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The Potential of Peer Guidance to Empower Migrants for Employment

Satu Heimo
Tampere University, Finland (satu.heimo@tuni.fi)

Katriina Tapanila
Tampere University, Finland (katriina.tapanila@tuni.fi)

Anna Ojapelto
Tampere University, Finland (anna.ojapelto@tuni.fi)

Anja Heikkinen
Tampere University, Finland (anja.heikkinen@tuni.fi)

Abstract

Peerness is a common approach to learning, especially in Nordic adult education, but is increasingly adopted by European Union (EU)-funded projects that aim to improve migrants' employability. This article discusses action research that evaluated an ESF-funded project, run by a Finnish popular adult education association in collaboration with vocational adult education institutes, NGOs, and a trade union. The project trained migrants to become peer group guides and empower migrant-background participants for employment. The training prepared guides to become experiential experts, but increased the distance between the participants and themselves. The guidance could even strengthen the otherness of participants when the peerness was based solely on sharing a migrant background. Voluntary peer guidance may reinforce this separation, but dependence on ESF funding also shapes mainstream adult education; therefore, the empowerment of migrants should build on collaboration between experiential experts and guidance professionals as part of the regular adult education system.

Keywords: Adult education policy; employability; empowerment; migrants; peerness

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Employability of migrants as adult education policy

In Europe, the educational integration of migrant-background young people and adults mainly focuses on improving their employability (Darvas, Wolff, Chiacchio, Efstathiou, & Goncalves Raposo, 2018). At the European Union (EU) and member state level, this is commonly governed by social and employment, rather than education, policies. The EU Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion is the main agency administering financial support for the education and training of migrants (European Commission [EC], 2020a) and one of its main instruments is the European Social Fund (ESF), which has been promoting employment and labour programmes in Europe since 1957. These programmes target groups currently identified as most in need, such as the unemployed, young people, the elderly, women, and/or migrants. The ESF focuses on equality, the prevention of social exclusion, participation, improving competencies, and developing new structures for employment markets (EC, 2020b).

In their declarations on lifelong learning, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2016, p. 6–8) and the EC (2000, p. 3, 5) have outlined the future of European adult education, but the goals seemed to be contradictory: adult education should aim to respond to the unique learning needs of people and promote their lifelong freedom to participate in education, but concurrently it should develop adaptive competencies among learners for labour market participation and support their active citizenship through employment. Political documents make normative assumptions about citizens—how they should be or what they should become—as members of European society (Fejes, 2019, p. 234–235).

The EU considers the ESF to be the most important vehicle for investing in human capital and, in some European countries, as much as 90 per cent of the labour force policy expenses, primarily relating to competitive projects, are covered by ESF funding (EC, 2016). In Finland, EU funding, especially through the ESF, has become the most important driver for the integration of adult migrants. Of over 2,100 ESF-funded projects during 2014–2020, directed by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, which is mainly responsible for integration and employment measures in Finland, 270 directly promote the integration and employment of migrants. The funding for each project ranges from tens of thousands to four million euros (European Regional Development Fund, 2020). By contrast, funding through the state budget for promoting migrants' integration and employment is, in total, roughly a few million euros annually (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2016).

ESF funding is encouraging a growing number of NGOs, especially popular adult education organisations, to seek justification and funding for their activities. When welfare services are increasingly transferred from the public to the private and voluntary sectors, popular adult education organisations compete in integration project markets, due to their traditional expertise in peer learning and education. However, little research has considered the impact of adult education concepts in empowering migrants for employment or in shaping the conceptions and policies of adult education.

In this article, we discuss the findings of a follow-up evaluation research project, which the authors carried out as a part of an ESF-funded project that aimed to find an effective model for supporting the employability of migrants. The project applied the idea of empowerment through *peerness*, training migrants to become volunteer peer group guides for other (long-term unemployed) migrants. The project was run by a Finnish adult education association, in collaboration with vocational adult education institutes, NGOs, and a trade union. The follow-up evaluation research used an action research approach, collecting 2018–2019 data through participant observation, interviews, and self-

evaluations. While the research provided comprehensive feedback and information for the project consortium, in this article we focus on scrutinising the potential of peer group guidance to empower migrants for employment, based on the research findings. Before describing the research setting and discussing the findings, we briefly examine the concepts of peerness and empowerment in the context of the project.

