# THE VALUE OF ROLE PLAY AS A PRECURSOR TO GROUP WORK: SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS' VIEWPOINTS

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## ABSTRACT

As a new academic programme, the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) offers students a variety of modules which form part of a new curriculum. Group work, as one of the five methods in Social Work, sets prospective social workers in a good stance to set their own groups in their future place of work. It is the researcher's view that of all the methods in Social Work, the group work method is utilised less. There is also evidence that not enough emphasis is put on the vitality of group work as is the case with the other methods. A survey was conducted at the researcher's university in which 93 second-year students participated, which is in line with the module "Introduction to Group Work" of which the practical side was role play. These role plays were conducted in class and provided students in the second year with an opportunity to practice group work at an introductory level, with anticipated advanced level integration scheduled for the third year of study.

**Keywords:** social work; group work; role play; group work methods

## INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Social Work, as both an academic and professional practice, has five methods, namely casework, group work, community work, administration, and research. Utilisation of all five methods is ideal, but skill and interest play a crucial role in bringing these methods to their full utilisation. Thus, inculcation and developing the love of group work as one of the primary methods in social work in students, are crucial.

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A view is held that, of all the methods of engagement in social work, casework appears to be the most practiced and preferred and it seems that group work is the least preferred and practiced. This was seen as a limitation by Ward (2002) in Lindsay and Orton (2012, 13) when he states that group work is a minority interest. The authors further argue that group work as an intervention has been seen by some as having a low image (2012, 24). A balance may be struck by practising all methods equally as it may bring experience, expertise and exuberance to do more; it may also benefit those clients who may develop, grow and change from the benefits brought about by group work intervention.

DuBois and Miley (2014, 39) define a social work method as a responsible, conscious, disciplined use of self in the relationship with an individual or group. A diligent social worker draws from her caseload possible and identifiable areas that need improvement in her client's life. Thus, it is preferable that if group work must be used as a method, the first and practical place to start is where the need is; where the client is. In turn, the IFSW (2001) states that the social work profession promotes change, problem-solving in human relations and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising the theory of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the point where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

The aim of social work is effective communication skills which include listening, using appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication, gathering and analysing information as well as planning work with the service users (Lister 2012, 9). To assist students to develop and rehearse communication skills, social work educators engage them in skills rehearsal. Skills rehearsals include a variety of individual and group activities which usually involve various kinds of role play.

In casework, rehearsal is also a skill used in contracting and assessment and in the researcher's view, this entails role play on a small scale and is a skill that social workers use to improve clients' thinking and doing patterns. Role play is not a new concept in social work and can be utilised in diverse ways. Role play helps the student as an aspiring social worker to bring together the skills needed in assuming roles that one is not familiar with. It also helps the students to think what their clients must be going through in their own real-life situations. It facilitates in them recognition of what proficiencies a diligent social worker must possess to reach the individual in a group situation, thereby bringing about change.

Linking with the above-named, the purpose of role play during this introductory module was among many others, to afford students an opportunity to lead groups and thus hone their active or dormant leadership skills, inclusion and participation, learning in general, skills acquisition and also interpersonal and intrapersonal awareness and growth. These attributes were anticipated to enable students to acquire the confidence of having their voices heard and to interact with others in meaningfully therapeutic ways. It also proffers the student the confidence to set up, conduct and implement

group processes in the future; constituting therefore some form of foundation-laying. Of the key components of group work the following five were specifically relevant to this group, namely (1) the writing of a proposal, (2) recruiting of members (this was done by the students themselves by retaining their participation in the writing of the proposal), (3) the stages of group work (here students could incorporate into their role play subsequent sessions and identify which stage the group is at during role play), (4) starting a group, and (5) the implementation and accomplishment of tasks.

To determine whether the institution of role play serves the purpose of introducing group work as a valuable method in social work, a short survey was conducted among those students who had been exposed to role play in the second semester. This was done as an evaluative tool after the role-play sessions. It was noted that the students had to write their own proposal, which is a prerequisite, before any group session began and played out as group members in a group setting. This article highlights the views of the students about their participation in group work as a whole.

In line with other objectives, the following purposes of the utilisation of role play were formulated:

- to simplify the process and dynamics of group work as a method in social work with a specific outcome, namely problem-solving;
- to investigate whether students understood what the content of the module entailed and what its aims were;
- to empower students in the utilisation and application of group work as a method of social work;
- to test what level of insight, knowledge and perspective of group work the students had; and
- to test the students' views in a survey for reliability and validity, in addition to the summative and formative assessment used to measure the students' understanding and competence.

