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'A Presence in the Community': Developing Innovative Practice through Realist Evaluation of Widening Participation in West Yorkshire

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Abstract This paper examines the role realist evaluation can play in supporting innovative practice in widening participation (WP) activity. Based on the Go Higher West Yorkshire Uni Connect project (formerly the National Collaborative Outreach Programme, or NCOP) – a new model of WP provision has been developed to support learners in spatially disadvantaged communities where access-to-HE is nationally less than average. It offers specific examples of innovative practice developing a locally tailored approach to WP activities based on community contexts. A realist evaluation framework is utilised to iteratively assess WP activity through subsequent development and modification of relevant programme theory. The article contributes to literature through offering a reflexive account of how realist evaluation can be utilised in terms of Widening Participation outreach.

Key words Realist Evaluation; Innovative Practice; Widening Participation; Social Research Methods, Access-to-HE

Introduction

In the UK, access to Higher Education (HE) continues to be deeply socially stratified (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016), resulting in wider social inequality throughout the life-course (Savage et al, 2013). This has led the UK government to annually spend £833.5 million on Widening Participation (WP) programmes (Smith and Hubble, 2018) to support young people to enter HE and improve life-chances. Modern WP looks to create different

types of activities that support learners throughout their educational trajectories (such as careers focused events, HE-finance events and one-to-one mentoring). Yet, the delivery of community focused WP activity is a relatively new development in the UK (IntoUniversity, 2017). This has been prompted by greater understanding regarding existent 'gaps' in HE participation that can be observed at the 'ward' level (UniConnect, 2020). Working with communities to support learners (and their families) has been found to create effective WP that encourages access-to-HE (Scull and Cuthill, 2010). Such approaches consider different contexts – helping elucidate how WP is working in distinct community spaces (Lumb and Roberts, 2017: 22). Furthermore, by positioning WP in the community, there is increased scope for embedded 'sense of place' (Cresswell, 2009). Pretty et al. (2003: 274) argue that 'sense of place' "emerges from involvement between people, and between people and place". By tapping into the social relations that learners inhabit daily, it has been found that WP has the potential to be transformative in the support it offers learners to access HE (Scull and Cuthill, 2010).

In 2017, Go Higher West Yorkshire (GHWY) began a Realist Evaluation (RE) of Widening Participation in Northern England (in Bradford, Leeds and Wakefield). The rationale was to identify a new model to evaluate the efficacy of widening participation activity designed to help disadvantaged students to enter Higher Education – especially in areas where access-to-HE is lower than the UK national average (OfS, 2019). Realist Evaluation provides a theory-driven approach to analysing social programmes, and was chosen due to its focus on explaining social processes (Pawson and Tilley, 1997), and its capacity to elucidate the role of context (making it amenable to analyse WP activity in different communities). Furthermore, RE it allows high quality innovative everyday-evaluation practice to be identified and applied (Pawson and Tilley, 1997).

This paper provides a brief account on the RE of WP with an explicit focus on the community – a key strand of the GHWY approach. To engage with different communities, WP has been moved to the community space

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through the introduction of HEPs (Higher Education Providers) who facilitate WP community outreach. We draw on several HEP RE qualitative interviews to demonstrate how innovative practice can be approached in different community spaces. In addition, the paper contributes to WP evaluation literature through accentuating the advantages of the RE approach. We hope to provide a reflexive account to support other evaluators and researchers to support other innovative evaluation-based practice.

The Go Higher West Yorkshire Partnership

The GHWY RE framework has several overall aims focused on the generation of "robust evidence of what works, in what contexts and why, which can inform future outreach delivery and policy", and "to develop models of good practice in both the evaluation and delivery of outreach activity at both local and national level" (GHWY, 2018: 4). As part of the Uni Connect (formerly NCOP), it covers three areas in West Yorkshire – Wakefield, Leeds and Bradford – all with longstanding practices in WP provision and support. The Uni Connect initiative aims to build on pre-existing partnerships to "deliver outreach programmes to young people in years 9 to 13" (aged between 13 and 18 in schools and colleges), and has a specific focus on areas "where higher education participation is lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who live there" (OfS, 2019). Specifically, the NCOP initiative has sought to embed more regionally organised consortia to "strengthen the evidence base on the impact of outreach initiatives by fostering a step-change and embedding monitoring and evaluation within outreach activity at the local and national level" (Tazzyman et al, 2018: 14).

