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The value of peer support and a strengths-based approach in a group work programme for fathers in a family support setting

Introduction

This paper critically explores the experience and learning gained from planning and facilitating a fathers' group in a family support setting, in Cork, Ireland. It recounts the journey of *Just for Dads*, a group work programme for fathers, and in particular, focuses on two issues which became significant regarding the facilitation of the group, and the group process as experienced by the fathers who attended. These issues are the fact that the group was planned and operated out of a strengths perspective, and secondly, the dynamic of peer learning which developed throughout the group process.

The paper begins by outlining the background to *Just for Dads* including how it was developed and run in a community family support setting. It proceeds with a discussion of men's engagement with family services, and specifically, group work with fathers and explores this in light of literature and research relevant to this topic. This is followed by an exploration of our experiences of using a strengths-based approach in the planning and facilitation of the group, and how this was experienced by the participants. The paper proceeds to discuss the dynamic of peer learning within the group and how this was a significant aspect of the men's journey through the programme. The paper concludes with a brief reflection and summarises what the paper has covered.

Background

'*Just for Dads*' is a groupwork programme which was initiated and developed in Cork, Ireland arising out of a collaboration between Springboard Family Support Project, Knocknaheeny, in Cork and the School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork. It is aimed at engaging with fathers around developing relationships with their children and was conceived out of an awareness gained through practice, research, and experience of the limitations and challenges of effectively engaging men in family support services. Our experience was that often men are overlooked and when it comes to engaging and supporting families, however as workers seeking to effectively intervene and make a positive difference in the lives of the families we work with we recognised the need to address how we engage with fathers and resolved to embark on a more proactive approach in this regard. Thus, *Just for Dads* was conceived.

Just for Dads consists of a 10 week group work programme, which highlights how important dads are to their children's development. The programme also provides opportunities for men to explore and develop their fathering role in a supportive, non- judgemental environment. The programme runs weekly (usually mornings) for an hour and a half. Whilst the *Just for Dads* programme itself is ten sessions, the overall programme also includes a number of information sessions at the recruitment stage. These consist of an information session for service providers and community groups in the local area, and also an information session for interested fathers. The information session for service providers and community groups occurs 4-6 weeks before the group starts in order to allow time for referrals, queries, meeting potential participants etc. The information session for fathers usually occurs two weeks before the start date of the programme. Its aim is to give the men a taster of what the programme will be like and gives them a chance to ask questions and input their ideas as to how the group could best meet their needs. It is also an opportunity for facilitators to set a welcoming and supportive tone for the group. The outline of the programme sessions is as follows:

Session 1: Introduction and exploring fatherhood

Session 2: What our children need from us

Session 3: Ingredients for good relationships with our children

Session 4: Listening to our children

Session 5: Stages of child development

Session 6: Self-care for dads

Session 7: Exploring family relationships

Session 8: How about discipline?

Session 9: Where to now?

Session 10: Celebrating Dads (Award Day)

Over the course of two years, the initiative has been developed, implemented (twice), and independently evaluated. The programme has also been published and is available on an open access basis
(see https://cora.ucc.ie/bitstream/handle/10468/2459/HJ_JustPV2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y). The design and facilitation of the programme has been carried out by three practitioners from Springboard and an academic social worker from UCC. Another academic from the School of Applied Social Studies evaluated the programme from the outset resulting in the publication of a thorough evaluation report (Swirak, K. (2015) *Just for Dads – providing an opportunity for Dads to explore their relationships with their children: what have we learned?).* The methodology used in this evaluation included the keeping of structured reflective journals by the four facilitators, a focus group conducted with the fathers at the end of the programme, and focus groups with facilitators plus project manager at the beginning and end of the programme.

Recruitment to the programme is carried out through referral from local agencies such as family resource centres, fostering, child welfare agencies, family support organisations, and child and adolescent mental health services. The group is open to men who are in a fathering role and has included biological fathers, grandfathers, guardians, step-fathers and foster carers.

