

Editorial

We recently said goodbye to a group of young people – our current team of Associate Research Assistants – young people we had worked with as research colleagues over the past two years. Whilst they are 6 dynamic and inspirational individuals, their work with us was almost entirely based on groupwork; so it was natural that we chose a group activity to say farewell – we went out to dinner together.

Groupwork permeated their time with us, and demonstrated the wide applicability and adaptability of groupwork. Even at their interview and selection day – there was groupwork. Groupwork was at the core of their learning about research, they facilitated focus groups as part of research and we used groupwork exercises to analyse data, and indeed disseminate findings of research. They developed considerable skills as groupworkers themselves.

The groupwork was at the core their training, which was based on both peer education and on collective learning which could be sustained beyond the end of the specific training. Groupwork, with its collaborative commitment to achieving group goals and purposes on issues identified and owned by the group members themselves, was a perfect approach for this work. Groupwork ensured that decisions were a shared responsibility and that members felt empowered.

We employ young people as researchers as we believe that they can and should be involved in all stages of the research process: deciding the parameters of the research, its framework, the questions, and who should be involved, collecting and analysing the data, presenting and using the information gathered. Our research is participatory in that it seeks not only to discover meaning but also to explore its properties with the people who are the focus of the research. Information is generated and verified with young people themselves. As a group the Associate Research Assistants decided in the course of their research projects ‘What do we want to know? How will we find out? Who do we need to talk to?’ They devised the information collection process, agreed the people who should be interviewed, collected information and took part in the analysis of data, were involved to a greater or lesser extent in

producing reports, disseminating and acting on the findings.

Young people offer different perspectives; they challenge us as academic researchers, so that working in partnership with young researchers provides many opportunities for us to learn. The benefits for the young researchers include those common to much groupwork, as is highlighted by many articles in *Groupwork* – for example, gains in self-confidence and self-esteem, meeting new people and gaining knowledge and skills which can be useful, among other benefits, in seeking further employment. In addition they tell us they gain the understanding that their views matter and they have an ability to effect change. Indeed this is the most common reason young people give us for wanting to be involved in research - they want it to inform change and improve children and young people's lives.

At our farewell dinner we opened the 'time capsules' we had all made on their first day at work. This was a card carefully sealed in individual envelopes on which we had each written down our hopes and fears for working together. Interestingly one fear we all shared was that we would not meet the expectations of the others in the group and might let the group down. Reflective to the end, the young people shared with each other examples of how this had not in their opinion been true. Whilst there had indeed been some disappointments, they valued the mutual support and encouragement they had received and given, recognising how much they had learnt from each other and the value of the group experience.

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This issue of *Groupwork* has in it important articles that also reflect the diversity of groupwork. We open with an article by Jeanmarie Keim, Harue Ishii, Kristopher Goodrich and David L Olguin who set their article in an educational setting. It focuses on the use of experiential groupwork as a means of learning counselling skills. The article considers how groupwork can reduce ethical and multiple role issues in counselling education. They identify that whilst many group counselling skills were developed in the course of the groupwork process, not all the required skills were acquired. Their results lead to new questions for research and pedagogical interventions.

David Woodger and Jean Anastacio also write about groupwork in an educational setting, and using experiential groupwork as a tool to learn practice skills, this time for Youth and Community Work. They

provide a practice account of large groupwork and discuss how it can enable students to reflect on practice and develop critical awareness. Students are encouraged to give deep consideration to important issues such as racism, heterosexism and challenging oppression, noting there is a mis-match between this exploration and more conventional teaching which can be disconcerting. Drawing on students' contributions the article demonstrates that groupwork is an effective tool for teaching and learning.

In the third paper Jennie Fleming and Dave Ward write about how self-directed groupwork can be used as a flexible tool for service user empowerment and participation across a range of contexts, all seeking effective ways to bring about social change. Their paper sets out the principles and process of the self-directed groupwork model with a main focus on how people are putting the model into practice. It considers the role of the facilitator and how groupwork tasks are undertaken, and highlights that although self-directed groupwork is practised by a range of professionals it is equally used by self-run groups with no input from a professional worker.

The final paper in this issue is by Laura Bronstein and Susan E. Mason. It considers the use of serial focus-groups in research into the contribution of older volunteers on community projects. Their research using groupwork found that older people make a significant contribution through their voluntary work; it benefits both the older people themselves, the organisations they work in and also the community more widely. However for this to happen there needs to be clarity of expectations and adequate support. The paper also suggests that serial focus groups be given greater consideration as a research method.

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