*fun*zone: Using groupwork for teaching and learning

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Abstract: This paper documents the development and use of groupwork as a strategy for inclusion and social skills training in the curriculum of a special school, which is also the site of a fieldwork practice teaching unit for social workers in training. The groupwork model was developed for work with 16-18 year old people with learning disabilities, as one day a week in their school curriculum. The article examines the groupwork model. The issues that arose are explored, as are the implications and applications of such collaborative ways of working.

Key words: groupwork, learning disability, empowerment, partnership, inclusion and life long learning

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Introduction

This paper discusses the development and delivery of a group work programme in the curriculum of a 'special school' for pupils with learning disabilities. The purpose of the group was to enhance social learning and inclusion for the young service users and to provide an experience of group facilitation for social workers in training. We explore the conceptual and practice issues that arose for those involved in the creation and delivery of this form of service. Interventions that link the needs and skills of service users, with the needs and abilities of the social workers in training, and are supported and resourced by service providers, represent the approach undertaken to develop and implement this programme. This partnership used groupwork, to increase the level of provision from service providers, extend the networks available to service users and offer professional training opportunities for social work students.

Setting the context

The Brothers of Charity are a Religious Order who provide services for persons with learning disabilities. These range from early intervention to adult services and include schools, residential accommodation, outreach, family support, activation, training and supported employment. There is also a student unit on site that offers fieldwork practice experiences for social workers in training from University College Cork. The groupwork programme developed from a joint need to provide social skills training to the pupils and group facilitation skills to the social work students. The groupwork which is considered an essential element in the education and training of both groups takes place in Our Lady of Good Counsel school. This was one of the first special schools to be established in Ireland. Its current educational policy is to enable the child to live a full life and to realise her/his full potential as a unique individual; to develop as a social being through living and cooperating with others and so contribute to the good of society; to prepare for further education and lifelong learning (Department of Education, 1999, p.7).

Core concepts

Three ideas frame the intervention under discussion. These are disability, empowerment and groupwork.

Disability

Historically, in relation to disability, the medical model was the dominant perspective. This was problem focused, seeing the goal of intervention as remedial or curative. This view individualised and pathologised the experiences of people with disabilities (Barnes et al, 1999). A progressive or social model of disability began to emerge, based on partnerships between service users and professionals. Here, knowledge, skills and information are shared to support the aim of social equality and inclusion for people with disabilities. This view locates the problem of disability within a social context and is predicated on interventions that empower and facilitate change. A key concept in this shift from medical to social explanations of disability has been the principle of normalization (Oliver and Barnes, 1998; Wolfensberger, 1972). Normalisation does not imply conformity; rather it is predicated on the freedom to live life based on the same values and terms as others in society. By implication, social inclusion is concerned with the opportunities and provision for people to participate in everyday events and be part of the mainstream. This however, may be more difficult to embody in practice than in precept. In Ireland, the Education Act 1998 (Dept of Education, 1998) focuses on promoting inclusion for all children. This has challenged those involved to extend the boundaries and social opportunities for students in special education. Creative curriculum and teaching strategies are required, 'The ethos of inclusive education is to facilitate meaningful opportunities for all children regardless of impairment. It also means the utmost flexibility in terms of teaching and learning…' (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999, p.109). Effective education aimed at children and young people with learning disabilities should strive to balance education and care, the nature of which can vary as the person develops and progresses.

Empowerment

Empowerment is always concerned with power balances in the articulation of need. It aims to challenge and change the role of professionals from expert definers of need or resources and services towards more democratic forms of meaning and method (Wilson, 2001). Within the area of disability, models focusing on empowerment and advocacy are becoming more important as methods of service delivery. Advocacy seeks to promote users' own control and involvement in their lives, communities and services. The empowerment approach in social work places a priority on practice with people who face issues of oppression. Empowerment is not 'done' to people; it is not a technique. Rather it is a goal of intervention as well as the process by which that goal may be achieved, 'the process of empowerment is [a] collaboration…' (Saleebey, 2000, p.4). Collaborative approaches hold particular promise as a methodology for supporting people with disabilities in addressing issues of discrimination and fostering inclusion.