Peerness as a voluntary adult education service

At the start of the project, its underpinning concepts were not explicitly defined by the project partners. Since the project was coordinated by a popular adult education organisation, it was assumed that the concepts would be dominated by the Finnish adult education tradition. However, with partners from vocational adult education, trade unions, employment offices, and worksites responding to the ESF call, it was likely that the perceptions of peerness, peer groups, and volunteerism would be diverse.

In the tradition of Finnish and Nordic popular adult education (literally free edification-work), peerness built on the idea of independent and self-motivated (volunteer) collective self-education. The educational aim was to develop dialogical and equitable relationships (peerness) between the participants (e.g. Pätäri, Teräsahde, Harju, Manninen & Heikkinen, 2019) and emphasise self-motivation, mutual mobilisation, and democratic collaboration between adult learners (Nordhaug, 1986; Pätäri et al., 2019).

Peerness and volunteerism have gained popularity due to the global neoliberal shift from public to private and voluntary social, health, and education services. While this has been justified as an alternative to the hierarchical and bureaucratic public services, it is also considered necessary because of the high cost of public services (Nylund, 2000), with social innovations increasingly being expected to replace inefficient and expensive public services (Cullen, 2017). The definitions, goals, and priorities of voluntary activity usually reflect economic factors, such as unemployment; for example, in Finland, the massive unemployment of the 1990s resulted in a host of voluntary and peer support groups and associations emerging to support the unemployed (Nylund, 2000, p. 100). In the UK also, employment was supported by projects based on voluntary activity during the economic recessions of the previous thirty years (Kamerade & Ellis Paine, 2014, p. 263).

In integration projects, like the target of our research, social service definitions permeate the adult education vocabulary. A typical focus of peerness is on self-help groups, where individuals are simultaneously needy and independent, reciprocally giving and receiving support (Borkman, 1999). The groups and their collective expertise are assumed to depend on similar experiences and specialised knowledge about their life conditions (ibid., p. 14, 16). It is common to distinguish voluntary activity from self-help and peer support, according to who offers help and who receives it: for example, Nylund (2000, p. 32–35) considered volunteer activity—traditionally provided by religious charitable organisations—to be vertical, ‘top-down’ helping, but self-help and mutual support to be horizontal peer activity, with no hierarchies between the actors.

In the social work paradigm, the formation of peer groups is assumed to be built on diverse criteria, such as age, work, profession, or lifestyle, but also on a reciprocal need to deal with life crises such as sickness or loss (Hyväri, 2005, p. 214–215) and, in some cases, on the migrant background of the participants (e.g. Päällysaho, Saunela & Pesonen, 2019). According to Hokkanen (2003, p. 268), the different interpretations of volunteerism and peerness lead to diverse group expectations in relation to openness and the intensity of activity, or to autonomy and internal homogeneity. It is also assumed that

the nature of the group activity depends on group members sharing the context of the activity and the duration and acuteness of certain life experiences (ibid., p. 268).

The way in which peer group activity is organised depends on the definitions, experiences, and goals of the group. Hokkanen (2003) emphasised that understanding peerness as togetherness and sharing of mutual experiences may lead to oversimplifying the phenomenon and disregarding the uniqueness of individual experiences. She explained that peerness always connects to a certain issue and its manifestation (ibid., p. 267–270) and, even though the issue may be the same, different peer groups may focus on either accepting or improving the situation; therefore, if there are too many conflicting views in the group, the members are unlikely to continue attending (Borkman, 1999, p. 7, 16).

