

Groupwork with children from a disadvantaged community

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Abstract : *Groupwork has proved to be a key choice in methods of intervention with children and young people in recent years and it is greatly implemented by the social workers in the agency where I have been placed for my work experience. This paper will examine the use of groupwork as a method of intervention for the children from a disadvantaged community, focusing on the a number of theories that are incorporated to assist and inform the social workers in their endeavour to alleviate the many problems faced by the children who attend this agency.*

This paper will furthermore acknowledge my role and observations in the group setting and discuss how groupwork participation has provided me with the opportunity to engage with children in a formal and informal structure in the workplace.

Keywords: confidence building; valued, socialization, strengths; resilience; role-models; groupwork

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Location of the group

The group I was involved with is from a disadvantaged community. The agency has committed itself to a neighbourhood-based approach to working with children and families. It has a value-based commitment to working with the excluded of society, those people who are poor, oppressed or alienated. There is a growing awareness of the value of community based family support services in Ireland and the work done here takes place on the level of early intervention. When working with vulnerable and at risk children it is better to intervene when a problem is in the early stages where this can have the greatest and most long-lasting effects on health, education and behaviour (Arturaz, 2007, p.308).

The environment in which the group conducts its work has a profound effect on how effective the group is. The social worker should ensure that the setting facilitates the group's work. The décor and comfort of the room and the availability of equipment and supplies all influence the group's leadership (Toseland and Rivas, 2001, p. 105). The group I was involved with is located in a community setting. The building is easily accessible and the children are within walking distance. A mini-bus collects the younger children and the groups are facilitated in a room that is warm, safe and child friendly. Comfortable seating is provided and many provisions are in place for the children and young people and a large room accommodates a pool table, table tennis, darts board, and indoor table soccer. Outside there is a grassed area where goal posts are set up. There is also a well-stocked art room and numerous games are available for the children. Children are made to feel welcome on arrival, and food such as fresh fruit, rolls and juice are available.

In this paper I will discuss my role in a group that caters for 12 year old boys and girls. There are 10 children in the group and it is an ongoing group. The children know each other well and many seem to have formed a bond inside and outside of the group. The group sessions last for one hour and are held once a week. Where home is stressful the best support strategy may be to help the young person find 'an arena of comfort' outside the home which may make home bearable (Canavan and Dolan, 2000, p.16).

An ongoing group for disadvantaged children

Many of the children who attend the group are growing up in poverty. There is considerable evidence to show that this has a great impact on children and their families and their life chances are substantially weakened by growing up in a disadvantaged community. Poor parenting is a big issue for many parents and their ability to parent effectively is often compromised by the many stressors they endure as a result of living in poverty. The stressors parents face are at individual, family and neighbourhood level. The family's environmental and social problems are typical of those living in a disadvantaged community. Their surroundings are physically dirty, crime ridden, dangerous and generally challenging places to live. Many of the parents suffer from ill health, emotional and mental health problems. Problems with alcohol and drugs are also evident. Multiple problems further compound parenting difficulties and the greater the number of stress factors - the less likely that the parent can care for their children effectively (Ghate and Hazel, 2004, p.16). This in turn reflects on the children and they present with many problems as a result of their upbringings. Children often exhibit behavioural problems, low self-esteem, developmental problems, hyperactivity, poor social skills to name but some. Despite concerns about poverty and child abuse and their adverse effects on children, it is still possible for at least some children to do well in difficult circumstances. This can happen if support can interact with the child's natural drive for normal development. The groupwork process is about mobilizing support for children's development in adverse circumstances. It is about counteracting the corrosive potential of poverty and other harm that can befall children in a disadvantaged community (Canavan and Dolan, 2000, p.13).

The children are referred through a variety of sources, including schools, social services, Gardaí and the children themselves. The children attend the agency voluntarily and this is based on the assumption that the work with the children is much more effective and productive when they attend because they want to. As a result of their environment and home situations the children have much in common. This gives the group a sense of homogeneity. The principle of homogeneity suggests that members should have a similar purpose for being in the group and have some personal characteristics in common.

Homogeneity facilitates communication and bonding and helps members to identify and relate to each other (Toseland and Rivas, 2001, p.167). This treatment group signifies a group whose major purpose is to meet the children's socio-emotional needs, where support, education, therapy, growth and socialization enable the children to develop and interact more effectively (Toseland and Rivas, 2001, p.15).