Groupwork

Groupwork 'lies at the heart of empowerment' (Mullender and Ward, 1991, p.12). Numerous models of group leadership, with a commitment to the empowerment of group members can be found in the traditions of social groupwork (Doel and Sawdon, 1999; Cohen and Mullender, 1999; Gitterman and Shulman, 1994; Lee, 1994; Glassman and Kates, 1990; Pernell, 1986). By participation in groupwork the process of personal empowerment is cultivated through collective support and mutual aid. Groupwork interventions predicated on partnership with service users have also been used to challenge disablist practices (Lordan, 2000; Nakanishi & Pastore, 1999; Lee, 1997; Kohli, 1993).

Origins of the groupwork programme

The decision to use groupwork with the senior pupils in the special school arose from discussions among the class teacher, senior

psychologist and coordinator of the practice teaching unit. As the idea grew, a collaborative partnership developed aimed at meeting identified needs for social skills training for the pupils and group facilitation skills for social workers in training. The needs that each professional brought to the planning and development frame were specific to their areas of intervention.

Class teacher

From the class teacher's perspective there exists a difficulty in finding interesting and age appropriate material for the nine pupils in Class 7. They are aged between 16-18 years, include both genders and are at a turning point in their lives. The process of transition and change for special education students involves their choice to move towards the world of vocational training and work thus encountering the joys and vicissitudes of independent living. Consequently, there is a natural boredom with school based subjects such as reading, writing and numbers. The students have been working in these areas since they started school at the age of 4 years. For learning to take place they need years of repetition and over-learning. They were all experiencing frustration with a system that neglected their other potential. The class teacher welcomed the opportunity to use groupwork, seeing it as an inclusive tool for the relationship building skills needed by her class. She believes that pupils at this stage of adolescence require age appropriate interventions, in which the educational focus is 'real' and related to their needs at the interface of school, home and the wider world of work. Symbolically, the issue of transition was represented by locating the groupwork in a venue away from the classroom.

Educational psychologist

The senior educational psychologist found that her experience of the 'expert' model based solely on consultancy and individual casework was unsatisfactory and this fuelled her search for different approaches. She found that small, time-limited groups, based on collaboration and consultation, were successful in initiating and maintaining behavioural changes for people with moderate or severe learning difficulties. There is convincing research evidence supporting the

use of groupwork interventions that emphasise social skills' training for students of mixed ability in 'integrated' schools in the USA. (Lannaccone & Hwang, 1998; Corey, Corey & Callanan, 1998). She suggested the introduction of groupwork into the school, believing it best synthesised humanistic approaches to work with disability. The group would explore pupils' interactive styles, provide dynamic assessments of their strengths and skills and consult with them regarding their wishes about school, home and the future.

Social work practice teacher

The practice teaching unit aims to provide fieldwork practice placements in the area of disability for social workers in training on the Bachelor in Social Work (BSW) and Master in Social Work (MSW) Courses. The practice teaching coordinator plays a pivotal role in negotiating practice learning contexts within the agency. A strong working relationship has developed with the school, which offers field experience of 14 weeks duration for two students each semester. In fieldwork practice, the opportunity for direct work with service users and their families is seen as vital for the professional development of the social worker in training. For the practice teaching coordinator, the ongoing challenge of finding suitable pieces of work for students and the possibility of moving beyond the apprenticeship model of social work training to a more reflexive and portfolio based praxis, were the primary motivating factors for supporting the groupwork initiative.

The *fun*zone group: A combined groupwork approach

The *fun*zone group (the name was chosen by group members) was introduced into the curriculum for teenagers with a moderate learning disability. It united elements from education and cognitive behaviouralism, with mutual aid and empowerment perspectives. A brief outline of the conceptual framework that evolved is given below.

