed because they cannot solve the real problem: that of educational systems existing within wider contexts of social inequality. In sum, educational paraprofessionals in both English and US contexts represent a role which is needed but at the same time marginalised, suggesting that western capitalist systems are applying a sticking plaster to a situation of its own making.

It is nevertheless possible to argue that there was some benefit to be had to relatively small numbers of both paraprofessionals and their recipients. A degree of social mobility was attainable to working class and BME men and women, particularly if, in the US they were employed in the public sector (Dunning, 2018); but in comparison to their white middle class professional counterparts this could be interpreted as ‘crumbs from the table’. Within the more recent English context, the presence of paraprofessional roles like learning mentors have arguably opened up a space for more flexible, person-centred interventions with the potential to operate beyond the gaze of performative discourses (Elliott, 2001). Furthermore, from the perspective of young people, a paraprofessional workforce offers a more diverse range of adults within a school and, for some, the opportunity to draw on shared biographies of ethnicity and social class which have led to an unexplored sense of disaffection and discrimination. Ultimately though, the inequality of employment conditions, the question of who is recruited and how their work is regulated are highly politicised in terms of power and control. Lower pay and precarious employment are real and lived consequences due to

the policy-driven nature of the work and the examples presented in this discussion reveal a state apparatus which uses the marginalized to regulate the marginalized. Then again, education has always been about social control as much as emancipation, at least for the poor.

ⁱ Job descriptions for these can be found at www.prospects.ac.uk/job-profiles

ⁱⁱ Exact numbers for each group are difficult to extrapolate as learning mentors come under the Teaching Assistant category and behaviour workers come under the category OSS (Other support staff) or BEHM (Behaviour Manager/Specialist)

ⁱⁱⁱ The GCSE (General Certificate in Education) is the academic qualification used to measure pupil attainment in all subjects in the final year of compulsory schooling.

^{iv} The CWDC was subsequently disbanded by the incoming Coalition Government in 2010

^v Foundation degrees became available in areas like teaching and learning as well as areas of support taking place outside of the classroom with an emphasis on utilising counselling skills, advice and guidance, careers and a knowledge of outside agencies for pupil referral if necessary.

^{vi} All names are pseudonyms

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Robin Simmons and Dr Ron Thompson for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

Bibliography

- Allison, E. (2008, November 4) A brave face: Despite deprivation and tragedy, the pupils of Gorton Mount primary find much to smile about, *The Guardian*
- Austin, M. (1972) The Professional and the Paraprofessional: Manpower and Educational Implications. In M. Austin, M., J. Lickson and P. Smith, (Eds) . *Continuing Education in Social Welfare: School Social Work and the Effective Use of Manpower* (Florida State University), pp. 58-65.
- Bailey, B. and Robson, J. (2004) Learning Support Workers in Further education in England: a hidden revolution? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 28 (4), 373- 393.
- Ball, S. J. Maguire, M. and Braun, A. (2012) *How Schools Do Policy: Policy Enactments in Secondary Schools* (Abingdon, Routledge).
- Ball, S. J. (2010) New class inequalities in education: Why education policy may be looking in the wrong place! Education policy, civil society and social class. *The International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 30 (3-4), 155-166
- Ball, S. J. (2008) *the education debate* (Bristol, Policy Press).
- Barber, M. (2007) *Instruction to Deliver: Fighting to Transform Britain's Public Services* (London, Methuen).
- Bell, D. (2003) Education Action Zones and Excellence in Cities, *Education Review*, 17 (1): 11-15.
- Bernstein, B. (1970) Education cannot compensate for society, *New Society*, Available at: <https://search-proquest-com.libaccess.hud.ac.uk/> (accessed 10 December 2019).
- Best, R., Jarvis, C. and Ribbins, P. (1980) *Perspectives on Pastoral Care* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd).
- Bishop, J. (2017) *Removing barriers to learning or picking up the pieces? An Ethnography of the Learning Mentor in a performance-based culture* (School of Education, University of Huddersfield. Unpublished Ph. D. thesis).
- Bishop, J. (2011) Learning Mentors eight years on – still removing barriers to learning? *Research in Education*, 85, 30-42.
- Bishop, J. and Sanderson, P. (2017) Marginalized, Misunderstood, and Relatively Unseen: Using Institutional Ethnography to Explore the Everyday Work of