The envisaged outcome of using role play was that this activity might change the manner of teaching and learning group work especially for the undergraduate students. It would also establish whether they are either in support of or against role play. The reliability of the finding lies in that similar consistent results would be achieved in various group work situations involving role play. In terms of validity, the same activity (role play) was repeated and it was the only measurement used.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It is hoped that this study adds to social work theory, development of valuable knowledge and the evaluation of practice and programme outcomes. This study was useful to the

target group (second-year students) and relevant to their studies as a module towards the completion of their training. Techniques, skills and varieties of groups were components that were determined as significant in their study milieu. Interaction, cohesiveness, and diversity were also encouraged. As Corey, Corey, and Corey (2010, 10) state "... developing an integrated, well-defined theoretical model requires extensive reading and years of practice in leading groups … to modify old methods and practices of learning to fit new knowledge." This exercise was aimed at laying the foundation for leadership and forging ahead with innovative ways of introducing students to diverse intervention. Innovation was thus a motivation based on what new strategies could be employed in doing things to equip students for better service delivery as they settle into professional practice. "Character-building" was a key plot and focus area as suggested by DuBois and Miley (2014, 37) who perceive the purposes and benefits of group work in educational and recreational parameters. An important characteristic of role play is the element of self-awareness that eventually breeds efficiency and effectiveness. On this aspect, DuBois and Miley (2014, 117) concur that "good social workers always return to the need of to be self-aware and self-knowing for authentic dialogue with and true understanding of our clients."

# LITERATURE STUDY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, the following will be discussed: definitions of social group work, the rationale fit of role play, the benefits of groups, the models of social group work and the theories before the theoretical framework that shapes this study.

## Definitions of Social Group Work

According to Lindsay and Orton (2012, 7 and 16) social group work is a method of social work that aims at establishing an informed way through which to interrogate purposeful group experiences, to help individuals and groups to meet individual and group needs, and to influence and change personal, group and community problems. Konopka (1963, 15) sees and avers with the previous authors by defining social group work as a method which helps persons to enhance their social functioning through purposeful group experiences and to cope more effectively with their personal, group and community problems. These two definitions have a clear emphasis on both personal and group experiences with the outcome being optimum social functioning. The latter is mentioned for the consistency that group work maintains with the ultimate goal of alleviating community problems. Another definition of group work according to Toseland and Rivas (2012, 11) is that it is a goal-directed activity with small treatment and task groups aimed at meeting socio-emotional needs and accomplishment tasks.

Forsyth (2010, 3) in Lindsay and Orton (2012, 14) states that social group work is when two or more individuals are connected to one another by and within a social relationship. Zastrow (2009, 3) cites Johnson and Johnson (2012) that a group may be defined as two or more individuals in face-to-face interaction, each aware of possible interdependence as they strive to achieve mutual goals, each aware of their membership in the group, and each aware of the others who belong to the group. Generally, it is the size of the group that is important, and it is clear from these two definitions that the author considers a large number not essentially a key characteristic of group work. The other definition worth mentioning is that of Crawford, Price, and Price (2015, 166) who define social group work as a method, process, activity or practice of working with groups of people who come together (either in person or by other means, such as virtually) in one or more sessions to facilitate a desired change, growth and development. In all the above definitions, there is one key aspect: change.

## Rationale Fit of Role Play

Role play was used to assess whether the student is fit to enter into and apply group work as a skill and method, measuring the extent to which students have achieved the learning outcomes of the group work module. Generally, role play is described differently by different authors. Following are the views which will give the rationale fit of why it was used as a technique for assessment and of promoting the use and raising the worth and value of group work as a method in social work. Crawford, Price, and Price (2015, 86) describe role play as an activity, game or exercise that constitutes a rehearsal in a protected environment for something the individual wishes to do in the outside world. Particularly this description makes a rationale fit over why role play is used to portray real group processes through simulation or rehearsing roles. Toseland and Rivas (2012, 291) say that role play is an enactment of a social role in an imagined situation. After the role play in this study, students used reflection to analyse their skills, and to identify areas in which they display strength and those that need development.

## Benefits of Groups

Lindsay and Orton (2012, 7) name the following benefits of groups:

- It is normal to be part of the group: this was seen as an opportunity for the student functioning.
- People with similar experiences, situations and problems can be a source of support to each other: people having had particularly damaging and hurtful experiences, or expecting challenging situations often feel isolated and alone. Meeting others with similar experiences may be a major source of help.

