

Group work is a key youth work process. Discuss, from your professional perspective if the process can make an effective contribution to reducing oppression?

This paper aims to discuss whether or not group work as a key youth work process, can make an effective contribution to reducing oppression. The focus will be on youth work, group work and oppression. The author will contextualise this discussion through examining theory with regards to: the importance of attaining a critical understanding and commitment to equality and diversity; the key principles and values of youth work with regards to professional practice and interventions; the role of group work and group processes in professional practice; and, being able to manage conflict and challenge prejudice and oppression within groups.

Young people enjoy congregating in social groups to 'plan and organise their own social activities' (Gordon, 1989, p.14). However, modern society perceives these informal gatherings and young people as a 'threat' (Garratt, Roche & Tucker, 1997). In British society, young people experience numerous modes of oppression according to their personal circumstance, in addition to an imbalance of cultural, structural, and political hegemony (Chouhan, 2009, p.63). Furthermore, they are regularly exposed to prejudices and stereotyping by way of the media (Mitchell et al, 2009). Oppression has been defined by Freire (2006, p.37) as 'any situation in which 'A' exploits 'B' or hinders his or her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression'. Freire (2006) holds the view that critical pedagogy is paramount in the process of empowering young people to challenge oppression. As social educators, Nicholls (2012, p.11-12) maintains youth workers 'are on the side of young people for the purpose of emancipating their minds and altering the social constraints on them'. Therefore, this paper will argue that group work as a youth work process, can make an effective contribution to reducing oppression.

Equality, diversity and human rights are essential values for a fair-minded democratic society. These values foster equality of opportunity for one and all, ensuring individuals develop towards achieving their full potential, unrestricted by prejudice and discrimination. A society absent of mutual respect, an apprehension for others needs, and the 'associative life'; will be a society where oppression thrives (Garratt et al, 1997).

Youth work is a value-based practice rooted in the respect for young people, in addition to the principles of equal opportunities and inclusion (Davies, 2005; Banks, 1999; Young, 1999). Chouhan (2009) holds the view that anti-oppressive practice which challenges oppression and discrimination towards young people is a fundamental principle of youth work. Banks (1999 p.9) suggests these values and principles offer a precious 'reference point' for youth workers during professional practice and interventions. Additionally, Banks (1999, p.11) maintains that the values and principles of youth work 'serve to encourage youth workers to think through, discuss and reflect on the implications of their decisions and actions'. However, the author advocates that the values and principles of youth work are of little worth, if youth workers do not possess the moral courage, integrity, ethics, and passion to champion them. Furthermore, the author holds the view that it is insupportable for youth workers just to demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of equality and diversity; their actions and attitudes must express a profound respect for democratic values. Jeffs and Smith (1996, p.53) refer to this as youth workers having 'moral authority', or as Davies (2010, p.5) suggests, 'action has to be put where the mouth is'.

Although youth work is a value-based practice and is often referred to as a distinctive practice due to this; Davies (2005, p.6) argues that it is the methods and 'how it seeks to express those values', in particular its 'process', which defines youth work's distinctiveness. Davies(2005,p.8) and Banks (1999,p.10) support the view that youth work is characterised by values that respects 'a voluntary relationship with young people'; 'values association'; 'values young people participating democratically'; 'and engages in an informal educational process that starts where young people are

starting, and seeks to go beyond that'. In addition, Banks (1999, p.10-11) suggests that youth workers should have a commitment to ethical principles that 'respect young people; 'respect and promote young people's rights to make their own decisions and choices; 'promote and ensure the welfare and safety of young people'; 'contribute towards the promotion of social justice for young people in society'; 'practise with integrity, compassion, courage and competence'.

Young (2006, p.109) argues that the purpose of youth work 'is to engage young people in moral philosophy through which they can make sense of themselves, their experiences and their world'. What is more, Young (2006, p.110) suggests that this purpose is established through 'voluntary relationships' that 'accepts and values young people'. The outcomes from this process of reflection and self-examination is that it supports young people 'take charge of themselves as empowered and authentic human beings' (Young, 2006, p.110). Freire (2006) proposed that comprehending one's critical consciousness through education form liberalisation, empowers an individual to take action against oppression. Therefore, it may be plausible to argue that youth work's philosophical approach has real significance with regards to challenging oppression and promoting equality and diversity. Primarily, due to youth work being in a position to facilitate anti-oppressive practice; grounded upon voluntary participation, informal learning, and a clear emphasis on democracy and association; as well as fostering 'group experiences' for young people to develop human and social capital. Young people being partners in this learning process and decision making, will empower them to challenge their own oppression, as well as oppression directed at other groups(Gore, 2007: Smith,2008: Young,2006).