Groupwork with fathers

The importance of fathers to their children's development is well documented and research shows that active paternal engagement has wide range of benefits for children, positively impacting the child's self-esteem, their academic achievement, interpersonal competence, behaviour, and their mental health and psychological well-being (Bayley et al., 2009).

However, interventions with fathers within social work and family support contexts in an intentional and purposeful manner is a relatively neglected and under developed area of practice, with research highlighting low levels of engagement of and with fathers in child welfare services (Maxwell et al., 2012; Featherstone 2009; Baum, 2015). The Fatherhood Institute highlights the tendency within family services for 'parent' to mean mother and consequently fathers remaining marginal and overlooked in interventions, and emphasises the need for services to focus on engaging fathers directly (McAllister et al., 2012). Likewise, groupwork interventions particularly targeting fathers is not a common occurrence, and groupwork programmes specifically designed for fathers are rare. Panter-Brick et al. provide a good summary when they say, "Fathers have a substantial impact on child development, wellbeing, and family functioning, yet parenting interventions rarely target men, or make a dedicated effort to include them" (2014: 1209).

Groupwork is a very powerful tool in social work and family support settings and has been specifically identified by Gilligan et al as a "promising approach" to working with fathers in the context of children's services (2012: 505). When discussing engaging fathers in a group work programme, a number of considerations are important. Firstly, in order to be effective, services need to be proactively male friendly, where there is a culture of seeking men's involvement and developing an environment where men feel invited and welcomed (Gilligan et al., 2012). Very often family services portray an image and have a default culture of being a place for women and children with men being seen as irrelevant, resulting in their absence or exclusion (Brewsaugh & Strozier 2016). Materials advertising family services need to be inclusive of men, and specific interventions aimed at men should be designed with gender in mind reflecting masculine identity (Dolan, 2014). When planning *Just for Dads*, we developed a brochure and poster for the group depicting a male lion standing with its cub. It was a striking image, which aimed to reflect the male nature of the group. Related to this point, it is acknowledged that men can be hard to recruit, with many seeing family services as the domain of their partners rather than themselves (Bayley, 2009; Stahlchmidt et al 2013). Therefore, significant effort and focus needs to be given during the planning stage of groupwork to the recruitment and retention of men, making particular effort to communicate the relevance of the group to them as fathers and build up relationships with workers (Gilligan et al., 2012). In our experience of running *Just for Dads*, this was very significant as we found that recruitment, attendance and retention was highest when a great deal of effort was made at this stage. We held information meetings for local service providers in order to gain referrals, followed up by phone and email regarding potential referrals, held information meetings for interested fathers, and also met men in advance of the group who were considering taking part in *Just for Dads*. In addition to this, during the weeks the group was running, each father was phoned the night before the morning the group was scheduled to remind them it was on (they had been asked if this would be helpful and they said that it would).

In their review of research into engaging fathers in child welfare services Maxwell et al. (2012) conclude that men are more likely to engage in services that are specifically tailored for them. In their critical review of best practice regarding parenting programmes and fathers, McAllister et al. (2012) highlight the importance of groupwork for fathers being purposely designed for men rather than using a generic parenting programme as their needs are going to be different from women in relation to their parenting. They assert it is unhelpful to be gender blind in this regard if one is to effectively meet the needs of men seeking to enhance their relationships with their children and develop in their role as fathers. *Just for Dads* was designed as a programme for fathers rather than parents in general. All materials referred to fathers, men, dads, and the programme covered general parenting issues (e.g., listening to my child, stages of child development) but also highlighted issues of particular relevance to men (e.g., exploring fatherhood, self-care for dad's; family dynamics: The importance of my relationship with my child's mother).

Over the past two years, through the evaluation process in conjunction with our experience of developing and facilitating the *Just for Dads* programme, two issues of note came to the fore as being particularly relevant to the men's experience of the group, their participation in it, and the workers' experiences of facilitating it. These are the fact that the programme was designed and run using a strengths-based approach, and secondly, the dynamic of peer learning that the participants experienced and valued.

Strengths-based approach

Back in 2014, when the group facilitators first came together to plan a fathers' group we spent a great deal of time at the outset discussing and reflecting on what approach the group would be based on.