Peer groups are often facilitated by volunteer peer group guides. According to previous studies, the willingness of migrants to become volunteer peer group guides may be based on their own experiences of being helped, and thus their role shifts from that of a user to a provider of the service (Handy & Greenspan, 2009, p. 969). Voluntary work may offer individuals professional fulfilment, intellectual challenges, and the opportunity to develop themselves and interact with people (Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017, p. 345). Entering labour markets can be challenging, and voluntary work can be a means to obtain employment (Kosic, 2007, p. 21) and other forms of societal inclusion (Schedler & Glastra, 2000, p. 61). However, the peerness between a volunteer guide and a peer group participant can be problematic: despite the term 'peer' signifying equality, a peer who takes the role of a guide rises temporarily to the role of expert or pedagogical authority (Koskela, 2009, p. 58–63).

In our research, we started with a concept of peerness as mutual understanding between people in similar circumstances, based on their own experiences and comprising reciprocity and equality (Hokkanen, 2003); however, it transpired that the actors in the project had different interpretations of peerness.

Experiential expertise as a means to empowerment

A key concept in the project we studied was empowerment, which has become essential in integration policies and projects striving for the employment of migrants, although the concept was not explicitly defined in this particular project. Since the project was coordinated by a popular adult education organisation, we could assume that the concept would adhere to the adult education tradition. A well-known interpretation is Paolo Freire´s (1985) idea of empowerment as a 'pedagogy of the oppressed', whereby people grow into consciousness by reflecting on their own life conditions. More broadly, empowerment can be understood as a self-initiated and collective process of understanding restrictive circumstances and recognising the possibility of overcoming them through action, leading to a better life and a more just society (Hämäläinen & Kurki, 1997, p. 207–214).

In social work, empowerment is commonly interpreted as a strategy that enables an individual empowerment process. Communities' social structures are key for endorsing the process, enabling people to become members of a group, to share experiences, and to reflect on life jointly with others, thus contributing to the formation of their identity and functioning as an empowering mirror (Hänninen, 2006, p. 192; Siitonen, 1999, p. 116–119). Aarnitaival (2012) emphasised the significance of migrants´ independent involvement in the sense of belonging to a community. She claimed that empowerment is intertwined with migrants´ experiences of obtaining and sharing information about

social practices. Learning strengthens their identity and confidence, but the possibility of sharing their own learned knowledge and feeling that their contribution is needed leads to experiences of involvement and participation in the community (ibid., p. 181–184).

Empowerment has become a global catchword in inclusion policies and a major tool or goal in employment projects for migrants (EC, 2020b). The focus on employability of EU policies and ESF funding favours an individualist and depoliticised interpretation of empowerment; for instance, Zimmerman (1995, p. 582–584) considered empowerment to be an individual process, whereby people become active subjects of their own lives and aware of their competencies, but also active participants in the community and aware of their society and social environment. In integration projects, empowerment is considered to be a means to encourage participants to take responsibility for their situation and to encourage their willingness and motivation to learn the skills that are considered crucial for becoming employable (Vesterberg, 2015, p. 11). The use of empowerment vocabulary, which has positive connotations in adult education, makes it appealing and justifiable for adult education organisations to develop projects that focus on employability through empowerment.

Experiential expertise is a new label for peer support that aims to empower marginalised groups, especially in social and health care, but also in integration programmes. The term *'experiential expert'* implies an equal relationship between a service user and a professional: they both have expertise, although it is gained in different ways (McLaughlin, 2009, p. 1101–1114). While migrants are commonly marginalised as they are considered to be in a high-risk group in health care, the role of experiential expert can provide them with opportunities to participate (Jones & Pietilä, 2018, p. 304, 307, 309). In addition to promoting their sense of capability and positive self-image, it is assumed to have a deep impact on migrants' sense of belonging to a society. An example of a project in which the peer group activity gave migrants an experience of 'being a Finn' was a Finnish ESF-funded Digital Path to Work project (Päällysaho, Saunela & Pesonen, 2019). In this project, migrants acted as peer guides for other migrants in developing the digital skills needed for working life and education (ibid., p. 53–59).