In Wales there is a clear and robust commitment in law, Government policy, and within the Youth Service, to promote the rights of children and young people; in addition to advocating participation in decision-making; quality and diversity; and challenging oppression. The National Assembly for Wales adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) as the foundation for its entire policy making and legislation, with regards to children and young people.

The author suggests that legislation alone will not sufficiently challenge the oppression of young people, and promote equality and diversity. Although it is advantageous for protecting their rights, the Welsh Youth Service is better placed to be proactive and champion the rights of young people in Wales. Youth work in Wales is committed to the education and development, both social and personal, of young people aged between 11 and 25 years (WAG, 2007). The Youth Work in Wales: Principles and Purposes (Youth Work in Wales Group, 2013) advocates this is based 'primarily on a voluntary relationship' encompassing a 'universal entitlement' (YWWRG, 2013, p.2). Furthermore, it is value based and founded upon 'respect for young people' and the 'principles of inclusion and equal opportunity' (YWWRG, 2013, p.5). Young people are provided with opportunities for learning that are 'educative, expressive, participative, inclusive, and empowering' (ibid). This is facilitated within an informal/non-formal environment, where the outcomes for young people are; 'active participation', 'wider skills development', and 'enhanced emotional competence' (WAG, 2007, p.7). Within the context of this paper, it is important to establish that youth work in Wales is concerned with issues of 'oppression', 'equality', and 'diversity' (YWWRG, 2013, p.5); and that youth work practices through a variety of methods, most notably group work.

The Youth Work National Occupational Standards (LSIS, 2012, p.35) states;

The importance of equity, diversity and inclusion is one of the values which youth workers are expected to know about and apply when working with groups of young people.

(LSIS, 2012, p.35)

Group work is central to the youth work 'process' (Davies, 2010: Jeffs & Smith, 2008: Patton, 2010). Historically, group work has been embedded within youth work rhetoric and practice (Patton, 2010). The Albemarle Report (HMSO, 1960) makes reference to the importance of group work within the context of youth work practice, by articulating that 'encouraging young people to come together in to groups of their own choosing is a fundamental task of the Service' (HMSO, 1960:52). Additionally, The Albemarle Report (HMSO, 1960) also heavily emphasised the significance of encouraging the development of 'associational life' for young people. Group work theorists (Gordon, 1989: Hirsch, 2005: Milson, 1982) argue that young people learn best through 'informal social interaction' within groups, and there are emotional and biological benefits from being part of a group. Moreover, they gain a 'sense of connectedness or community' (Patton, 2010 p.112). Putman (2000, cited in Patton, 2010) in his research found that this contributed to greater 'civic communities', which benefited from greater cohesion, trust and tolerance.

A group may be best illustrated as three or more individuals congregating to accomplish a particular task, the accomplishment of which will encompass interdependency and interaction by the members (Adams, 1993). Groups may be categorised into sub-groups such as: social group, interest group, family group, task group. Young people may be members of these different groups; however, their choice of membership may be obligatory, voluntary or limited. For example, attending school is compulsory for young people and therefore the school class is regarded as a 'formal group'. Whereas they are at liberty to choose their peer friendship group within the school class, thus this is considered an 'informal group' (Adams, 1993, p.309). Youth work engages with young people in formal group settings and informal settings. A formal group setting may be a Youth Club or Community Centre. Due to the fact formal groups operate under public rules and have requirements for membership. However, within these formal group settings, youth work is concerned with providing 'associational spaces' for informal group settings to form and develop. Informal groups also have stipulations for membership, rules (norms) and beliefs.

Although informal groups differ from formal groups by virtue of being more flexible and relaxed with regards to membership, rules (norms) and beliefs (ibid). Adams (1993, p.314) suggests that young people forming informal groups within formal settings have the opportunity to 'break a mould that others expect of them'. Thomson et al (2004) contend that youth work needs to challenge this stereotyping of young people, and present positive images of them. Furthermore, Putman (2000, cited in Patton, 2010) considers these settings to be fundamental in the development of social capital within communities (Patton, 2010).

Formal and informal groups both experience the various stages of group life. These stages were categorised by Tuckman (1965), Llewelyn and Fielding (1982). They were defined as forming, storming, norming, performing and mourning (Adams, 1993: Sapin, 2009). Tuckman's (1965, cited in Adams, 1993) theory focuses on the development of a group through well-defined phases. It commences with the initial formation through to the accomplishment of the task. The theory asserts that these stages are essential and inescapable for a group to fully-form, function and move forward to the completion of the task. However, the group may travel back and forth through the stages dependent on circumstances. For instance: when a member departs or a new member arrives; when the task alters; when the group is affected by external influences; and internal conflict resulting from the establishment of power and roles (Adams, 1993). This learning process in terms of social educational development, will foster self-determination and group self-determination; by reason of members acknowledging their own needs as well as the needs of the group; in addition to endeavouring to resolve conflict and reach a 'true consensus' within the group (ibid). What is more, Putman (2000, cited in Patton, 2010) advocates this will also nurture trust, tolerance, and acceptance, through dialogue and conversation. Putman (2000, ibid) further argued that joining and belonging to a group, developed social and human capital. Putman's (2000, ibid) research established links between the development of social capital and social networks, and improved 'associational life', health, and quality of life.