We came from different professional backgrounds with three of us being social workers and one facilitator being a counselling psychologist. Preston-Shoot emphasises the importance of facilitators sharing a common ethos and values, when planning for and facilitating a group together in order for the group to have a strong coherence and for there to be an effective working relationship between workers (2007). The greater the number of facilitators, the more negotiation needs to take place in order to achieve clarity and a coherently focused programme. In our case, the four of us spent some time considering the research around men's groups and fathers' groups in particular. Some of what we read focused on men as perpetrators of harm and interventions aimed at confronting and changing particular behaviours. We were struck by much of the research which articulated the negative ways men are often viewed within social work, child welfare and family services, commonly being seen in terms of risk, as a problem, or overlooked as irrelevant (Ferguson & Hogan, 2004; Brewsaugh & Strozier, 2016; Dolan, 2014). This brought into focus for us that we wanted to avoid preconceptions like these and begin from a premise that most fathers want the best for their children and want to be a good father to them. This is not to naively ignore the potential for difficulties or risk, but rather harness each father's strengths as a basis for engagement in the groupwork process. Sharry articulates this well when he says, "This is not to deny that major problems and difficulties do exist in clients' lives, rather it reflects a central belief that it is more effective, when trying to create change…to focus on strengths. If clients do create change in their lives or solve problems *they do so out of their strengths and not out of their weaknesses*" (2001: 23).

Strengths-based approaches aim to work in partnership with service users, valuing their experiences and expertise and acknowledging and working with the resources they bring to the process (Healy 2005; O'Connell, 2012). A strengths perspective acknowledges the "inherent capacity" of people to "adapt, learn and grow" (Trevithick 2012: 349), and utilises the service user's strengths as a means to reach a positive outcome. In their book *Experiencing Social Work – Learning from Service Users*, Doel and Best explore service users' positive experiences of social work with a view to distilling what are some significant elements in constructive social work practice. A key theme arising in service users' narratives is when social workers believe in the possibility for change and expressed belief in the service user, thus engendering a sense of self-belief and cultivating resilience (2008). It was in this spirit that the four facilitators approached the planning and facilitation of *Just for Dads*. It isn't a programme that 'tells them how to be a better father' but rather seeks to engage them in a journey of exploration, reflection and learning, in a supportive and non-judgemental environment. In view of this *Just for Dads* aims to provide an opportunity for men to explore and develop their relationships with their children and is underpinned by the following principles:

- Dads are their child's first and foremost male role model and are very important in their child's life.
- A recognition that while fatherhood is important it can sometimes be difficult and challenging.
- Using a strengths-based approach, *Just for Dads* is centred on dads, to help strengthen their resilience and build self-esteem.
- *Just for Dads* offers a safe space for fathers to come together to support and learn from each other.

We were very interested to see that our efforts to design and implement the programme from this perspective was also a feature of the men's experience of the group as documented in the evaluation report (Swirak, 2014). One participant articulated how it would have been a negative experience to come to a group and be told what to do:

There is a big difference between being given advice and you have the option of taking it or being told what to do…if I am told what to do…I might do the opposite…I am told to sit I will jump up and do the opposite (Swirak, 2014:13).

Another said:

That's where this kind of group also differs…because rather than focusing on being told what to do… every experience is looked at…and you take what you need from it…it's like self-learning…you're asked a question and you're left how to answer it…and if not…you don't have to (Swirak, 2014: 14).

The men spoke about being able to be themselves, without being judged:

No judgement, there was no judgement regarding what you say or feel (Swirak, 2014: 13).

Nurturing a supportive environment contributed to the men's openness and experience of learning:

It helps you think back after the thing being done here…it helps you to cope a small bit better you know…sometimes you sit down and think about Oh I heard this in the course…I will try it this way…and sometimes it probably works…in fairness it helps you relax a bit you know (Swirak, 2014: 9).

The men also frequently remarked on how the approach in the group was different to some of their other encounters with other service providers. For example:

If you're on your own with your children…there's no-one to help you…the people in authority expect you to do everything right…but they don't do one thing to help you… (Swirak 2014:18).

