Editorial
Groupwork and environmental and community sustainability
Papers from SWSD2018

Ní neart go cur le chéile – there is no strength without coming together. This is a proverb from the Irish language (the national language of Ireland, sometimes referred to as Gaelic) that can also be translated as 'there is strength in coming together'. It echoed in our minds as we celebrated the Joint World Social Work, Education and Social Development Conference 2018 (SWSD2018) held in Dublin, Ireland in July 2018. As members of communities of social work practice, of teaching and/ or research and as social workers, this also resonates as we witness the empowerment, liberation and transformative impact of people coming together and finding strength through groups. Groups that emerge through people coming together and acting collectively can help us develop new skills, to heal or to mobilise for social change. More recently, in some parts of the world, we have seen the potential for strength in coming together through online virtual communities including the #Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements which have gathered momentum on-line and on the streets.

From 4th-7th July 2018, we did just that – we came together! Over 2000 delegates representing 101 countries across Europe, North America, South America, Australia, New Zealand, Asia and the Middle East, convened in Dublin, Ireland, for the Joint World Social Work, Education and Social Development Conference 2018, under the theme *Environmental and Community Sustainability: Human Solutions in Evolving Societies.* Organised on behalf of the International Federation of Social Workers, The International Schools of Social Work and the International Council on Social Welfare, the conference was opened by Mary Robinson, a former President of Ireland and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Across the four conference days, practitioners, educators, researchers, policy analysts, campaigners and users of services engaged in challenging and critical debate on issues that negatively affect people across the world, including, austerity and

poverty, inequality, war and climate change. Following the conference, we were invited by the journal committee of Groupwork to issue a call for a special edition of the journal featuring presentations on aspects of groupwork practice from the conference. In compiling this special issue, our aim as guest editors and as members of the local organising committee for the conference, is to capture and preserve in this volume examples of the rich tapestry of practice wisdom and research knowledge on groupwork which was presented across the four days of the conference. We believe this will be of interest to delegates who attended SWSD2018 and will also provide those who could not attend the conference with opportunities to learn more about the information which was shared during the event.

Ní neart go cur le chéile can also serve as a summary of this edition of *Groupwork*. In this issue, we are delighted to share with readers the insights, the practice skills and the wisdom that came to light to a wider audience at SWSD2018 in Dublin. The individual papers selected for this special issue are all important contributions to the field of groupwork practice.

Focused on groupwork practice in Ireland, the first paper in this issue by Concannon and Finucane reflects on their practice in a large palliative specialist care service, and their involvement in the development and evaluation of a psycho-educational group for surviving parents with a focus on how they supported their bereaved children. Highlighting the particular significance and potentially life altering impact on children following the death of their parent, Concannon & Finucane spotlight the highly individualised yet deeply intense and disruptive emotions that children may experience following the loss of a parent in this way. Responding to the need for individualised and differential responses to children's needs in conjunction with surviving parents' expressed uncertainty and lack of confidence in their responses to their children's needs, the hospice social work team developed a group programme centred on providing information to bereaved parents about self-care as a bereaved parent and also about how children grieve. The paper in this special edition reports extensively on this programme.

Craig, Yang and Austin's paper focuses on the impact of an affirmative group intervention in Canada which utilised cognitive behavioural therapy on the sexual self-efficacy of sexual and gender minority youth (SGMY). With the assertion that groups represent an advantageous

modality for intervening with SGMY as their starting point, Craig and her colleagues echo Yalom and Leszcz's (2005) belief in the power of group interventions, not least as groups emphasise the universality of shared experiences whilst simultaneously creating an environment where SGMY can discuss their unique experience in a safe setting. Examining the efficacy of an eight-module manualised cognitive behavioural intervention with thirty SGMY aged 15-18 years who were recruited from an urban Canadian city, the authors report on the positive impact of this intervention on an emerging construct in sexual health, namely sexual self-efficacy.

Highlighting the lack of understanding and empirical knowledge about coping strategies and the degree of psychological distress suffered by men who were sexually abused as children (Alaggia & Millington, 2008), Yun and Fiorini's paper sets out to explore the various mental health problems experienced by adult male child sexual abuse (CSA) survivors and the effectiveness of different treatments as found among an adult male research sample in Canada. Employing secondary data analysis on 18 government-funded male survivor individual and group programs in 12 Canadian county regions involving a total of 1,285 adult male survivors, their analysis shows statistically significant improvements with respect to depression, anxiety, stress, and PTSD after treatment. Interestingly, Yun and Fiorini's analysis highlighted no statistically significant difference between individual and mixed treatment (including group and individual counselling) regarding alleviating mental health symptoms. However, the findings need to account for methodological limitations, including the absence of a comparison group, the small sample size, and the nature of self-reported data. The study's findings establish a baseline contribution to the limited empirical research on the therapeutic utility of a male-specific treatment modality based on trauma-focused cognitive and behavioral therapies (TF-CBT) and the gender role strain paradigm (GRSP). This is a noteworthy study as it is provides important evidence regarding the comparative effectiveness of individual and group treatments for adult male CSA survivors.