Educational groups are used in a variety of settings including hospitals and schools. Their primary purpose is to help members learn new information and skills. While most groups routinely involve

presentations of information and knowledge by experts, they also include opportunities for group discussion to support the learning process. The worker's intervention focuses on the 'individual learner and the group as a whole as vehicles for learning, reinforcement and discussion' (Toseland & Rivas, 1998, p.24). The cognitive deficits and cognitive skills approach focuses on the most effective ways to teach social skills, problem solving and negotiating skills. Such approaches have been found to significantly reduce anti-social behaviours, with gains being maintained until at least one year after termination (Kazdin, 1997; Mishna & Muskat, 2001). Social skills training, using psycho-educational groupwork is a direct spin-off from behavioural methods. 'Members gain particular knowledge and learn specific skills while participating in a process which includes group interaction and support' (Geldard & Geldard, 2001, p.20). Here the focus is on overcoming deficits and enabling persons to survive and thrive in their daily lives. Exercises such as role-play and direct instruction are used to improve skill performance. There is evidence that students with moderate learning disabilities are likely to benefit from being taught the content of solutions to specific situations that they may encounter. General principles of problem solving do not appear to transfer to other situations. The literature suggests peer encouragement, repetition, and collective reinforcements all facilitate the acquisition of a specific skill (Paraschiv, 1998). The distinguishing feature between psycho-education and education is that the content focuses on problems related to human development, behaviour and relationships. Many such multi-disciplinary psycho-educational programmes have been undertaken successfully in schools in the United States (Edlefsen & Baird, 1994).

Unadulterated cognitive behavioural approaches have been criticised for failing to utilise mutual aid which is a significant feature in many groups. Mutual aid in groupwork consists of a process in which group members need and help each other. The value of mutual aid in groups with adolescents has been identified by Malekoff (2002) and Steinberg (2002), who stress the importance of the relationships between worker and members and their relationships with each other. Gitterman and Shulman's (1994) process oriented approach makes the connection to the wider social environment, including family and school, so that interventions respond to members' needs.

Writers such as Ife (2001), Thompson (1997) and Lee (1994), contend that groups dealing with social issues such as disability must include information and processes that address the societal context. An anti-discriminatory perspective is essential for theorising and building a model of intervention, that reframes such structural understandings by bringing the issues of power and oppression to the fore. Therefore empowerment through increased feelings of self worth and an increased ability to feel and use power in constructive ways should be an integral part of members' experiences of the group. 'Learning to believe in and accept personal power and responsibility can be an important experience for all members of the group' (Doel and Sawdon, 1999, p.51).

The social workers in training were familiar with the conceptual elements of empowerment and anti-discriminatory practice. In bringing this focus to their work with the group, they sought to challenge the 'learned helplessness' (Barber, 1986) of people with a disability and to develop abilities and behaviours that have been underused or not previously known. It is important for people with learning disabilities to have a positive perception of themselves and 'learned optimism' (Seligman, 1998) is a significant achievement for all people, especially teenagers in transition.

The *fun*zone groupwork intervention evolved from a synthesis of these approaches. We categorise it as 'pyscho-aid-ucational'. Its principal components are that it is needs driven, addresses emotional and educational needs of members, fosters mutual aid, offers group support for the learning process and seeks to make the social environment responsive to the needs of members.

The groupwork process

The group was composed of twelve members in total. Nine of these were the pupils from Class 7. Their ages ranged from 16-18 years. The social workers in training were drawn from the BSW and MSW courses at University College, Cork. Groupwork theory is taught while students are in college. Later, on fieldwork placement they are expected to engage in work with a group and write a groupwork practice analysis. This provides an opportunity to integrate the

theory learnt with the practice undertaken. They co-facilitated the group with one of the professionals. The objectives for all group members focused on the acquisition of specific skills in the personal and professional spheres. The issues that the group would address developed from consultation between group members, professionals and parents. The inclusion of parents was considered important in terms of support, theory reinforcement, homework assignments for generalisation and to provide 'scaffolding' for the process of transition for their daughters and sons. Parents were invited to participate at all stages. They met with the team before the groupwork began, mid-way through and at the end of the group for evaluation of outcomes. A synopsis of the activity that had taken place, signed by pupils and facilitators, was given to the parents after each session. Parents as partners in the process meant that the programme was based on real issues arising in the family and community rather than something artificially constructed from an unrelated context.