Theoretical perspectives

Groupwork can be used to develop social competence in children. It provides an opportunity for youngsters who are neglected to receive attention, those who are isolated to be more socially involved, and those who are rejected, to be accepted. Low levels of social incompetence are both a reflection of and a contributor to troubled family relationships. The lack of sufficient levels of social competence has come to be regarded as a significant drawback for children (Rose, 1999, p.109). Socialization groups help children learn social skills and socially accepted behaviour patterns so that they can function effectively in the community. Activities such as games, role-plays and outings help children to accomplish individual goals. The personal needs of children are often met through program activities rather than exclusively through group discussion. Thus, socialization groups feature a learning-through-doing approach in which members improve their interpersonal skills by participating in program activities. These recreational groups are particularly important for working with children. They can help children to learn community values, accepted norms of behaviour, develop interpersonal skills and feel a sense of belonging. In addition they help children develop confidence and self-esteem, which raises their ability to function as part of a group and in other social situations (Toseland and Rivas, 2001, p. 29).

The strengths perspective is also incorporated into the work done in this agency. In seeking to understand the needs and potential of children, groupwork is less concerned with deficits, pathology and risk and more concerned to find and value strengths (Canavan and Dolan, 2000, p. 16). The strengths perspective demands a different way of looking at children, their families and their communities. All must be seen in the light of their capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities,

visions, values and hopes, however dashed or distorted these may have become through circumstance, oppression, and trauma. The strengths approach requires an understanding of what people know and what they can do (Saleebey, 1996, p. 298). Strengths can come in the form of many guises. They can be found in the form of 'skills', for example, being good at mathematics, languages, sports and so forth. They can be found in the form of 'talents', for example, playing an instrument, singing, art, cooking. Strengths can also be found in the form of 'personal virtues', for example, patience, good insight, self-discipline, being trustworthy or having a sense of humour. Strengths can furthermore be found in the form of 'interpersonal skills', for example, comforting the sick, mediating conflict, reducing tension, and being considerate of others and so forth. Having good 'interpersonal and environmental resources' can also come into play and having strong intimate relationships with family, extended family, friends and others can be considered to be a valuable strength (Saleebey, 2001, p.185).

Through working with children's strengths we are also improving their chances of increasing their resilience. Resilience is used to account for a child's capacity to develop well, despite life conditions of significant risk (Cited in Wyman et al, 1999, p. 645). For these children it is necessary to search for the presence of 'protective' factors that presumably compensate for those 'risk' elements that are found in the lives and in the environments of many disadvantaged children. Some refer to resilient children as 'stress resistant children', or 'invulnerable children' (Garmezy, 1993, p.130). Where a child's external environmental supports have been ineffective, the safety of the group may provide an opportunity for the child to experience the group as a secure, effective and valuable social milieu. All children have strengths and resilience, even though for some those strengths have been dampened by circumstances in the home. Our job is to mobilize and build on children's strengths and resilience. Resiliency has been defined as a 'set of qualities, or protective mechanisms that give rise to successful adaptation despite the presence of high risk factors during the course of development' (Benard in Howard et al, 1999, p. 309). The ability to interact socially with others appears to be a very strong trait characterizing resilient children. Responsiveness to others by being flexible, empathetic, caring, communicative and possessing a sense of humour are examples of these social qualities. Studies found that

among the factors associated with resilience in vulnerable children were the availability of caring adults outside of the home, who acted as role models and assisted the children with realistic goals. The life stories of resilient youngsters now grown into adulthood teach us that competence, confidence and caring can flourish, even under adverse circumstances if children encounter persons who provide them with the secure basis for the development of trust, autonomy and initiative (Canavan and Dolan, 2000, p.19).

There is also a strong influence from the humanistic perspective. The humanistic groupwork method aims to develop and sustain a particular kind of a small face to face group that is built on selected values which link its members to each other through a distinct set of affective bonds. These affects include trust, care, respect, acceptance and anger. These values and feelings are used to develop and intensify the children's individual and interpersonal potentials in the context of their needs and interests. The aim of the humanistic method is the development of effective behaviour for the group and the members, within the group's milieu and its external environment. The method's objectives are designed to assist the children with their interactional and problem solving processes. Humanistic values shape children's stances and attitudes about themselves and others within the group. Humanistic values for social groupwork have stood the test of time as a fundamental means for the development of group experiences and members are seen as individuals of inherent self-worth, and are mutually responsible for each other (Glassman and Kates, 1990, p.13)

My role and behaviour in the group

My first encounter with the group was a little daunting. Everybody knew each other and they were all familiar with the group norms. The group leader ensured that I was acknowledged in the group and everybody got the chance to say their name and tell us about something they liked doing. I had the opportunity to repeat all the names back again and to recall what each child liked to do. It was a difficult task but certainly helped me retain many of the children's names. The ground rules of the group are discussed and the children participate by taking it in turns to relate them. They feel valued and listened to. The

children are reminded of the effects of bullying and the importance of respecting everyone in the group.

