

# Editorial

## **Introduction: Documenting the process**

There is nothing quite so powerful as an idea whose time has come. This phrase captures our experiences in September, 2007 when we (Guest Editors Paul Johnson and Mary Wilson) both attended the twelfth European Group Work Symposium in York. What had been so impressive about this symposium was the number of students who had attended and the positive way in which they contributed. At the time, we noted that the presence and inputs from the students had greatly enriched the event.

In the spring of 2009, Paul had the opportunity to teach a groupwork course in the MSW program at the University of Southern Maine's School of Social Work. What immediately struck him when teaching the course was the vast array of settings the students were placed in and the amount of groupwork they were undertaking. Over the course of the semester, he suggested that all the students in the class write about their respective groups and the work they had undertaken.

He was amazed by the responses he received and determined to reach a wider audience e-mailed Mark Doel, then Co-Editor of *Groupwork*. Mark informed him that Mary Wilson had also commented upon the high quality of the students' work in her groupwork class at University College Cork, which uses a similar method of assessment, based on documenting the students' fieldwork practice experiences. With a view to developing a collaboration based on our teaching experiences we agreed to propose a special edition of the Journal that would focus on students' work in their respective field work placement settings. This

proposal was put to the Autumn Meeting in 2009. Mary recorded that the Board were extremely enthusiastic about this project, and it was determined that eight papers would be included in the special edition, four from University College Cork, and four from the University of Southern Maine.

### **The contributors**

The UCC contributors are BSW students. The BSW is a programme exclusively for mature/non-traditional students, who bring a rich repertoire of previous life and work experiences to their professional formation. The USM contributors are MSW students. As postgraduates they demonstrate their increased sophistication and understanding of the conceptual and practice spheres. Both sets of writers attest to the strength and diversity that exists in the education and training of practitioners in the social professions.

The four papers from UCC are written by Margaret Deasy, Pádraig O Driscoll, Sarah Madden and Steven Peet. The four from USM are written by Erin Benner, Todd Marquis Boutin, Katherine Lamore and Amy Westcott. All papers provide a 'snapshot' of work that was undertaken in the process of the professional formation of these social work students in field work training. This concept of the *practice analysis* as it is termed in Ireland and at USM has the aim and outcome of providing opportunities for students to use interventions in the field/action that been introduced conceptually in the classroom. The skills of integrating 'theory for practice' appear to have been enhanced as a result. The students, speaking from a diversity of contexts, show the implementation of theory; the role of values in facilitating social inclusion; risk and creativity in practice; and the role of groupwork in both specialist and generalist settings, all give clear voice to these processes in their papers.

Margaret Deasy's paper, 'Groupwork with children from a disadvantaged community', addresses working with a group of twelve year old youngsters, who resided in a disadvantaged and excluded community in Cork city. She provides vivid descriptions of the geography of area and its impact on life chances. Margaret identifies and discusses the theoretical perspectives that guided her practice.

Strengths perspectives and humanistic approaches in conjunction with resiliency theory are reviewed and applied for their capacity to enhance self esteem and promote strategies of mutual aid. Margaret goes on to discuss the positive changes she observed in the children while examining the challenges for her practice as a result of the experience. Finally, she reflects on the lessons she has learned from conducting this group.

Pádraig O Driscoll's paper 'Planning the CLAP Group', discusses the planning of a group for pre-adolescent children who have a physical condition known as Cleft Lip and Palate Facial disfigurement in a large acute hospital in Cork city. Using the Kurland and Salmon model he outlines need, purpose, composition, structure and context. What Pádraig does so well is to take the reader through all these steps underlining the importance of meticulous preparation. He clearly articulates the strength's perspective which will guide his intervention and contribute to perceptions of group members as strong and resilient. The implications for leadership and group facilitation are examined in the context of values for empowering practice for children and facilitators.

Sarah Madden's paper, 'For parent's sake', reflects on her facilitation of a mutual support group for parents whose children have offended or are at risk of offending. Sarah eloquently recounts the parent's experiences of dealing with their children's' challenging behaviours while searching for a means of validating their existing skills and strengths. Prior to the group, the parents felt extremely isolated, believing that they were bad parents. However, as Sarah noted, one of the group's greatest achievement was that the parents acknowledged the benefit of the support they received. They were also able to reflect on their own responses, and by implication, came the realisation that they needed to allow their children to take responsibility for their behaviors. The value of mutual aid and of service users as *experts by experience* are clearly articulated in this work which has resulted in an ongoing programme of intervention within the agency.

Steven Peet's 'Men's group' documents his first experience of establishing and running a therapeutic group for men who had mental health issues and is located in a rural area of Ireland. Steven takes the reader through all the phases that resulted from 'being dropped into the deep end' of the process and articulates his learnings as a result. He

presents the agency context in which the group was located and explores the theoretical orientation that guided his work. The development of the group, the activities undertaken and their impact on members reveal clearly the learning trajectory and challenges encountered by all involved. What is also impressive about this paper is that Steven is forthright in his reflections on the lessons he learned from conducting this group.