Two papers in this special issue are based on posters presented at SWSD2018. The first of these articles, by Levitz and Levas, focuses on the importance of social support for female newcomers to the Canadian border town of Windsor. Levitz and Levas report on a mental health

wellness programme established in 2013 and now delivered in three cities with service provision in over thirteen languages. This dynamic and creative program incorporates greater understandings of personal identity as well as principles of macro level community building and trauma informed care. The program involves both individual and group sessions and seeks to establish rapport and warmth in order to create connection through non-traditional yet creative clinical methods and modalities including drumming, dance, yoga, meditation which are delivered across a range of non-traditional clinical settings, including, for example, community activities and neighborhood walks. The program embraces the idea that social capital is a central part of integration and as such, the program does not exist in isolation and links in with other relevant community services, both formal and informal. With a focus on meaningful cross-cultural interaction as a tool in itself for healing and growth, an authentic space is created through this programme regardless of the similarities, intersections or differences in identities for group members. In achieving this, the authors assert that this art itself, is a central part of how we ARTogether.

The second article based on a poster presentation offers a critical reflection of the interplay between groupwork theory and the practical experience of group facilitation. Hall's article and poster (which can be viewed on the *Groupwork* journal website) explores concepts of discomfort and messiness in terms of what they mean for participants, facilitators and agencies of groupwork. Hall's poster proposes a model for working with group processes that captures what he calls both linear and organic understandings, highlighting opportunities for maximising the benefits of groupwork in the context of unpredictable group processes in addition to participants' and facilitators' potentially chaotic lives. Reflecting on many critical aspects of groupwork including the nature and purpose of the group, group stages and processes, group roles and relationships, Hall cautions against facilitators expecting a nice tidy package with groupwork, advising instead that messiness is a normal part of human groupwork experience.

Reporting on a student social work placement in a Sri Lankan village, Sivakumaran & Jeevasuthan's Groupwork in Practice paper highlights the power of group interventions in supporting communities and individuals to overcome complex adversities. Describing a group intervention that was conducted in a disadvantaged rural village in

post war-torn Sri Lanka, this article provides a fascinating insight into groupwork with women-headed households. The purpose of the group was to empower the female participants and promote their sustainable economic development through self-employment initiatives. Alongside providing a descriptive account of the group process, Sivakumaran & Jeevasuthan also outline the challenges the group encountered and those that the student social worker overcame as part of her learning. Furthermore, the evaluation of the intervention confirmed the capacity of groupwork in promoting and facilitating significant changes for the participants including improved skills, leadership and teamwork, mutual support and increased self-confidence.

In 2005, Pamela Trevithick (2005, p. 101) asserted that,

> one of the difficulties we face is that we in fact know very little about whether, when and where groupwork- in whatever form- is practised in the United Kingdom.

Acknowledging the significant contribution of a special issue of *Groupwork*, edited by Robbie Gilligan and John Pinkerton in 1992, which highlighted a range of groupwork practices on the island of Ireland, the final article, by Ratcliffe, Kirwan, Holt and Heneghan, reviews the literature since that 1992 publication and reaches a similar conclusion to Trevithick (2005) regarding the existence of an information gap on the current use by social workers of groupwork methods in their practice. Responding to this dearth of contemporary empirical Irish data concerning the extent and nature of groupwork in current social work practice therefore provided the impetus for the study, the results of which are reported on in the first paper in this special edition. Employing survey methodology, the study on which this paper is based, involved the administration of a national survey to social workers in Ireland regarding the nature and extent of groupwork in contemporary social work practice. The findings illuminate the current state of groupwork in social work in Ireland, with the authors concluding that groupwork practice is currently thriving in the Irish context.

While social workers from around the world gathered at the Joint World Social Work, Education and Social Development Conference in

Dublin in 2018, representatives meeting there from the International Federation of Social Workers and of the International Association of Schools of Social Work approved the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (IFSW, 2018). In that global statement, social workers are charged with a mandate to promote social justice, challenge discrimination and build networks of solidarity in order to work towards change and build inclusive societies. It is our hope that the papers presented in this issue of *Groupwork* indicate some of the ways in which we can meet these challenges through working with and in groups to enkindle hope, share a sense of solidarity and co-create change. Finally, it is our hope that this edition presents as an opportunity to respond to the concern raised by Trevithick (2005, p. 101) (albeit in a UK context) about the dearth of information on groupwork practice. This edition has not only illuminated the breadth and depth of groupwork practice internationally, but it has also positioned groupwork as critically integral to social work and community development and confirmed its transformative power to mobilise social change.

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