From the outset pupils were encouraged to engage in planning for each session. As the group developed they became more involved and designed role-plays that reflected their lived experiences. Communication was a significant aspect of this process. In engaging the pupils, it was necessary to gain an insight into their interests. This was achieved through pre-group interviews and visits to the classroom. It was something that could not be rushed and was crucial to the development of the relationships that blossomed over the period of the group's life. The beginning stage of groupwork involves building trust. But trust does not happen, its development needs to be facilitated. Modelling was a major factor in normalising and building up trusting behaviour in the group. Beginning exercises such as finding music and refreshments for the group were undertaken by pupils following modelling by students. Pupils were encouraged to exercise choice in relation to the games or ice breakers being used. As they experienced and participated in icebreakers led by students, they offered to develop their own ice breaker game, called 'chalk relay'. This comprised two teams, who were required to run in relays from one end of the room to the other and write their names on the wall. Each member in the teams takes a turn. The game is timed and whichever team finishes first is the winner.

Learning about the exercise of choice and personal responsibility

was reflected in increased self-determination shown by pupils taking charge of beginning activities for the group and designing role plays. Pupils who were not normally leaders in the classroom were encouraged to take leadership roles in line with the empowerment focus of the group. A common interest in sport was used to facilitate work and became a means of harnessing pupils' strengths. For example their knowledge and interest in soccer helped in the design of a role play, about peer pressure and saying no. The role play involved two managers, representing Manchester United and Leeds (both major teams in the English Football League). These parts were played by volunteers from the group. Their role was to pick members for their respective teams. Other group members had to choose whether to play for that team or wait to be invited to play for the other if that was their preference. One pupil/manager took his role very seriously. Having failed to attract his preferred player, by the offer of extra money and other benefits, he finally commanded, 'I'm the manager and you'll do what I tell you to do'. The designated player did not respond to this pressure and waited for and received his preferred option. The group offered many opportunities for modelling and learning forms of assertive behaviour in common usage to deal with feelings arising from fear or intimidation.

The content of group sessions required a degree of repetition in order for the pupils to engage fully and gain a sense of the theme being presented at any given time. The willingness of the pupils to engage was evidenced in their interaction with each other and participation in the various activities and role-plays that were features of the group sessions. For example, the teacher identified a behavioural problem arising in the classroom. She was concerned with the coping abilities of pupils who experience isolation or exclusion when cliques or sub groups form. The facilitators acted the role-play and members were then invited to perform. A ball with names of pupils written on it is used. A pair of names were selected at random and they were asked to play ball together while a third pupil comes along and invites one of the two to go to the shop. She wants to do both activities, but chooses to go to the shop, thereby abandoning the other. This one feels angry and left out and bounces the ball calling the name of the person who has left her out. This is spoken with feelings of anger and ferocity. This portrays exclusion.

After this, the group were asked to repeat the exercise with an inclusive approach. They were coached as follows 'I'm happy playing ball with you but I would also like to go to shop with Mary. I will be back. How would you feel about that'?. This gives the other person the choice of waiting or leaving to do something else. It demonstrates a way of being and doing that transfers power and transforms relationships. The purpose of the role plays was to address issues of rejection and exclusion and to provide a language of feeling to speak about the behaviour. Pupils were encouraged to identify the situations that occurred and articulate their feelings about being excluded. To know and speak the language of feelings is an important skill in all human interaction. It is particularly important for people with learning disabilities, who understand a simple language of feelings and speak of being happy or sad. Often there is a lack of middle range speech to describe states of confusion, embarrassment or uncertainty. Thus the expression of feelings and behaviour related to their transition status was encouraged and explored.