- Group work can be empowering: Doel and Sawdon (1999) as cited by Lindsay and Orton (2012, 8) have submitted convincingly that "empowerment in the sense of an increasing feeling of self-worth and a growing ability to feel and use power in constructive ways, should be an integral part of the members' experience of the group."

- Groups offer learning opportunities through the use of a variety of learning methods not available to an individual. Group activities and exercises that cater for the different learning styles could be delivered, in this instance, role play for every individual. Besides this aspect, learning from one another like sharing problems and solutions to situations and offering opportunities for growth as well as the opportunity for acquiring information about others' behaviour are all made possible in group work. Feedback by others and the opportunity to try out new behaviour reiterate the value of role play where simulations, rehearsals and practicing were utilised.

- Groups offer an opportunity for social compassion: even in observation and listening, experience of others' behaviours occurs.

- Groups provide hope and optimism: enhanced self-efficacy is experienced in groups and is beneficial as individual members' coping is enhanced and the belief that their situation can change becomes concretised.

- Groups can offer a way of reaching the unreachable: individuals can be helped more easily in a group setting than on an individual basis.

- Group work can be economic: the point of contestation here is that more contact (minimum six and maximum eight sessions) in groups and a lot of planning on other logistics occur in groups and are more complex in execution. Thus, group work must not be seen as a time-saving alternative to casework; both methods are complementary to each other.

Of the five uses of role play identified by Toseland and Rivas (2012, 309) namely, assessment, simulation, understanding, decision-making, and behaviour change, the first three were of significance to this study that focused on role play by second-year students.

## Models of Social Group Work

The three models of social group work namely remedial, reciprocal and social goals identified in Toseland and Rivas (2012, 50–52) were critical and applicable in the students' groups because of their beneficial purposes. The social goals model was particularly relevant for its empowerment and social action emphasis. This is coupled by indicating the linkages among the three where for instance the reciprocal model emphasised self-esteem and identity which students could directly benefit from, while the remedial model which underpinned learning and individual change held valuable attributes for students.

Crawford, Price, and Price (2015, 32) sum it all aptly by integrating these models under one umbrella. Toseland and Rivas (2012, 49–50) mention a very important factor of the social goals model which is the value it puts on diversity and the power of group action. The researcher sees this from the premise that group development can be used to empower members to achieve goals.

In practice a combination of these models in social group work is the ideal. It is hoped that from a theoretical perspective, these young students would be able to combine the models to suit the type of group they would form in future, to the benefit of that particular group. Middleman and Woods (1990) in Toseland and Rivas (2012, 53) call this blending of models of group work, while other authors like Alissi (2001) are seen to promote this combination as a mainstream model which is committed to democratic values, welfare of individuals, programme activity, power of small group processes and the influence of the group worker (2012, 53).

## Theoretical Framework

In the theoretical framework, two theories were utilised, namely the systems theory and the learning theory. These two theories were chosen for their relevance to group work activity as applied by the students.

The learning theory has been criticised for its individualistic leanings than for it being of benefit or applicable to groups. Toseland and Rivas (2012, 60) have indicated this theory's crucial influence on group work practice, especially its psycho-educational characteristics. In Bandura (1977) three paradigms are evident, namely (1) the behaviour of group members can be explained by the association and the stimuli (this is further explained in controlling untoward behaviour of a group member towards other group members and the reaction this behaviour evokes), (2) operant conditioning is identified as a second method in learning theory where actions of members and the group leader are governed by consequences, and (3) social learning theory is explained by what the individual, in this instance a group member, learns by observing and reinforcement or punishment instituted, for example praise for good behaviour (positive reinforcement) and rebuke (negative reaction) for disruptions or untoward behaviour. What is outstanding in this learning theory is the desired change that is brought about as a result. This learning theory was applied optimally to the students as they acted out acceptable and unacceptable behaviours of group members so that aspects of positive and negative rewards could come out. Behaviour that is progressive to the group as a whole came to the fore as well as disruptive behaviour as an enactment so that students could get acquainted with such behaviour and map out how to deal with that in real practice.

Systems theory flows and emphasises that groups are seen as systems. This is in line with Toseland and Rivas (2012, 56) who quote Parsons (1951) in asserting that groups are social systems with several interdependent members. These authors further identify four functional tasks of a group as a system, namely

- integration,

- adaptation,

- pattern maintenance, and

- goal attainment.