Although such partnerships provide a centre for the organisation and provision of WP activity, they also generate more localised and community driven approaches to WP throughout the UK (Formby, Basham and Woodhouse, forthcoming; IntoUniversity, 2017). Understanding the role of community 'needs', 'context', 'place' and 'identity' – and how such factors frame HE participation regarding learners and their families – has become

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a pertinent aspect of WP evaluation (Harrison, 2018). Further, how learner choice plays out regarding HE is "woven into regional cultural and economic histories" of the local community – and there are further complications for WP delivery as "universities are also bound up in specific cultural and economic regional histories" (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018: 374). For GHWY, the need to engage with the local community has formed a central aspect of the Uni Connect delivery and RE. A delivery model that has 'buy-in' from the community – where stakeholders feel they are contributing to WP alongside schools and colleges (Scull and Cuthill, 2010; IntoUniversity, 2017) enhances existent WP activity and provision. In 2015/16, HEFCE analysis indicated that there were 27 wards in West Yorkshire that had lower than expected HE participation and were quantified as Polar 3 Q1 'Low Participation Neighbourhoods' (HEFCE, 2016). These wards were concentrated across Leeds, Bradford and Wakefield and have formulated the core focus of GHWY Uni Connect activity. There is, however, considerable sociocultural diversity throughout these wards and this has engendered different types of WP activity.

In Leeds, the proportion of individuals with HE qualifications is at 34% yet still below the England national average (State of the District, 2019: 22). Many of these target wards were impacted by forms of urban and social deprivation as Leeds has ranked the 3rd most income-deprived district in England in 2015 (Bradford City Council, 2017). At ward level, communities vary significantly: some wards are characterised by newly arrived migrant families who have little experience of the UK education system. Others have a combination of longer-established White and Asian communities with high levels of unemployment and lower level skills. Key barriers within these wards include difficulties in providing support for learners due to shift work. Local schools report that their students are often rooted to their local community and there is a reluctance to travel to access Higher Education (GHWY, 2016).

In Wakefield "14% of 15-year-old pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) entered higher education (HE) by the age of 19" in 2016/17 (State of the

District, 2019: 5). Whilst the number of those with level 4+ qualifications (e.g. an undergraduate degree) was at 28% – 10% below the England average at 38% (State of the District, 2019: 22). Our own internal analysis at ward level found that partner Higher Education providers, schools and academies emphasise lowered expectations regarding HE as well adverse wider socio-economic conditions in the context of declining mining/manufacturing industries. Further, our analysis pointed to a reluctance amongst learners to travel away to study, with many preferring to study near home (and Wakefield more broadly). In many of the target wards, schools report high numbers of students that work alongside their studies, spend less time on co-curricular activities and who lack confidence and communication skills (GHWY, 2016).

Bradford also had several target wards similarly characterised by social deprivation. Yet, there are also significant variations – 27% of the population live in areas classified as the 10%-most-deprived-areas, whilst 6% of the population live in the 10%-least-deprived-areas in England (Bradford City Council, 2017: 1). 26.8% of people have a degree in Bradford – over 10% less than the national average (Bradford City Council, 2017: 4), similar to the City of Wakefield. Our own analysis noted that wards characterised by relatively high levels of unemployment, alongside significant proportions of young JSA claimants and NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training). More specifically, our internal consultation emphasised the importance of parental influence on learners in Bradford, and a divergence of attitudes to Higher Education between British-Asian, and White families (GHWY, 2016).

At more local levels, differences in community context shape how learners perceive HE. Hinton (2011) notes the importance of feelings of 'belonging' to a community space and how this affects learners capacity to frame what is 'possible' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). More recent empirical work points towards the importance of beginning with learner sociocultural context through the examination of a 'possible self' (Harrison, 2018: 5) – and how HE is perceived by learners in their future trajectory. Other spatial

inequalities include a lack of knowledge of HE (Brooks, 2003), relative spatial mobility (Christie, 2007), and 'contingent choosing' whereby learners feel that by participating in HE they are differentiating themselves from their family and wider community (Ball et al, 2002: 354).