The sporting commonality was of major importance to all the young people. Bowling was the outing of pupils' choice at the conclusion of the group. Such activities would not have been a regular occurrence for the young people from Class 7. Pupils exhibited their capacity to work together in teams. They approached all the tasks such as preparation and planning for the outing and team participation, in a manner not dissimilar to their non-disabled peers, with anticipation, excitement and a great spirit of fun. As the group had developed, greater sharing took place between members, which is a significant component of groupwork practice. This involved sharing of strengths and weaknesses. Needing help and being able to ask for it is an important life skill. The class teacher admitted needing help with bowling when the group went on their outing. She was coached enthusiastically by her pupils, offering a unique experience of power sharing.

Over the six sessions of the group's life pupils were introduced to work on expression of preferences, complementing others, making choices, decision making and assertiveness. Anger management and asking for help through focusing on strengths was featured. Training in problem solving skills were also included. Pupils were encouraged to assert themselves and to experience how to manage potentially

'tricky' social situations. For example, the rehearsal and repetition of coping strategies that might be necessary for moving to and remaining in a hostel for respite care.

Techniques such as the metaphor of a 'traffic light' were used to represent a stage in the process of anger management, relaxation, self-instructional training and problem solving. A specific focus of the group was to provide a space for each member to express his or her thoughts, views and feelings. In this regard, Bannister and Gallagher (1998, p.414) suggest, 'One of the key functions of a group is to provide a place where members can experience a different way of interacting with others'.

Facilitating the process

The pupils were not the only ones to experience the freedom to be different. Morgan, Carter and Roebuck (1998, p.143) note: 'The most striking feature of social work is its diversity'. The social workers in training, found that their role was not as clearly defined as in other contexts. The learning challenge afforded by this perspective concerned how to achieve a humanistic match between issues of self-direction and socialisation in groups of severely impaired individuals. Toseland & Rivas (1998, p.186) contend that many sites of practice have an explicit expectation 'that workers will use their authority to help members function as more productive members of society'. In such groups the workers' role is designated as that of expert who provides structure and facilitation so that members can learn new skills. In this group the social workers in training were required to find a balance between the delivery of specific information and skills, while engaging themselves and the pupils in the work of developing and taking ownership of the process. This was achieved as they became more confident in their roles, because they became comfortable with letting go and allowing the pupils to determine the content. One remarked, 'My role involved being a constructor of group content as well as a participant in events as they unfolded during each group session'. This shift from task to process was significant. It represented a movement from expert to facilitator and from controlling interventions to empowering practice.

While leaders in 'psycho-aid-ucational' groups may vary in the style

of their facilitation, they are always actively involved in the group process. The skills that the social workers in training learned from the group were based on the 'ancient insight that the heart of education is learning, not teaching' (Knowles, 1972, p.33). Summing up the experience one of the social workers in training wrote, 'the singular most significant learning during my membership of the group, concerned the crucial aspect of individual and collective strengths within the group and the sense of sharing and support emanating from being a member of the group. From my time in the group the human interaction stands uppermost' (social worker in training). The belief that person-centred and structured groupwork occur at opposite ends of the spectrum has also been challenged by Doel and Sawdon (1999). They suggest that a highly structured framework can also include a flexible responsive content. The role of facilitation involves recognising and finding the balance between a prepared programme with the need to encourage work by group members.

Evaluating the group

A series of evaluations were carried out at the end by the social workers in training involving all stakeholders in the programme. The pupils were asked what they liked most and least about being in the group. One lad commented on the 'plays', which were 'great'. This is the group's word for the role-plays. They particularly selected the 'play' with the Manchester United strip (team shirt). All the pupils reported that they had fun. This was most noticeable on the outing when they all went bowling to celebrate the ending of the group. Comments such as 'it was great, fun and cool' describe reactions given subsequently. What they said they liked least related to the frequency and extent of the programme; they said they 'did not like that it was over' and would like 'more' . A cultural shift in pushing boundaries outward by pupils was also noticed. The group used the staff canteen for refreshments before their sessions. They used this opportunity to bring in their own music. Ghetto blasters gave voice and volume to diverse sounds not usually heard in the environs of the staff canteen. The groupwork sessions were conducted in the Parlour, which is the agency's major clinical and administration centre. This was symbolic of the pupil's transition and of groupwork as an intervention beginning to progress

from the margins to the mainstream within the agency.