The work of Putman (2000, cited in Patton, 2010) focusing on social capital and social networks is of great relevance to informal educators and youth work (Patton, 2010), and may be linked to the three broad outcomes of youth work outlined in the National Youth Service Strategy for Wales (WAG, 2007). For example: '*Active participation*' and improved 'health, fitness and well-being'. '*Wider skills development*', as regards to 'team building', 'communication', and 'learning to learn'. '*Enhanced emotional competence*', taking into account improved 'self-awareness', 'self-worth', as well as 'empathy with and consideration for others' (WAG, 2007, p.7).

This paper has so far discussed the purpose as well as associated principles and values of youth work. It has demonstrated the commitment of the Youth Service to equality and diversity and its challenge of oppression. Furthermore, the paper has explored the theory of groups within the context of youth work; in addition to establishing group work is a key youth work process. Finally, the paper will bring together the authors knowledge and understanding of youth work and group work, and address the issue of oppression. The author will address the issue of oppression from his own professional perspective, focusing on issues of interest related to his work.

The experience of being mistreated or oppressed as a young person is the first form of discrimination that the majority of adults may have been subjected to. However, adults appear to lose sight of this fact as they transcend out of adolescence to adulthood. Consequently, the mistreatment or oppression of young people due to the fact they are simply 'young', is widespread in today's society (Garratt, Roche & Tucker, 1997). For example, young people do not enjoy equal freedom of rights as adults do within the context of law. This is evident under the 2003 Anti-Social Behaviour Act, with regards to police being able to 'disperse young people' even if they have not engaged in 'anti-social behaviour'. Therefore, young people may unquestionably consider themselves as an oppressed group (Mitchell et al, 2009).

The author will now draw on his own personal experience from his University work placement in order to demonstrate how group work as a youth work process, can make an effective contribution to reducing oppression. The author's work placement was with a Youth and Community Project, which was a non-profit/non-governmental organisation. The relationship between the young people and adults within the local community were strained and fragile. The young people felt alienated, as well as being treated unfairly and viewed negatively by the adults. The adults complained about the young people's 'anti-social behaviour' (based on prejudice) and viewed them as being a 'disruptive element' of their community. Consequently, there was a clear lack of social cohesion, cooperativeness and sense of community. The Youth and Community Project after consulting with the young people mutually decided that a film-making project would be an effective intervention to address the problematic issue within the community. The project worked with a group of young people in partnership with a local artist, to produce a film about themselves and the local Youth Club. On completion, the film was showcased to members of the local community, local councillors, families and peers.

The author will suggest the most significant learning that arose from this intervention for him as a youth worker, was the empowerment process. The young people were able to acquire an understanding of themselves as part of a wider group, and exercise certain control over their lives, in regards to the oppression previously discussed. Thompson (2007, p.21 cited in Fitsimon, Hope and Russell, 2010) states 'empowerment can be defined as helping people gain greater control over their lives and circumstances'. Although the aim of the project was to make a film about the young people and showcase it to the wider community, the author will argue that the relationship and mutual learning between the young people and youth workers were central in this project. The relationship was the 'fundamental source of learning' involving: conversation: respect: trust: association: voluntary participation (Jeffs and Smith, 1996:p.30). The 'group experience' enabled the young people to self-learn, and be actively involved in their own empowerment.

Furthermore, the group experience provided the young people to comprehend the source of their own powerlessness, and reclaim control. Empowerment should be 'political process' where young people are encouraged to question society and make steps to alter it (Nicholls, 2012). Davies (2011, p.100) argues that young people should be 'active and empowered'. Freire (1996) referred to this as 'problem solving', where people are provided with the tools to challenge oppression.

In order to challenge the demonization and oppression of young people, it is a prerequisite that young people are acknowledged as equal citizens in society, where their rights and views are accepted and valued. Group work as a youth work process is ideally positioned to support and encourage young people to challenge their oppression, and take a full and active place in society. Youth workers need to have the 'moral authority' to reclaim the 'associational spaces' and 'activism', which are essential for allowing young people to make sense of themselves, their experiences and their world. These informal group settings are crucial 'learning laboratories', where young people can share space to experiment in social skills, association and democracy. Experimental learning in these 'laboratories', will support and encourage young people to construct routes to more complex political activities. Developing 'politically literate activists' through the empowerment process will encourage young people to challenge anti-democratic forces and their own oppression.

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