At the beginning of the GHWY evaluation of its Uni Connect delivery, nine 'programme theories' were created through consultation with staff and practitioners (as well as an examination of previous literature) to understand assumptions about how WP programmes work. A programme theory is defined as a statement that shows "how programme activities are understood to cause (or contribute to) outcomes and impacts" (Westhorp, 2014: 4). One of our specific programme theories was to build a model of practice that included engagement with local communities in West Yorkshire:

> *Reaching into a young person's community will change culture and support a young person to take the step into Higher Education.*

For GHWY, establishing inclusive models in the community is central, as we are able to tap into the 'social capital' of the community space – treating it as a social environment where "potential resources…are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986: 248). Based on this programme theory, a series of community based initiatives engaged individuals in target wards. This article presents a Realist Evaluation of this work, through focus on the experiences of Uni Connect staff in their endeavours to bring HE discourse into diverse community settings across West Yorkshire. More traditionally, these Outreach Officers (based in each of our Higher Education Partners, but working collaboratively to represent GHWY and deliver Uni Connect) have been utilised in more traditional school-liaison roles, delivering WP outreach in the context of educational institutions. They develop and deliver a diverse range of WP activity – such as mentoring or HE visits – with the specific aim to increase HE participation for learners in target wards (OfS, 2018: 13). Yet, by positioning Outreach Officers in the community – we

have encouraged them to establish WP activity that is more tailored to specific community spaces. This helps re-configure WP to be outward facing, and better positioned to support learners and their families in the context of their own communities (Scull and Cuthill, 2010). The types of outreach activity they deliver are tailored to the needs of the young people and communities in which they operate. Yet, some prominent examples include setting up and running informal activities explicitly positioned as separate to formal school or college settings, such as creative/art focused projects; individual interventions (e.g. one-to-one mentoring); liaison with local community groups (to engage with parents and carers), setting up information stalls in local community spaces and working with local youth groups.

The different delivery model(s) that emerge from this work reveal the benefits and challenges of more context-based WP. In turn, nuanced accounts that explain how, why, and in what circumstances Uni Connect outreach activity works emerge. This pushes beyond the one-size-fits-all 'what works' approaches that do not consider how context(s) shape WP activity efficacy. As such, GHWY has utilised RE as an innovative method to evaluate WP and find new ways of supporting young people, parents/carers, schools, colleges and wider communities in which they work.

What is a Realist Evaluation Approach to WP?

RE provides an innovative approach to evaluating WP activity, as it goes beyond 'what works' – instead seeking to uncover underlying explanations behind different outcomes. Realist enquiry asks not only whether interventions are effective or not, but also (and more importantly for locally tailored outreach), moves us to consideration of *how*, *why* and the *circumstances* WP programmes or activities work. The UK government has explicitly questioned the efficacy of widening participation activity as well as the utilisation of contemporary WP evaluation methodology (DoE, 2019). This highlights the importance of both finding effective WP activity that promotes access-to-HE for disadvantaged students (Gorard, 2006), and

robust evaluation approaches that exemplifies best practice in the WP sector. In particular, Harrison (2019) notes that although modern WP is often well-intentioned – some measures have become 'deadweight' (an assumption that activities lead to associative and positive outcomes), and stresses that "we need evaluations that focus [on] *changes* not *outcomes*" (Harrison, 2019).