Experiential expertise indicates a new relationship between professional helpers and their clients (Jones & Pietilä, 2018), but despite the positive effects, voluntary activity may also lead to exploitation (Nylund & Yeung, 2005, p. 26, 30). While peer groups have become more popular, volunteers are increasingly responsible for achieving the goals of public integration policies and enhancing the participation of marginalised people. The training of peer group guides aims to prepare them to meet these expectations. According to Alm Andreassen, Breit, and Legard (2014, p. 325, 330–336), the volunteer work of experiential experts is not recognised as a profession or paid employment, despite the experts' achievement of work-related competencies or delivery of workforce inputs.

In our research, we started with an interpretation of empowerment as a self-directed process, whereby migrants would gain the individual and collective resources to participate in and influence society. We were uncertain about what kind of peerness and volunteer guidance would be developed through the vertical approaches adopted in the project design.

Research setting and methodology

The project which we followed and evaluated was coordinated by a Finnish adult education organisation, in collaboration with vocational adult education institutes, an employment office, NGOs, and a trade union. The aim of the project was to enhance the

employability of migrants, especially women, who had been unemployed for a long time, through peer group guidance. The peer group participants were expected to be literate and not asylum seekers. As the primary language used in the groups was Finnish, some Finnish language skills were also required.

The peer groups were guided mainly by project-trained volunteers. The training especially targeted people with a migrant background. The requirements for becoming peer group guides were a willingness to guide migrants and some experience of Finnish working life. The training lasted for 25 hours and included some self-study. The topics included information about working life, job seeking, peerness, intercultural communication, and group guidance. During the project, 36 peer group guides, of the 45 who started, completed the training and were given a certificate for their participation in the training and a badge indicating their knowledge of peer group guidance.

After the training, 17 peer group guides commenced volunteer guidance of migrant-background participants, aiming to strengthen their work-related competencies and Finnish language skills. Each peer group had five to eight sessions per week or every other week, each lasting two to four hours. During the project, 18 peer groups were organised, in which 126 migrants participated, representing different ethnic backgrounds and genders, work-related competencies, and motivations for seeking employment. Initially, the peer groups were guided only by two migrant-background guides trained by the project. In addition, a Finnish expert was invited to discuss study topics in peer group sessions.

During the project, it transpired that not all of the peer group guides had sufficient skills to guide participants in such challenging circumstances; therefore, project staff, who were guidance professionals and had long experience of integration work, started to guide the groups alongside the peer group guides.

The purpose of the follow-up evaluation research was to support the project in developing an effective model for enhancing the employability of the target group. The methodological framework was action research, understood as an interactive process that aims to produce best practices through collaborative problem solving, integrated with data-driven analysis (Denscombe, 2010; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). As researchers, we participated in project meetings and were involved in all the project activities. Our role was to verbalise the tacit knowledge demonstrated in activities, in order to analyse, discuss, and develop them (cf. Heikkinen, 2010, p. 215). In addition, we were especially interested in understanding the meanings of peerness created during the project.

In this article, our focus is on what the research findings (Heimo, 2019; Tapanila, Ojapelto & Heimo, 2020) revealed about the potential—promises and pitfalls—of peer guidance in empowering migrants for employment. We collected the data behind the findings by using participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and self-evaluations by peer group guides. We carried out the observations during the peer group guide training (28 hours) and documented them as word-for-word field notes by 1 or 2 researchers (over 70 pages). We conducted 15 interviews (over 110 transcribed pages) with all the instructors in the peer group guide training (6 instructors from 5 organisations), the peer group guides who had guided the first peer groups in the project (4 peer group guides), and some key informants in the project, such as the project staff and collaborators (5 people from 3 organisations). The interviews were conducted by two Finnish researchers and each lasted approximately one hour. The themes included peer group guide training (motivation for joining, learning experiences) and peer group activity (successes and challenges, actions as a peer group guide) for the peer group guides, but also, for the project staff, their experiences of other projects and their perceptions of, and goals for, learning during the training. The self-evaluations were

completed by the peer group guides at the start and end of their training. For the purpose of this article, we have translated the quotations into English.

