Reviews

Using Drama with Children on the Autism Spectrum
Carmel Conn
Speechmark Publishing, August 2007, 256pp.
ISBN 9780863886010 (spiralbound) £34.99

This practical, accessible resource book deals with the important and complex subject of autism. It aims to show how to work creatively with young people with this disorder. It is presented in a straightforward, non jargonistic and user friendly way. It provides an up to date overview of knowledge of the autism spectrum and makes the case for using drama as a way of working with primary age, 5-12 year old children, on the ASD spectrum. It emerges clearly from this book that the author is well grounded, experienced and skilled in direct work with children including those with autism. Through her work she has known many children who presented with major deficits of social communication when young but have gone on to develop 'skills in verbal communication, sociability, curiosity and playfulness'.

Through the use of snapshots, the author provides excellent examples of how this can be achieved.

A fundamental issue in autism is that of developing the child's capacity for performance in the social world. The author believes that this needs to be considered in terms of what it actually means to engage. This requires awareness and understanding of the developmental stages that are involved in achieving this. Traditional approaches to working with autism have been dominated by the use of a cognitive social deficit model. These tend to be very prescriptive and restrictive, thereby limiting possibilities and potential for growth by specifying an overly narrow focus of intervention that is predicated on prescribed stages of intervention. From this the ordinary assumptions about human behaviour and motivation do not apply. This book challenges that approach by providing activities that have structure and clarity but focus on the possibilities offered by creative engagement, participation and learning.

The content is divided into two parts. The first is for children who are in special educational settings and who are at the first point of intervention with services. The second part is more inclusive and focuses on groups of children, with and without autism, in mainstream education. This section provides activities and exercises that demonstrate interventions that facilitate the development of personal and social skills, which the author believes is the principal medium to "engage the individual and encouraging relatedness to others and to their world".

The structure of the book works well. It begins with setting the context and creating the space for using drama. By starting at the beginning with assessment the reader is brought to an understanding of the task and its rationale. Many examples are provided of the process from individual engagement to groupwork building skills. By using a variety of media and props such as puppetry, story telling, sculpting, roles plays and games it breaks down what the child needs to learn for social engagement that gradually builds capacity and increases their skills bank.

The target audience is teachers, therapists and parents. However, we think that if we change the lens from autism to social inclusion, this book can provide a useful resource for members of the social professions working in community and alternative educational settings. The examples documented have relevance and application to the promotion of social capital and can enhance the personal and social functioning of all people regardless of ability or disability.

In summary, the book provides many concrete ideas about how to approach and teach drama to children with autism and the challenges that can arise in group and drama work. We recommend this book to anyone who is interested in engaging and working with difference and diversity.

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Effective Groupwork
Michael Preston-Shoot
Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, (2nd ed.) 2007
ISBN 9781403905529 (pbk) £18.99

The second edition of Michael Preston-Shoot's *Effective Groupwork* (2007) is a welcome addition to the literature on this subject - not least because it provides important coverage of key issues in relation to groupwork theory and practice. Unsurprisingly, some chapters in this second edition duplicate those headings covered in the first edition of this text but with additional information added. These include chapters relating to Planning the Group; Working in Groups; and Supervision. Other chapters expand on earlier themes but expand on these in important ways - for example, the Introduction and Chapter One in the new edition provides an excellent and succinct account of the 'practice landscape' within which groupwork is currently located within the United Kingdom and the 'changing policy and organisational context for practice' (p. 9). Or again, the section in Chapter Nine on 'Evaluating and researching groupwork practice', provides a clear and convincing account of why it is important to 'strengthen the evidencing of groupwork and offer tools for researching more systematically what makes groups work' (p.171).

The practice approach that Preston-Shoot advocates is an anti-oppressive and empowerment perspective in ways that lie at the heart of effective and user-centred groupwork practice. This is described in Chapter Two, under the heading 'Practicing Groupwork Values': 'In essence, this values-based approach recognises people's resilience and capacity for growth and change' (p. 30) and 'The belief that group members have the ability to be self-directing' (31).

As with all texts, choices have to be made in terms of subject and topics are included and those that are not. For example, in Chapter Three, which covers the 'Types and Purposes of Groups', a number of important types of groups are summarised in brief including social groups, group psychotherapy, group counselling, educational groups, social treatment groups, discussion groups, self-help groups, social action groups and self-directed groups. However, what is missing from this account - somewhat surprisingly - is the importance of programme-based group approaches, such as those commonly used in the criminal justice system and in parenting groups. This is a serious omission and an

area where Preston-Shoot's analysis could have provided valuable insight and an important critique of how programme-based approaches link to the wider 'modernisation agenda', particularly the way that 'groupwork has increasingly been used for purposes related to social control and conformity rather than personal and interpersonal development' (p, 59). There is some important coverage of feminist, behaviourist, humanist and systems based approaches, under the heading 'Theoretical frameworks, styles of work and leadership' (p, 63) but I would argue that just as an anti-oppressive and empowerment based approach have a distinct features, so too do feminist approaches - and that this area of practice should have warranted much greater coverage.

Other areas that could have been strengthened relate to the fact that despite the publication of a range of new groupwork books and journal publications, these do not tend to inform to this text. For example, most of the publications cited tend to be clustered between 2001- 2003, with only six publications covering 2004-2006. Another shortcoming is evident in the limited coverage of direct practice experience within this text. Where practice examples are described, these tend to be drawn from other practitioners' experiences and practice accounts. This constitutes a lost opportunity - we are all member of groups and it would have been valuable if Preston-Shoot could have used his own experience as a member of a range of different groups to bring the link between and groupwork theory and practice theory and practice alive.

Yet despite these points, this is an important and accessible text and an excellent introduction to groupwork for students and practitioners working in a variety of social work and social care contexts - and one that provides an insightful account of the complexities of the policy context within which groupwork is currently located.

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