The class teacher reported that the behaviours and skills learnt using groupwork, such as cooperation, turn taking and managing difference all manifested themselves in the classroom throughout the rest of the week and appeared to be transferred directly from the pupils' experiences in the group. If there is a conflict they now use a vote system to resolve it. Students have experience of democratic means to resolve conflict. The group accepts the outcome of the vote whereas previously there would have been uproar if a dissenting individual(s) did not also get their own way. She views this as movement from the previous model of managing behaviour by individual referral for behaviour modification, or to the psychiatrist for drug therapy. The approach that is emerging is empowerment focused and based on the group resolving its own issues by facilitation and using members' skills.

From the psychologist's point of view it was an effective way of working preventatively with a whole class to offset crisis referrals, particularly concerning challenging behaviours, by dealing with such commonly experienced difficulties in the group. She also noted that pupils developed a language and a way of being that was 'different' than they were before.

Both psychologist and teacher indicated the emergence of a group identity, the shift from I to we. The game of chalk relay, referred to above, was the example on which this observation was based. When used in the class context, each group selected those who were perceived as an asset. They did not automatically select the teacher, teaching assistants or psychologist. They knew who was fast and they wanted that person on their team. Here they showed ability to discern and make an assessment of ability. This is something not always associated or recognised in people with a learning disability. Turning the tables, showing the strength of their judgements and finding a space to experience and practise the skills of being selective as opposed to their usual experience of being assessed or being judged. People with a learning disability are always being told what to do. The groupwork gave them choice and the experience of exercising that choice. Thus the application of empowerment practices revitalised the classroom context by transforming it. This way of being and doing has implications for realigning power relationships within the classroom

and in the wider educational context.

The parents' evaluations were fulsome in their praise of the groupwork experience. Comments such as 'My son loves the groupwork it facilitates him in lots of ways. He gets bored in class at times, he likes a change and looks froward to meeting his students and doing different things. He keeps asking what day they are coming'. Another referred to the learning that had taken place. 'He has a fear of the Garda, (police) that fear is not as bad now as C. and R. [social workers in training] explained the good side to the Garda and how they help people. Teachers and myself need more support now that he is 17 years old and that is where the groupwork helps'. In relation to the on-going consultation about the content and nature of the activities, a parent wrote as follows, 'As a parent I enjoyed getting letters home about what they did on the day. I enjoyed meeting with teachers, social worker, social work students, psychologist and other parents. I am listing these people out as it is a great opportunity to meet them all and air our views of problems'. This parent's comments reflect support for extending the groupwork on the curriculum, 'We should have more of this it helps other parents so much' and 'My comments on the groupwork is I would like to see it starting at lower classes as it helps in so many ways. I feel class 7 is too late and if possible more than one day a week'.

In social work education the skills and application of reflective learning approaches are increasingly framed as methods of professional development. 'Reflective practice is a set of ideas to be drawn upon critically and reflectively as part of the continuing challenge of integrating theory and practice as opposed to a set of ready-made technical solutions' (Thompson, 2000, p.116). The focus for the social workers in training was to learn by doing, making links to college knowledge and integrating it into practice. The practice teacher believed groupwork provided both opportunity and milieu for students to explore the use of self and experience the development of the professional self within the structured learning environment afforded by the agency. This was achieved using the professional team as a resource and support network for learning. Students' work was reviewed using wind-down at the end of each session. They also wrote learning incidents to promote further enquiry into their practice. Selected aspects of the students' practice interventions were

de-constructed and reviewed, using critical conversations.