RE subscribes to a general causational model – where underlying and *unseen* mechanisms operate in pre-existing contexts – in turn explaining why outcomes are differentiated. In doing so, it recognises that attempting to establish direct causal relationships between intervention and impact is complex – making it an ideal approach for WP evaluators who are attempting to understand unseen factors that limit HE engagement. An example of the RE approach is the introduction of WP mentoring schemes for learners that qualify for WP criteria (resource), with the purpose of assessing how this shifts the practice of WP outreach workers through increased emphasis on one-to-one work (reasoning) – together creating what is termed a 'programme mechanism'. Yet, crucially programme mechanisms differ in relation to contexts in which they operate. In this instance, the introduction of a mentoring scheme will have substantial different outcomes because of wider contextual influences – e.g. differences in the training of staff or different organisational arrangements. Indeed, it is this focus on context(s) that allows RE to be extensively effective in analysing a wide range of WP programmes – especially in the community space. Pawson (2018: 212) notes how contexts in RE include 'locations' (spatial and geographical characteristics), 'individuals' (e.g. training), 'interrelationships', 'institutional arrangements' (e.g. organisational arrangements) and the wider infrastructure (e.g. wider social, economic and cultural contexts). Accounting for contexts can elucidate what is happening with WP in community settings.

Case Study – Reaching into Learner's Communities

Reaching into learner communities to encourage learners to enter HE has been a key strand of GHWY's Uni Connect delivery model. This has entailed the development of several community partnerships to ensure the delivery of high-quality WP throughout different areas of Leeds, Bradford and Calderdale, and Wakefield. Most specifically, Outreach Officers were tasked with engaging learners, their families, and other influencers in different community contexts. The aim was to tailor support based on specific needs.

This raised challenges as Outreach Officers began to engage with unfamiliar territory: *'I did find it quite difficult and I was quite uncomfortable with it'* (Outreach Officer based in Leeds) – emphasising the difficulties that come with reaching into community spaces. Yet, over time, confidence increased and the value of a community-driven approach to WP became clearer, with the majority of Officers emphasising *'I'll certainly be looking to maintain a community presence and increase […] I think it's important, I think it's valuable'* (HEP based in Wakefield). Specifically, staff responded to 'community work' through taking account of geographical location – and this influenced how they approached individual learners in the community space. Inner-city areas in Leeds and Bradford had a significant presence of community 'hubs' (such as faith groups and existent networks), which Outreach Officers could utilise to reach out to learners and their parents/carers. One commented that: *'especially in Leeds and Bradford it's been really easy to get into the faith groups'* (Outreach Officer based in Leeds and Bradford). Whereas in Wakefield – where there were fewer community 'hubs' – Officers noted the difficulties in building relationships:

> *'Wakefield I think is the only city in the whole of the UK that doesn't have a University […] whereas in Leeds you'd be working with people who think that university's not for them but the Parkinson building is visible, it's a presence in the community* (HEP based in Wakefield).

Other aspects that problematized engagement in Wakefield included transport and geographical isolation. For learners in more rural and ex-mining communities, travelling outside local contexts was uncommon, partly because local transport was not as extensive as other areas (such as

Bradford or Leeds), but also because of deeper social and psychological barriers:

> *The actual physical distance between Featherstone and the city centre […] you're working with people who've never left Featherstone, let alone Wakefield.* (Outreach Officer based in Wakefield)

Themes of 'isolation' more broadly – and specifically, a sense of distance between HE and the local culture was present in other communities, although this manifested differently. In Wakefield, Outreach Officers encountered scepticism about the nature of HE itself (and educational institutions more broadly) – '*it is a bit like, 'well, who are you coming in here, we're a mining community'* (Outreach Officer based in Wakefield).

In Leeds and Bradford communities, staff found that many families were struggling to meet basic needs, and were particularly vulnerable. This often meant that thoughts of HE were far from people's minds:

> *It's a struggle to have money or get food or they've got to walk miles to get to school and talking about higher education is just too far out of their imagination* (Outreach Officer based in Leeds, referring to child refugees).