We analysed the data through hermeneutic and deconstructive content analysis in order to discover the interpretations of peerness created during the project. In the beginning of the analysis, we verbalised our pre-understanding of peerness, empowerment, and volunteerism (cf. Nikander, 2002, p. 1–2). To get deeper understanding—as characteristic of hermeneutic analysis—we repeatedly compared our assumptions to the interpretations of peer group guides, instructors and key informants (cf. Siljander, 1988, p. 115). In this process, contradictions and tensions emerging from the data and the ambiguousness of the language were deconstructed and disclosed (cf. Niikko, 2018; Royle, 2003). The roles, responsibilities, and negotiation about the peerness, as well as the distinctions, similarities, and counter-arguments that the peer group guides and project staff revealed, were analysed. Following the action research methodology, the analysis included several recurring phases of planning, collecting and analysing the data, and reflecting the actions (cf. Heikkinen, 2010). Interpretations were discussed with the project staff and compared with similar projects and research. Although the interpretations were drawn from unique accounts, they can be perceived as reactions to shared circumstances, constituted by generic societal structures.

Peerness as an ambiguous aspiration

In the analysis, three interpretations of peerness created in the project were constructed (Heimo, 2019). Responsible peerness, empowered experiential expertise, and self-directed career-planning indicated the potential—promises and pitfalls—of peer guidance in empowering migrants for employment. Most of the informants' accounts crossed these categories, since they included characteristics that applied to many of them. In the following, we scrutinise the interpretations and their development during the project as our understanding about them increased by disclosing their tensions in the hermeneutic-deconstructive analysis.

Responsible peers as exhausted tutors

The majority of the peer group guides considered helping other migrants to be their most important reason for joining the training, conforming to the interpretation of peerness as vertical volunteerism (cf. Hokkanen, 2003; Nylund, 2000). They wanted to give back the help they had received when they came to Finland as migrants. During the training, the guides used a lot of 'we speech' when they described the needs and wishes of the peer group participants. They assumed that, as peers, they understood the challenges the participants faced and how it felt to come to Finland without peer support:

> I think the group participants know that I have felt exactly the same as they are feeling … that kind of contradiction, helplessness, like … what I am going to do, and the uncertainty every morning about where to apply … But I have gone back [to work] again and they also have the same opportunity (peer group guide).

However, the reality of the peer groups and the participants did not coincide with the expectations of the guides. The participants' backgrounds, skills, life situations, positions, and motivations for seeking employment were different from those of the guides. The guides were mostly well educated, moved to Finland for work or family reasons, and had experience of working life in both their own countries and Finland. Many participants,

however, had a low education level and a refugee background. Even though the peer group guides used ‘we speech’ during the training, when they talked about themselves and the participants, some of them also positioned themselves as Finns; for instance, they told us that they had adjusted to Finland and even adopted some Finnish habits that they initially regarded as bizarre; therefore, the project staff regarded them as well-integrated migrants, while the participants were seen as newcomers to the integration path, no matter how long they had lived in Finland. The instructors in the peer group training also set standards for integration, such as knowing the ‘right’ things about Finland, and simultaneously, constructed stereotypes of the Finnish and migrant people.

> Instructor 1: Sometimes, the opinions of the participants do not fit with Finnish society.
>
> Peer group guide: But we migrants think differently from the Finns. Maybe, for us, this is not surprising.
>
> Instructor 2: Not all Finns are the same as each other.
>
> Instructor 1: By that I meant that, sometimes, they [the migrants as participants] have opinions and beliefs that do not promote integration … so you [the peer group guides] should ask questions and be interested. … Spreading the wrong information is unacceptable—you should correct the participants with facts.