-
- Learning Mentors In an English State Secondary School. In J. Reid and L, Russell (Eds) *Perspectives on and from Institutional Ethnography* (Bingley, Emerald Press), 125-145
- Brawley, E.A. (1974) The Nonprofessional and the Professional Culture: A dilemma for Social Work, *The Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 2 (2) 182-197.
- Calvert, M. (2009) From ‘pastoral care’ to ‘care’: meanings and practices, *Pastoral Care in Education*, 27 (4), 267–277.
- Colley, H. and Guery, F. (2015) Understanding new hybrid professions: Bourdieu, illusion and the case of public service interpreters, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 45 (1): 113-131.
- Colley, H. (2003) Engagement Mentoring for ‘Disaffected’ Youth: a new model of mentoring for social inclusion, *British Educational Research Journal*, 29 (4): 521-542.
- Cruddas, L. (2005) *Learning mentors in school: Policy and practice* (Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books).
- Davies, S, and Thurston, M. (2005) Establishing a Learning Mentor Service within a Cluster of Primary Schools: Learning from Evaluation, *Pastoral Care*, September, 37-43.
- Department for Education (2015) *Statistical First Release: School Workforce in England*
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/440577/Text_SFR21-2015.pdf (accessed 20 September, 2019).
- Department for Education and Employment (1997) *Excellence in Schools*. White Paper, (London: DfEE).
- Department for Education and Skills (2001a) *Schools achieving success*. Cm 5230, TSO.
- Department for Education and Skills (2001b) *Good Practice Guidelines for Learning Mentors*, (Nottingham: DfES).
- Department for Education and Skills (2005) *Supporting the new agenda for children’s services and schools: the role of learning mentors and co-ordinators* (Nottingham: DfES).
- Dunning, C. (2018) New Careers for the Poor: Human Services and the Post-Industrial City, *Journal of Urban History*, 44 (4), 669-690.

-
- Edmund, N. and Price, M. (2009) Workforce re-modelling and pastoral care in schools: a diversification of roles or a de-professionalisation of functions? *Pastoral Care in Education*, 27 (4), 301-311.
- Elliott, J. (2001) Characteristics of performative cultures. In D. Gleeson and C. Husbands (Eds) *The Performing School: Managing, Teaching and Learning in a Performance Culture* (Routledge Falmer), 192-209.
- Evetts, J. (2011) A new professionalism? Challenges and opportunities, *Current Sociology*, 59 (4) 406-422
- Field, H. and Gatewood, R. (1976) The Paraprofessional and the Organization: Some Problems of Mutual Adjustment, *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, December, 181- 185.
- Gans, H. (1962) *The urban villagers: group and class in the life of Italian- Americans* (London, Free Press).
- Garner, R. (2013) *Must do better: 200 secondary schools on Government 'hit list' after failing to reach target for GCSE passes*. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk> (accessed 12 November 2013).
- Gillies, V. (2016) *Pushed to the Edge: Inclusion and behaviour support in schools* (Bristol, Policy Press).
- Gray, R. and Francis, E. (2007) The implications of US experiences with early childhood interventions for the UK Sure Start Programme, *Child: care, health and development*, 33 (6), 655 - 663
- Harris, A. and Allen, T. (2009) Ensuring every child matters: issues and implications for school leadership, *School Leadership & Management* 29 (4), 337-352.
- Hayward, A. (2006) *Making Inclusion Happen: A practical guide* (London, Paul Chapman Publishing).
- Jeffrey, B. and Troman, G. (2012) *Performativity In UK Education* (Gloucestershire, E&E Publishing).
- Jewell, S. (2010) *Shaping the future: On the job: Meet the workers*. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk> (accessed 9 March 2012).
- Jones, K., Doveston, M. and Rose, R. (2009) The motivations of mentors: promoting relationships, supporting pupils, engaging with communities. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 27 (1), 41-51.