In her paper, 'Looking systematically at group development, structure, and function in an eating disorder program', Erin Benner considers the importance of self reflection, and the need to evaluate one's own practice. She talks about the group members' ambivalence around attending and participating in the group and how at times the individual's own concerns and needs are addressed by the entire group, which enables the individual not to feel so alone in this process. The value of mutual aid and solidarity are of critical importance in such interventions.

Todd Marquis Boutin's paper, 'The Resident Athletic League', addresses the benefits of a sports-based 'interpersonal effectiveness' group for adolescent males who are in a residential treatment program. He identifies a number of groupwork theories that underlie the Resident Athletic League and points out the theoretical underpinnings that direct his work. He also explains how he implemented these theories in practice and provides the reader with three examples of the residents' group experience. The immediacy of the voices of service users is a particular feature of this paper.

Kathy LaMore's paper on the 'Use of Alzheimer Family Support Group by community-residing caregivers' emphasizes how caregivers and loved ones of people with the disease are often challenged on a daily basis – emotionally, mentally, and physically. Being with other people in similar situations encourages group members to share information, exchange coping skills, give and receive mutual support, and enable them to openly vent their feelings and frustrations. The concepts of mutual aid and empowerment are central to the approach undertaken.

Amy Westcott's paper looks at 'Meeting individual needs in recreational groupwork for people with dementia'. Amy discusses how this population has been marginalized by society and has experienced multiple losses beyond those of memory and cognitive ability. She then goes on to look at a number of theories that are applicable to this

population and puts forward the assertion that overall, improving the quality of life for people with dementia demands engagement in person centered recreational activities that focus on the individual's present needs and strengths. It is Amy's assertion that facilitating this kind of engagement is not only of benefit to those individuals marginalized by society's treatment of dementia, but also our health-care system, communities and society as a whole.

## **Theory 2 Practice**

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, David Ward asked the question 'where has all the groupwork gone? (Ward, 2009, p. 115). It seems we have an answer here! It is alive and well and being practised by social workers in training in Europe and the United States. Both UCC and USM adhere to generalist models of social work education and training, which acknowledges the importance of social action/social justice perspectives in the students' professional formation. Being of service and working in partnership with service users appear throughout the papers as interventions reflecting this core value.

The variety of agencies or services in which the work was undertaken is also worthy of note. Students were facilitated to engage in practice across a wide range of contexts and a diverse spectrum of practice populations. The partnership between college and field, student and service user, teacher and pupil reflect in microcosm the social work project in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We find it is relevant, and respectful of and responsive to service user need; it works collaboratively to build communities that increase the level of provision from service providers, extend the networks available to service users and offer professional training opportunities for students.

One of the wonderful elements in all the students' papers is their willingness to reflect upon themselves in this process. Here we find honesty, acknowledging mistakes; looking at their own learning in the process; what worked and what did not; what they could have done differently; doubts and fears. Unfortunately, many of the papers that we read in social work journals are 'perfect.' By that we mean, they are written by experts with years of practice wisdom. That is fine, but often what does not come across in the writing are the complexities

and struggles the group facilitator or service provider has gone through. Hence they often appear as a little detached, and leave the reader feeling somewhat in awe. What is marvelous about the eight student papers is that their fears and trepidations; concerns, new learnings, various approaches and willingness to try something different, all emerge clearly in these papers. There is something refreshing and honest about them.

To those of you who are currently studying we trust that you will read these articles and draw some parallels to your own work in your respective placement settings. If in the past you have thought you could never undertake a group, we hope that perhaps after reading the eight papers by your peers you may reconsider. Remember, it isn't just about getting it right. Rather, it's about taking risks, challenging yourself and looking at new ways of doing your work. We acknowledge that groupwork is challenging, but believe that the benefits far out weigh the negatives. For we who teach about groupwork, the learning from the students' reflections has been about the importance of providing a good theoretical foundation, encouraging the development of a strong value base and facilitating greater visibility and validity for groupwork as a mainstream method of intervention in practice. To those of you, who read *Groupwork* on a regular basis; please share this edition with your students whether it is at your respective university, or in the field work placement site. So to all of you out there conducting groupwork, or contemplating it, as the TV commercial says: 'Just do it!'

To the eight students and all the students that were in our classes, thank you for writing such wonderful papers and sharing your work and insights with us. To the Editorial Board, thank you for agreeing to publish this special issue of student papers.

**Paul Johnson and Mary Wilson**

## **References**

- Ward, Dave, (2002) Where has all the groupwork gone? in R. Adams, L. Dominelli and M. Payne *Critical Practice in Social Work*. (2nd ed.) 2009, Aldershot: Palgrave Macmillan (pp. 115-124)