Many novice guides were worried about how the peer group participants would get along: they were anxious about taking sole responsibility for the participants but, despite being volunteers, they identified with the goals of the project staff, which were to guide the participants towards employment or study. The guides also pondered possible challenging situations in peer groups and the possibilities of receiving support, leisure time, and substitutes during their guiding duties. The peer group guides took the voluntary work very seriously and were extremely committed to it. Some peer group guides even became exhausted through taking on more responsibility than was necessary. Their activities showed their empathy with other migrants, but they also sacrificed many aspects of their lives to the voluntary work. Some guides fulfilled their responsibilities even when they were ill or talked about ‘work’ rather than voluntary activity:

> You could say, that [the peer group guidance] takes time, even though you think that you go there [just] to discuss, that it would be a conversation group. But it isn´t a conversation group at all. It is the same as work (peer group guide).

Between the group sessions, the peer group guides worked with the participants on their personal issues and delivered materials to them by e-mail. The guides were in contact with their colleague (the other guide in the group) on an almost daily basis and often developed material for the group. If only one group participant showed up, they felt that their efforts had been wasted and were disappointed by the participants’ lack of commitment, which they interpreted as a lack of appreciation for the voluntary help they gave so freely to the participants.

Empowered experiential experts as alienated teachers

The instructors in the peer group guide training revealed that they expected the novice guides to have experiential expertise and knowledge about guidance, and also to be suitable role models for the peer group participants. During the training, the novice guides were able to share their knowledge and learning with each other, which related to the idea

of a self-help group (cf. Borkman, 1999). The instructors trusted the guides' proficiency enough to allow them to evaluate the suitability of Finnish language tests for different learners, the usefulness of computer programs, and the cultural appropriateness of games and examinations. They encouraged the guides to work professionally in the peer groups by demonstrating good peer group guidance, ethics, and best practices. The instructors hoped that the guides would adopt solution- and practice-oriented methods in the groups:

> I think that in the peer group guide training, there were actually people who had a migrant background and, in that way, they were really peers, [because] they came to this country and they went through all this: looking at things differently and learning the language—then suddenly they were the experts! … I don't know; somehow, I felt that I was [only] in some kind of small guiding role (instructor).

> The course [the training] was formed in a way that made us all experts: our own experience is valuable to you, so we can also give you something (peer group guide).

Many peer group guides accepted the role of an experiential expert (cf. Jones & Pietilä, 2018). The methods used in the training built on reciprocity and dialogue between the instructors and the novice peer group guides, which was experienced by the guides as one of the most empowering elements of the training. The novice guides earned respect from other guides and instructors and the course content resonated strongly with their own meaningful experiences as migrants. The training empowered them as individuals by providing them with the role of helper, rather than the receiver of help (cf. Handy & Greenspan, 2009). Their assumed previous weaknesses, such as the challenges they faced in learning the Finnish language or being unemployed, became their strengths as expert migrants helping other migrants in peer groups (cf. Hokkanen, 2003; Slootjes & Kampen, 2017).

However, adopting the position of an experiential experts tended to alienate peer group guides from their peer position (cf. Alm Andreassen, Breit & Legard, 2014; Koskela, 2009). The empowered experiential experts started to act in a professional manner in the peer group: they constructed goal-oriented outlines for learning, gave homework to the participants, and evaluated their learning and development. One of them explained that he tried to imitate the instructors, in order to guide the group as his own training instructors did him. Similarly, another stated that she did not mind if participants disliked her, since her main responsibility was to guide and teach them. Some of the peer group guides had previous work experience as teachers, which they could use in the peer groups:

> I have a background as a teacher, so I can understand what people's thoughts are and whether they are following or not. The aim, through conversations, was to get the participants involved, but their weak Finnish language skills prevented that (peer group guide).

The creation of peerness between the peer group guides was empowering, but the alienating experiential expertise was connected to their background and experiences during the training. The experienced distance between the guides and the peer group participants made it difficult for them to provide similar empowering examples from their own training. The peer group guides lacked the professional experience and competence in dialogical and reciprocal practice that would have enabled them to interact with the participants as equals, without fearing a loss of respect.