-
- Katan, J. and Etgar, T. (1998) "New Careers for the Poor": A Review of the Career of an Innovative Idea, *Social Security*, 5, 127-141.
- Kerry, C. (2002) Support staff as mentors: a case study of innovation. *Education Today*, 52 (3), 3-12.
- Kirkman S (2004) *A shortfall in the cure-all?* Available at: <http://www.tes.co.uk> (accessed 8 January 2010].
- Klein, M. (2016) Educational Expansion, Occupational Closure and the Relation between Educational Attainment and Occupational Prestige over Time. *Sociology*, 50(1) 3– 23.
- Lee, C. (2011) *The complete guide to behaviour for teaching assistants and support staff* (London, Sage Publications).
- Lewis, K. C. (2004) Instructional Aides: Colleagues or Cultural Brokers? *The School Community Journal*, 14 (1), 91-111.
- Mansaray, A. (2006) Liminality and in/exclusion: exploring the work of teaching assistants, *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 14 (2), 171-187.
- Martin, D. (2016) *Whatever Happened to Extended Schools?* (London, UCL Institute of Education Press).
- McCann, L., Granter, E., Hyde, P. and Hassard, J. (2013) Still Blue-Collar after all these Years? An Ethnography of the Professionalization of Emergency Ambulance Work, *Journal of Management Studies*, 50 (5), 750-776.
- Morrison, N. (2008) *Catch them when they fall*. Available at: <http://www.tes.co.uk> (accessed 9 March 2012).
- Mortimore, P. (2013) *Education Under Siege: Why there is a better alternative*, (Bristol, Policy Press).
- Odih, P. (2002) Mentors and Role Models: masculinity and the educational 'underachievement' of young Afro-Caribbean males, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 5 (1), 91-105.
- O'Grady, C. (2006) *What's my job... lead learning mentor, Westminster*. Available at: <http://www.tes.co.uk> (accessed 9 March 2012).
- Ozga, J. (1995) Deskillling a profession: Professionalism, de-professionalisation and the new managerialism, in: H. Busher & R. Saran (Eds) *Managing teachers as professionals in schools* (London, Kogan Page).

-
- Pearl, A. (1974) Paraprofessionals and Social Change, *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 53, (4) 264-268
- Pearl, A. and Reissman, F. (1965) *New Careers for the Poor* (New York, The Free Press).
- Philip, K. (2003) Youth mentoring: the American Dream comes to the UK? *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 31 (1), 101-112.
- Piper, H. and Piper, J. (2000) Disaffected Young People as the problem. Mentoring as the solution. Education and Work as the goal., *Journal of Education and Work*, 13 (1),77-94.
- Power, S. (1996) *The Pastoral and the Academic: Conflict and Contradiction in the Curriculum* (London, Cassell).
- Purdy, N. (2013) *Pastoral Care 11-16: A Critical Introduction* (London, Bloomsbury Academic).
- Reis Monteiro, A. (2015) *The Teaching Profession: Present and Future* (Lisbon, Springer).
- Robson, J. (2008) Changes in post-compulsory education and training in England: Emotional and psychic response to encounters with learning support, *British Journal of Education Studies*, 56 (32), 304-322.
- Rhodes, C. (2006) The impact of leadership and management on the construction of professional identity in school learning mentors, *Educational Studies*, 32 (2), 157-169.
- Saltzman, H. (1965) The Poor and the Schools. In A. Pearl and F. Reissman (Eds) *New Careers for the Poor*, (New York, The Free Press), 38 – 54.
- Simmons, R. (2017) Mrs Thatcher's first flourish: organic change, policy chaos and the fate of the colleges of education, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 65 (3), 353-368,
- Stanfield, R.E. (1973) *The Uses of Paraprofessionals in the Delivery of Manpower and Social Services through Public Service Employment: The Vermont Experience* (Vermont Department of Employment Security).
- Stephenson, C. (2006) *Case Study: the learning mentor*. Available at <http://www.tes.co.uk> (accessed: 15 March 2012).
- Stewart, B. (1971) *The Role of Secondary School Para-Professionals*, (Oregon School Study Council).

Stoney, S. (2005) Hopeful signs in our inner cities. Available at: <http://www.tes.co.uk>
(accessed: 26 June 2006).