

The Peer Education Project to improve mental health literacy in secondary school students in England: a qualitative realist evaluation

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Background

Worsening adolescent mental health and exacerbated health inequalities post COVID-19 calls for universal preventative strategies. The Mental Health Foundation's school-based Peer Education Project seeks to improve students' mental health literacy through 'Peer Educators' (aged 14-18) teaching 'Peer Learners' (aged 11-13) to recognise good and bad mental health, identify risk and protective factors, and seek help accordingly. While previous pre-post quantitative assessments have found the intervention to be effective, this realist evaluation aimed to qualitatively uncover the theory of change, exploring how the mechanisms played out in different contexts to achieve the desired outcomes.

Methods

Our initial programme theory was developed following expert stakeholder consultation and reviewing the literature. We divided mechanisms into 'resources' and 'reasoning' to explain how the intervention components (resources), experienced within specific contexts, engendered responses in the participants (reasoning), to produce observable outcomes. Data collected from six purposively-recruited schools in England comprised staff interviews (n=11), student focus groups (n=15) and observations (n=5). Deductive and inductive analysis using NVivo informed multiple causal statements represented as 'context-mechanism-outcome configurations' (CMOCs) to test and refine the programme theory.

Findings

We created several distinct CMOCs. For example, in 'Learners' accustomed to didactic teaching methods (context), conversing with 'Educators' possessing similar life experience (mechanism resource), endorsed and destigmatised help-seeking behaviour (mechanism reasoning) and facilitated a realisation that seeking help was appropriate and acceptable (outcome). Other mechanisms included: 'Learners' perceiving the information as tailored and relevant, 'Educators' feeling empowered, and a cultural shift percolating across the school.

Interpretation

Our findings reveal how peer education can work to improve mental health literacy, which will inform changes to the intervention to maximise its effectiveness in different operational contexts. Future research could test our theory of change in a randomised controlled trial, and also examine impacts on inequalities in a more diverse sample.

Declarations

Conflict of interest: Ms. Ruth Simmonds is employed by the Mental Health Foundation, serving as the research lead for the Peer Education Project. The other authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Contributors: JK and ML were responsible for study conceptualisation and funding acquisition, JK, ML and EW planned the study design and methodological approach, ELC and EW led data collection, ELC and SD conducted the formal data analysis and JK, ML and AER advised ELC and SD on the analysis. ELC and SD have directly accessed and verified the underlying data reported in the manuscript. ELC led the writing (original draft) and all authors provided input to ELC on the reviews and edits of the manuscript. All authors have seen and approved the submitted version of this manuscript.

We confirm that the paper has not been submitted to another journal, and has not been published in whole or in part elsewhere previously.

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Ethical approval: This study was approved by the University of Lancaster's Faculty of Health and Medicine Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: FHMREC19105).