Self-directed career planners as overly enthusiastic inspirers

The third interpretation of peerness created in the project was indicated by some peer group guides' aspirations to utilise their training to support a new direction in their professional careers: some hoped that they would receive formal recognition of their guidance skills, while one of the guides explained that she hoped the training and volunteer guidance of the peer groups would advance her employment. Many were interested in using the experience to enhance their curricula vitae and make a good impression.

Since the peer group guide training emphasised activity and self-directedness as qualities that support the achievement of project goals, the novice guides described themselves as active people. The instructors also characterised them as enthusiastic, motivated, and active people. Accordingly, both the instructors and guides encouraged the peer group participants to become more active in their efforts to seek work:

> Instructor: A course is not a shortcut to happiness; your own activity and motivation is very important. You can do different things, such as joining voluntary groups … but how do you get the information to the people and who will get these people out of their homes?
>
> Peer group guide 1: I'll go and get them, if you pay me a salary! (laughing)
>
> Peer group guide 2: I think it's totally fair. You must be active.
>
> Peer group guide 3: There can't be workplaces for migrants, but not for Finns.
>
> Instructor: Active citizenship concerns all citizens.

Because most of the peer group guides were employed, interested in societal issues, and had language skills and self-confidence based on their experience, their motivation for training was enhancement of their career paths. They shared the instructors' regular attribution of unemployment to the inactiveness of individuals and wanted to meet their instructors' expectations. Following their training, many peer group guides stated that the knowledge gained from the training helped them to form a clearer picture of their career aspirations and strengthened their decisions to change their careers. The knowledge obtained in the training also served as a 'buffer', in case the guides themselves became unemployed.

When guiding peer groups, the peer group guides as 'self-directed career-planners' were overly enthusiastic activators, expecting the participants to act in the same way as they did and reluctant to accept peerness with 'passive' participants. The 'activeness imperative' was visible in the different job-seeker identities of the guides and the peer group members: being a professional, an expert, or an employee was essential for the peer group guides, but being a mother, a wife, or a student might be more important for the participants. The contrast became particularly apparent when peer group guides with higher education encountered housewives with refugee backgrounds in their peer groups.

Peerness as an illusion built from the outside

In our research, we identified three interpretations of peerness that were created during the project and connected to empowerment and volunteerism. Responsible peerness depended on a migrant background, despite differences in the reasons for migration, language, cultural background, gender, and motivation to help other migrants. The

peerness of empowered experiential expertise was based on experiences of 'successful' integration, conveyed vertically to others. Finally, in the self-directed career planning of the peer group guides, peerness as voluntary activity was subsumed to personal ambitions and the improvement of their own opportunities.

At first, the interpretations were positive or neutral, but as our understanding of them deepened in the hermeneutic-deconstructive process, the tensions and contradictions they manifested became visible. The findings showed that the training methods that empowered the peer group guides became challenges in the peer groups. In the groups, the guides had problems in limiting the help they offered (exhausted tutor), in building reciprocity (alienated teacher), and in understanding the experiences of the participants (overly enthusiastic inspirer). The peer group guides had to balance experiences of stress and enjoyment as well as voluntary and professional work. Their motivation to guide the peer groups decreased when the participants seemed disengaged and it was difficult to reach the goals—such as employment—of the groups.