As informal educators we are concerned about imparting knowledge that will assist the children in a hope that they will lead more fulfilling lives. Learning in groups can promote self-empowerment and children's ability to make choices for themselves. We are using the medium of association to enable children to gain and provide mutual aid, a sense of belonging, identity and self-esteem, and to foster learning, change and development (Harrison and Wise, 2005,p. 114). Providing opportunities for children to engage in activities that they enjoy is so beneficial. Soccer, table tennis, pool, art, food preparation, board games, singing, talking to and listening to the children, learning about their personalities and traits, what interests they have and most importantly providing an atmosphere of fun is an important role for me. Every little detail of what we do counts. The rituals, the smiles, the interest in little things, the daily routines, the talents we nurture, the interests we stimulate, the hobbies we encourage, the friendships we support. All these things may foster in a child the vital sense of belonging, of mattering, of counting. All of these little things we do, these details, may prove decisive turning points in a child's developmental pathway (Gilligan in Canavan and Dolan, 2000,p. 18). Conversely, being in a group can also confirm feelings of isolation; reinforce oppressive behaviour or damage self-esteem. There is no doubt that this happens and it is important to establish ways of working which can avoid – or at least limit – these risks. Children can be very hurtful and say things that can impact negatively on other children. This was the case at one of the sessions. Two boys were teasing a boy who has a learning disability and attends a special school. He was very distressed by their remarks. I intervened quickly to reassure the little boy and made it clear to the other two boys that their behaviour was insensitive and I reminded them of the group rules. It is important to be vigilant in groups especially groups with children. Cruel words can be so damaging and children can be extra-sensitive about remarks made to them by other children. A useful way to deal with this would be to monitor the situation. If it continues to be a concern subsequent attention should be given to resolving the problem (Glasser et al, 1974, p.113).

There is a high staff-child ratio and the humanistic method is

evident immediately the children enter the room. The children are valued as individuals and consideration for all group members and workers is apparent. Caring, mutual aid, cooperation, inclusivity, open participation and respect for each other is the format and it is expressed in a child friendly format appropriate for the ages of the children who attend. I have been able to incorporate the humanistic in this group in a number of ways. I noticed at one session that two of the boys were a little withdrawn. They were new to the group and they appeared to be a little overwhelmed by the group experience, and I got the sense that one boy was feeling particularly anxious. I asked them would they like to go into the art room where they could make something or do some painting. They both agreed and relaxed immediately. They looked around the art room for suitable materials. When they had sourced them, they sat down to work on their pieces of art. While they were engrossed in their work we were able to engage in a small face-to-face group where the boys were able to interact genuinely and un-defensively. They told me much about themselves – their families, their schools and their pets. They were able to express themselves freely and contribute openly to the conversation. I was informed later by a member of staff that one boy had been living with his grandparents in a rural setting. He had just recently returned to the community to live with his mother and father and a large number of siblings. The father was a chronic alcoholic and often went missing for days. There was terrible hardship in the family and the mother often called to the agency to ask for financial support. The other boy was living at home with his mother, his stepfather and a number of siblings. His home life seemed to be more encouraging, however the community setting was a poor environment for this boy who was very vulnerable and an easy target for bullies. It was encouraging to note that as the weeks progressed the boys became more relaxed and confident in themselves and interacted more effectively with the other children and workers.

Observations of roles and behaviours

The group has a leader and three co-leaders. I found at the beginning of my placement that I was looking to the leader for guidance and tasks to perform in the group. However, this did not seem to happen and it has become evident to me that the interactional model of leadership seems to be the favoured method of running the group. The interactional model of leadership views leadership as a shared function that is not lodged solely in the designated group leader (Toseland and Rivas, 2001, p.102). This method was very liberating and I used the opportunity to work with children who I felt were excluded from the group. There were two children in particular in the group who I felt needed extra attention. They were withdrawn and had poor social skills. I discovered that one boy enjoyed solving problems and was particularly interested in lateral thinking. I downloaded some pages with many problems to solve and we spent some time working together on these. The other child has an interest in animals, and we spent time discussing her pets and I told her about all of the animals I had as a child. It was rewarding to see the children coming out of themselves and contributing to the conversation. I think my best memory of the group was the day many of the children (including the children who had been withdrawn at the beginning stage of the group process) decided to dress up in fancy dress clothes. There is a large box full of wigs, hats, costumes, and funny outfits in the games room. The children put on a variety of mismatched items, screaming with laughter as they saw their reflections in the mirror. They then proceeded to dress me up in a wig, and a hat and wrapped a feather boa scarf around my neck. The highlight of the session was when they started to sing and dance, all trying to outdo each other. I hope that the memory of that day stays with them always. I know it will with me.