Specifically, they were facilitated by the practice teacher to respond to the issues that arise when working in partnership with people with learning disabilities. Doel and Sawdon (1999, p. 52-53) suggest that 'successful facilitation requires awareness and avoidance of complicity with institutionalised oppression where members may have internalised feelings of discrimination and consequently have difficulty in seeing themselves in an alternative light'. Meeting the needs of those they serve rather than meeting their own needs is an important goal of professional training and development. Some students can experience difficulties in balancing these competing needs and wants as they realise that when providing a service, it is the needs of service users that must take precedence. How students constructed their practice to meet the learning needs of service users as well as their own, were considered significant turning points in their learning while on the placement.

Reflections on the process

Control and containment of the service user has always been an issue in work with learning disability and in particular with older adolescents. This cohort poses major challenges to the education system at present and for the foreseeable future. The value of life long learning as a continuous process of knowledge building and renewal of skills is enshrined in the curriculum of the Irish Primary school system. It can be nurtured through educational experiences that foster self-reliance in learning and a sense of responsibility for personal fulfilment. Such experiences aim to help individuals cope with the rapidly changing nature of modernity and unpredictable patterns of life and work (Dept of Education, 1999). Empowerment practice can significantly contribute to the degree of power and control that service users exert over their lives.

The evolution of the groupwork programme discussed in this paper, tilts the balance towards an empowerment paradigm that values the skills and abilities of service users and seeks to redress the power imbalances inherent in hierarchical systems of service delivery. The groupwork provided a forum in which the traditional roles of teacher,

social worker and psychologist could be reconstructed. The teacher noted that the class had become a peer support system that nurtured a more positive environment for sharing and learning. Pupils and teacher began building on the learning, connecting and transferring it to general life situations. The result was consolidation, not over-learning. In the daily issues that arise the teacher now sees herself as a facilitator of the pupils' needs, enabling them to resolve their differences. She has found that prioritising a learning curriculum that enhances social skills training and development, provided new ways of managing the class based on anti discriminatory and power sharing principles. Young people look forward to the groupwork and are actively seeking it. It is now an integral part of the curriculum and it is time tabled for each week.

This represents a structural transformation in the way in which education is delivered in the school. At macro level the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has requested details of the groupwork intervention, regarding it as innovative practice. They are reviewing the Guidelines for Curriculum Development in Special Schools. This progression and the change in service delivery that it may herald must not impede our awareness that those who have been strengthened still face obstacles to their inclusion in mainstream society. Future interventions are needed to ensure a coherent and targeted approach in addressing issues of exclusion. To this end, other sectors and service users within the service are engaging in discussions to develop more groupwork interventions. A group involving transition year pupils in both special and mainstream schools is being considered for the next groupwork programme. The aim would be to promote positive awareness of disability and focus on the shared needs and challenges posed for all young people in transition.

Conclusion

The groupwork that evolved in the *funzone* group was synthesised from a variety of approaches. At the outset it was driven by professionals articulating and fulfilling an identified need. However two ingredients were added which changed the recipe and offered a new version with an increased anti-oppressive flavour. The social

work students in training came with a professional agenda, but by using an empowerment focus in their work with the pupils they facilitated a process of change in their own and pupils' learning for understanding. The articulation and application of an empowerment focus offered a means to promote service users' control over the circumstances of their lives. The 'secret ingredient' in this was the pupils themselves. They took the groupwork, made their own of it and demonstrated their power and capacity to contribute to the teaching and learning process.

As a tool of learning and change groupwork is a continuously evolving process. The agency now acknowledges its importance and by implication there is scope for developing further collaborations that offer pro-active responses to the needs of service users.

The experience from the *fun*zone group suggests that empowerment and strengths' based approaches are the keys to more human and inclusive forms of social relations and service provision. Service users, service providers, professionals and pedagogues have demonstrated that their partnership can provide in microcosm what is ultimately aspired to at the macro level of society.

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