The experience of being a migrant was not sufficient to build peerness between the peer group guides and the group participants. The guides emphasised their position as role models and teachers, rather than reciprocal supporters. Help was given vertically and unidirectionally by the guides to the participants. Whereas the peer group guides were initially equal peers and were empowered by being raised to the position of an experiential expert and helper, the peer group participants were regarded solely as recipients of help. Guidance in peer groups, which aimed for the goal-oriented learning of the participants, came to appear more characteristic of the social and health care sector, where help is offered vertically. The voluntary peer group guides were not able to build the horizontal peerness typical of self-help groups and the self-educational ideal of popular adult education.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have examined the potential of voluntary peer group guidance to empower migrants for employment. The results of our research suggested that peer group guides may benefit from training that builds their competence and self-confidence and moves them towards experiential expertise. The target of our study, a Finnish ESF-funded project, managed to empower the peer group guides by considering their experience as migrants to be expertise. However, the experience of empowerment was difficult to transfer to the peer groups and, in fact, the position of an empowered experiential expert tended to alienate the guides from the unemployed participants in the groups.

Peerness is often seen as a solution to integrating migrants into Europe and projects based on peerness are financially supported by the EU; however, in our study, peerness manifested as a complex issue with various interpretations and meanings. At the start of the Finnish ESF-funded project, peerness was mainly taken for granted: the 'migrant-background-ness', which was the term used by the project, was regarded as a sufficient basis for peerness, even though the other background factors, competencies, and motivations of the peer group guides and the participants differed. It seemed that peerness had been interpreted too narrowly by the project and we concluded that peerness between migrants should not be built on a common simplified assumption that migrants are a homogeneous group. Peerness based mainly on 'migrant-background-ness' builds unnecessary categories, can stigmatise or strengthen the otherness of unemployed migrants, and is thus unlikely to empower them for employment. Therefore, the main

criteria for forming groups aiming for the employment of migrants should, instead of peerness, be based on the mutual professional interests of the participants.

The peer group guides struggled with the different roles and expectations of the project. The ambivalent role of the peer group guides and the expectation that they should act simultaneously as role models for successful integration and as peers who had experienced employment challenges, was stressful for the peer group guides. In addition, the diverse experiences and expectations among the participants concerning the roles of 'teacher' and 'student' caused tension. However, it seemed that the empowerment of the peer group participants depended on mutual learning, a sense of peerness, a low hierarchy in the group, and the dismantling the expected roles. To support the dialogue between the peer group guides and participants, we discerned that peer groups should be guided jointly by a migration-background peer group guide and a professional Finnish-background guide. The experiential expertise of peer group guides could then complement the expertise of the adult education professionals.

Our results suggested that project-based peer group guidance carried out by volunteer guides does not support the empowerment, integration, and employment of migrants, as typically assumed by adult education organisations. Peer guidance promises a solution for migrants' employment through solidarity between migrants, but the oversimplification of the concept and externally defined goals can lead to pitfalls; therefore, the employability of migrants should not be the responsibility solely of trained volunteers. The mainstream, official education and employment services should assume the main responsibility for the employability of migrants.

Numerous discussions between the researchers and the project actors made it possible to reflect on and problematize the project and its actions. Including studies based on action research in EU-funded projects may enable a critical viewpoint and the identification of challenges that may not otherwise be perceived. As characteristic for hermeneutics, we have not reached any final interpretation about peerness in this study (cf. Siljander, 1988, p. 117–118). However, the deconstructive analysis can disclose tensions in adult education structures, which may not always be visible (cf. Royle, 2003).

This research was based on only one ESF-funded project, but it exemplifies the challenges that are typical of many ESF-funded projects. The adult education actors worked on projects striving for employability, rather than fulfilling people's unique needs. The projects are massively funded and, to maintain their competitiveness, adult education organisations are obliged to run projects that meet the goals of EU and the available funding. The interpretations, adopted in the projects led by popular adult education organisations, shape the concepts and self-understanding of adult education; consequently, adult education is not defined by the perceptions of adult educators, but instead by the visions and strategies of the EU. By supporting employability of people in need through voluntary help between them, adult education is directed towards serving the competitiveness of nation states.

The adult education shaped by the EU-funded projects is reinforcing current societal and labour market structures in the disguise of empowerment through voluntary peerness. It corrupts the idea of empowerment in traditional adult education, which—instead of helping migrants to adapt to prevailing circumstances—would promote their self-initiated mobilisation for change.

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