Acting as a good role model is very important and for many social workers, being, thinking and acting in a certain way is not often thought about as a conscious means of moving people on. However, our actions are frequently far more powerful than our words would ever help to be. The adoption by a worker of a particular style of working and living can be a most effective way to demonstrate to young people with behavioural problems or poor social skills, that there are alternative ways of being and behaving. This role model method may

not seem to impress on children immediately however, it has been particularly evident to me through visits from adults - who attended this agency as children. Adults, who attended as children, often call in for a social visit. Their social skills are very good and they interact with staff members extremely well. The staff have often remarked after the visit on how the visitor presented as a child. They often exhibited poor social skills, behavioural problems and were often very challenging. By attempting to act, even in the most difficult circumstances, with a guiding philosophy of concern and respect towards children, there is a strong possibility of breaking that cycle. By attempting to follow this principle, however difficult, the long-term effect is positive in terms of relationships with young people (Rosseter in Jeffs and Smith, 1987, p. 60).

Social workers also use discussion, which broadens the limited experience of each member, to promote an understanding of problem-solving ideas. Some discussions are related to crises in the group as a whole or to personal crisis experienced by individual members, with the likelihood of the occurrence of the discussions being in direct relation to the degree of difficulties experienced by the group and the individual members (Rose, 1998, p.117). An example of this would relate to a spate of suicides of young people in the community where I was placed. Many of the children were aware of the suicides and indeed some knew the young people who had died. We used the group as an opportunity to discuss this very concerning topic. The group entered into a productive discussion. It was noted how informed the children were about the topic of suicide even at such a young age.

Reflections on what I have learnt from the experience

My involvement with this group for 12 year old boys and girls has provided me with the opportunity to work with children from a disadvantaged community in the groupwork setting. I have relied greatly on a number of theoretical perspectives to guide me during this time and it is evident to me that they have been beneficial in a number of ways. The Strengths Theory informs us that every child has strengths, skills, understanding, and ability to do things for

themselves. We must value children's strengths and focus on the positive contributions children bring with them.

The Humanistic approach is very effective and this was incorporated into my work with the children. Showing kindness and respect seemed to bring out the best in the children and they rarely gave cause for us to reprimand them. The children responded so well to this approach and they were able to relax and be themselves in the group setting. I used my time to talk to the children, I showed an interest in their lives, I listened to them, and encouraged them and I also played games with them and praised them when they did well. All of these actions helped them to feel important and special and this helped to increase self-esteem and confidence. This was evident in many ways but more so in the children's ability to interact with the workers and the other children. Their beliefs, thoughts, attitudes, emotional feelings, behaviour, motivation, interest and participation in events, activities and expectations for the future will all be significantly influenced by their level of self-esteem. Clearly, a child's self-esteem is likely to improve if they can acquire competence and confidence in these areas. It is believed that, for most children, work in a group provides the best opportunity for self-esteem improvement (Geldard and Geldard, 1997, p.210).

Resilience is also very important and it was a word I heard regularly on this fieldwork experience. I must admit that I found the word somewhat confusing and it was only by researching into the term that I now have a better understanding of it. Resilience has been defined as 'the self-righting tendencies' of the child, both the capacity to be bent without breaking and the capacity, once bent, to spring back into shape' (Webster in Wyman et al, 1999, p. 645). However, it does not suggest that a child is incapable of being affected by adversity; it means that a child can bend, lose some of his or her power and capacity, yet subsequently recover and return to the prior level of his or her power and capability. The prior position presumably is one that reflects certain competencies and it is to this state that the resilient child returns to as stress is reduced or compromised (Garmezy, 1993, p. 129).

Conclusion

Children in disadvantaged communities are prone to develop a wide range of social problems as a result of their circumstances. However, many of the social problems are amenable to prevention or intervention through the medium of groupwork (Rose, 1998, p.76). This was certainly the case in my fieldwork placement and as the weeks went by I realized that despite all the justifiable concerns about poverty, poor parenting, neglect and their adverse effects on children, it is still possible for at least some children to do well in difficult circumstances (Gilligan in Ferguson and Kenny, 1995,p.61). Participation in groups help children learn acceptable norms of social behaviour, engage in satisfying social relationships, identify personal goals and derive a variety of other benefits that result from participating in these very advantageous social systems (Toseland and Rivas, 2001, p. 3).

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