In these contexts, Outreach Officers sought to build innovative practice through narrowing such 'distance', and establishing a 'sense of place' (Cresswell, 2009) within communities. In doing so, they shifted provision to, build 'trust', meet need, and develop new forms of identification. In particular, they approached community mentors and other role models, to avoid being seen as 'outsiders' – especially as parents cited a lack of role-models from their ethnic/cultural background: '*I think the way they worded it is it's good to be able to look at somebody as if you're looking in a mirror'* (Outreach Officer based in Leeds). In all community contexts, staff found individuals already positioned in the community – such as student ambassadors, mentors or recent graduates – were integral in the facilitation of effective and innovative WP (Scull and Cuthill, 2010). Outreach Officers also considered the community context in their approach to this work. This in turn, allowed room to create innovative WP activities. For example, the 'Roving Reporters' project recognised the importance of the local Rugby

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League club to the identity of members of the Featherstone Community. Uni Connect Outreach Officers provided linked young people from Featherstone Academy with staff and supporters of Featherstone Rovers. Support from Higher Education Partners to develop the young peoples' confidence, journalistic skills equipped them to undertake this project that celebrated their own community whilst also introducing conversations about Higher Education (GHWY, 2020a). Another project called 'My Holmewood' sought to change perspectives about the 'estate' with support from local universities through exhibiting learner's photography community life and provide information about photography-based careers (GHWY, 2020b). Similarly 'Our Ovenden' aimed to build on community identity more explicitly through producing books on the local area and enabling learners to gain new skills, careers and information about HE (GHWY, 2020c).

The establishment of 'trust' and 'sense of place' (Cresswell, 2009) also ensured an effective platform for Officers to innovate WP in different ways. They highlighted the importance of 'flexibility' to reach isolated parts of the community, and found that working in the community helped reach learners often put off by formal 'school' settings – with informal activities often more effective. Specifically, activities that were creative (e.g. a 'slime' play activity with young people and their families) helped 'pave the way' for more serious conversations about HE choices and future trajectory. The importance of 'informality' was continuously reinforced as a mechanism to build relationships:

> *Sometimes you can have an outrageous activity…however that can start initiating conversations you need to have and sometimes in the community if you go in with this full-on HE session about student finance, people are not going to turn up* (Outreach Officer based in Leeds).

The importance of 'informal relationships' was also stressed for individualised interventions (e.g. one-to-one mentoring), especially in terms of building trust with learners:

> *Its quality…not just quantity […] just by having these smaller groups or just those one-to-one relationships you can really build up a rapport* (Outreach Officer based in Wakefield).

In these communities, the RE points towards an outreach model that entails respecting community; approaching learners in their own community space; introducing community-related WP activity; identifying role-models; promoting informal activities (not exclusively focused on WP or HE); and building relationships and trust. By doing so, community outreach can achieve positive outcomes regarding access to HE participation, and support learners more broadly.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has aimed to show the advantages of using RE methodologies in the evaluation of WP – as well as indicating why they are becoming pertinent and prevalent in the evaluation of WP more broadly (Crockford et al, 2018; Formby, Basham and Woodhouse, forthcoming; Lumb and Roberts, 2017). RE allows for theorisation of causation and practice that "operate at depth within our social practices to produce the intended and unintended 'outcomes' observed in the various contexts of our practice" (Lumb and Roberts, 2017: 22). In the case of community outreach WP activity, we show the importance of engaging the community space and the situated circumstances where WP works. This allows for in-depth and nuanced explanations about the efficacy of WP. In addition, this helps avoid generalised one-size-fits-all approaches that do not account for different contexts (Lumb and Roberts, 2017; Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Accessing 'sense of place' (Creswell, 2009) of local communities allows WP to open dialogues that break traditional power dynamics and re-configure relationships between HE and the community.

Furthermore, the RE approach sits well with process-driven evaluations as insight gleaned from relevant evaluations can both be utilised in the generation of new programme theories and innovative forms of WP practice for Outreach Officers to engage with. The exploratory work of the Outreach Officers – and especially the insights they developed about the importance of building relationships with community groups as an entry point for this work – lead to the development of a substantive Community Grants scheme, which is now in its second year (GHWY, 2019). Similarly our

enhanced understandings of the importance of role models and identification in engaging hard-to-access groups have influenced future delivery models. Specifically, understanding what makes a 'role model' in different community contexts and the potential for these individuals to bridge cultures, are areas we intend to explore further in our future evaluations of community outreach. Most importantly, our RE has accentuated the importance of community-driven, innovative WP practice. To make transformative change, modern WP must create presence in the community space.

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