Maxwell et al (2012) indicate that a strengths approach is a particularly effective model to use when working with fathers in the context of family support work. In their review of international research evidence on father engagement, they conclude: "It seems that in the context of family support work, the most effective interventions adopt a strengths-based approach which focuses upon the important contribution fathers make to their children's lives where workers are positive about the father's ability and are honest about the issues faced yet which emphasise the father's existing skills and use solution-focused thinking to develop their skills and build confidence" (Maxwell et al., 2012:160). King concurs with this and asserts that a strengths-base non deficit approach is most effective when working with fathers in groups (2005).

Planning and facilitating *Just for Dad's* from a strengths perspective has had a significant influence on the facilitators' experiences also. This was the first time the four of us had facilitated a group together and from early on in the planning stage it became clear that we all shared a deep commitment to common values which unified our approach to working in a strengths-based way. This was not to say that we were very similar in our personalities or ways of working, in fact we were all quite different. Some of us were very structured and put a high priority on planning and being organised, others were spontaneous and extrovert in nature, some brought a lot of humour to the process, others a calm reflective approach. Being so diverse there was significant potential for us to become frustrated with the differences of others. However, instead having a shared commitment to strength-based values meant that we as a team worked to each of our strengths and also valued the strengths, skills and assets others brought to the process. There was also a high level of trust and openness between the workers which was aided by regular supervision sessions with the Springboard project manager.

Operating out of a strengths approach also contributed to the tone and atmosphere that developed in the group, which was one of encouragement, support, and focused on participants working out

their own solutions and ways of enhancing their role as fathers. The group sessions were characterised by respectful dialogue between the participants, and between the facilitators and men, and it was actively communicated that everyone had things they could learn (including facilitators) and everyone had things to offer in terms of contributing to the learning of others. A strong feature of this dynamic was peer learning, which will be the focus of the discussion in the next section of the paper.

Peer learning

It is widely recognised that a powerful contribution of groupwork practice is in providing a space for people to participate in a forum with others with similar life situations experiences as themselves (Loumpa, 2012; Hill, 2001; Brown, 1992). Men seem to be less likely to come together in groupwork fora, particularly fora or services with a supportive or helping aim (Maxwell et al., 2012). Dolan suggests that perhaps this is due to help seeking behaviour not being congruent with qualities of stoicism and self-reliance which are traditionally identified with masculine identity (Dolan, 2014). This said, when men do participate in groups with other men there is huge potential for peer support, reduction in isolation, and a sense of common identity and goals (Dolan, 2014). King identifies in particular the value of peer mentoring and support that men can experience in fathers' groups (King, 2001).

For the fathers who have participated in *Just for Dads*, peer support and peer learning are very significant aspects of the group process for them. In terms of valuing being in a group with others in similar situations one participant noted how '*Just for Dads* helped him to '*feel I wasn't alone with everyday challenges'* (Swirak, 2015: 9). When asked what they considered to be the most important source of learning during participation in *Just for Dads*, participants named their peers as the greatest learning resource. Eg:

I suppose from other Dads, how they would approach different things how they would go about things…it was the main aspect of it…there is only so much a facilitator could kind of do…it's kind of the men who are in the same situation like yourself…and that's the type of information you are looking for (Swirak, 2015:10).

Certainly this strong element of peer learning was obvious to the facilitators also. One observed:

Yes, and maybe the content is secondary…to building the atmosphere of and the respect and everything and from that comes the learning because people are open and learn from each other…we learn from our peers…we can be up there and tell people how to be a good dad…dads especially won't take that…but they'll listen to another dad. The participants want to talk and be heard. This is why they like this group. They are listened to (Swirak, 2015:10).

Another facilitator identified the importance of designing the session in a way that maximised the possibilities for peer learning:

I suppose it highlights that when the sessions are being structured…to structure and facilitate them in a way that enables them to learn from each other and build up the relationship…to build up trust.

In practice this meant planning each session in a way that maximised participation using creative exercises, discussion based activities and small group discussions.

Of particular note in the men's feedback was their conviction that having a men's only group was very helpful to them. One man reflects:

I think men will open up much more with no women there…because you know…women and men together…the women will just look…what is the loser saying there?…you know what I mean (Swirak 2015:15).

However, it is also interesting that participants felt that having two women as part of the facilitation team was useful as they were able to contribute perspectives of 'mothers', but without dominating as they felt the mothers of their children would:

But even the small bit with Fiona and Lara [2 female facilitators] here…they had their opinions as mothers…we had our opinion as dads…that's minimal…but we had a small way of that…but it's much better with the focus only on the dads (Swirak, 2015:16).

In Dolan's research with men attending a 'Dads only' parenting programme participants also expressed a preference for just having men in the group. According to one participant, if woman were in the group, "Men would take the back seat and women take the lead role", another said "We may have felt overshadowed…we may have got…beaten down" (Dolan, 2014: 820).

The topic of facilitators contributing from their own experiences is an interesting one, particularly when we are discussing peer learning. All four facilitators in the *Just for Dads* group are parents, two being fathers. Sharing with the group our experiences and struggles as parents was a very natural thing to do throughout the group sessions. Does that make us peers and part of the peer learning process? A common tension for group workers is maintaining professional boundaries whilst at the same time contributing to the group in a meaningful and real way. Healy explores this in a helpful manner when she discusses the roles of facilitators as both insiders and outsiders. Many of us when facilitating groups will find ourselves having insider status in a group if we share an aspect of identity with the group (Healy 2012). For example, we may be facilitating a bereavement group and have experienced bereavement, or a group for people whose family member has mental health difficulties, and have experienced that situation ourselves. We need to decide as workers how much, if any, of or own experiences would be useful to share in the group. A guideline suggested by Healy is to remember that a group is essentially a public forum, and only to share information that you are happy with being in the public domain. Our value base coming from a strengths perspective contributed to us not assuming the role of experts (Sharry 2001), but rather recognising the resources each person brings (including facilitators) to the process in a spirit of collaboration. At the same time we also maintained some degree of outsider status as we took responsibility for the planning, content, and facilitation of the group process in our roles as professionals.

The issue of boundaries is one discussed by Doel and Best (2008) in their examination of what factors service users identify as contributing to positive experiences of social work. Having a sense of the worker as a real person is important, with self-disclosure being a significant part of that. Flexibility around boundaries, reciprocity and equality in relationships, whilst knowing the limits were also identified by service users as being key in positive practice. These elements are very relevant in groupwork practice too as we choose how much to share of ourselves and to what degree we contribute to and gain from the learning process as peers. Personally, as a facilitator of *Just for Dads*, I am happy to share my struggles and celebrations as a parent, but would be careful about giving identifying information about my children (e.g., where we live, what schools they go to, etc). In our experience of facilitating *Just for Dads* all four of us would say we learnt a huge amount from the group and were stretched and challenged both in terms of our roles as parents, and as group facilitators.

During the ideas and planning phase for *Just for Dads* I had two main fears, which began to morph into expectations as the start date got closer. This being my first time working with a men's group,

and having done some reading which tended to highlight the challenges around engaging men in practice, I feared that a) no-one would turn up; and b) if they did turn up they wouldn't want to speak or say anything in the group. I guess these are common anxieties for many of us embarking on a groupwork venture for the first time. Thankfully, neither of these fears were realised – men did turn up for the group, and moreover, they had an awful lot to say and participated fulsomely in the group process.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to share and critically explore the learning gained through the genesis, realisation, and facilitation process of *Just for Dads*. It highlights the importance of and challenges involved in engaging men in practice, and in groupwork aimed at fathers in particular. It recounts the significance of using a strengths perspective as a framework for engaging fathers in groupwork and highlights its value as experienced by participants and facilitators. The dynamic of peer learning which developed as a key part of the groupwork process is discussed, both in relation to how it was experienced by participants and also the degree to which the facilitators were part of that dynamic. Overall, the paper documented and aired key issues arising in this relatively unexplored arena of groupwork and family support practice.

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