In integration, members come together and try to be part of the collective, to conform to and to ultimately "fit" in this group. As members become part of the group, they start doing things together and identify one another as a group and not as discrete individuals. This coming together and being part of the group make it easier to cope with whatever members might be facing, knowing that they need not face that alone anymore and so maintain the routine or pattern in dealing with and working towards goal attainment. At the end of it all, members feel empowered and see the result of their interaction in reaching their goal. These two theories guided the study and informed group processes towards attainment of set goals.

## METHODOLOGY

This study centred on what is viewed as professional research, which is explained by De Vos, Strydom and Delport (2013) in De Vos et al. (2013, 43) as the forging of a genuinely indigenous theoretical base for a particular profession. The advancement of the profession, as well as the benefit to the student, was the driving force for this study. The latter is further seen and upheld by the researcher as providing better service delivery to the clientele by a better equipped student corps.

The quantitative approach was especially used as the objectives, design, sample and measuring instruments were predetermined. Numerical data and statistical analyses were done by the institutional academic development centre. This enabled the researcher to make interpretations and draw conclusions.

The choice of this descriptive research was solely to endear students to the utilisation of group work as a valuable and viable practice in social work. Rubin and Babbie (2009, 6) urge practitioners to view social work research as seeking to accomplish some humanistic goals, in this instance, the understanding and introduction of other interventions for future problem-solving in a group setting as ineluctably linked to social work practice. Descriptive research was used as it is apt in describing what others perceive, see or understand, in this instance the way students perceived and understood group work by being part of the group process on the one hand and partly the observed on the other hand. This approach is substantiated by what Yegidis, Weinbac, and Myers (2012, 126) state: "… not to introduce nor manipulate variables, but to see how variables are affected and to foretell the relationship or correlation." They argue that it is largely through the utilisation of role play in groups that such an ultimate goal is reached. The outcome was that the students see how group dynamics manifest and thus create an

awareness that group work is a valid alternative, viable social work method for group problem-solving. This was done to promote the integration of both theory and practice.

The selection of the design was guided by the following four conditions as set out in Yegidis, Weinbac, and Myers (2012, 137):

- it was based on existing knowledge as role play is not a rare phenomenon in social work;
- it is appropriate for the level of knowledge that exists; further studies could be undertaken to prove or disprove the findings and improve already existing information on the efficacy of group work;
- it is internally consistent in each component; features were interrelated and followed one another to form a comprehensive basis for the research-based description of variables; and
- it is feasible; of the sample of students who has been exposed to role play, most students were available so the practicality of the approach made it possible to conduct the study.

## Population

The target group in this research was second-year students who have completed the introduction to the social group work module offered at the second-year level of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programme. The researcher shared the second-year students where introduction to social group work is handled as well as the advanced level with the third-year students.

## Sampling

Purposive sampling was utilised to describe the process of group work as seen through the eyes of the inexperienced, eager-to-learn students. This was done to provide the researcher with access to a unique approach to a situation through a specific perspective, thus gaining insight, experience and expertise which the students also wished to understand.

Purposive sampling was employed as the respondents targeted had role play as part of the BSW programme in their second year of study. This common characteristic in purposive sampling earns it the term "judgmental sampling" according to Rubin and Babbie (2009, 247). Homogeneity is a determinant of sample size and this was influenced by the number of students in the class. Random sampling would not have been ideal as the results were dependent on the whole experience of the class. Sarantakos' (2013, 183) wise rule was applied: "the sample must be as large as necessary, and as small as possible."

## Measurement Tool

Questionnaires were distributed during class, and students were told to complete them as honestly as they could and to do it anonymously. Questions were largely open-ended and where elaboration was needed, individual remarks were noted.

## Ethical Considerations

Gomm (2003, 298) is quoted by Carey (2012, 97) where he refers to ethics as rules of morally good conduct which seeks to ensure that research participants do not experience physical or psychological harm, receive informed consent or are not deceived.

Permission and advice was sought to conduct this small sample study in a class situation. The purpose of this research was explained to the participants before the completion of the questionnaires and they were assured that no harm or misrepresentation was intended.

## Confidentiality and Anonymity

Participants were assured that all information will be handled with the utmost confidentiality and that they were not to write their names on the questionnaires. The researcher further explained that information gathered from the questionnaires will be used for the sole purpose of improving teaching and learning and that the results will be shared only with this group. No invasion of privacy took place and the participants were treated with respect. Questionnaires were completed with no identification of any of the participants, nor use of pseudonyms as suggested by Carey (2012, 102).

## Informed Consent

Participants were taken through the process from the beginning and throughout and ensured that they will be within their rights if they felt that they do not wish to continue or be part of the research project. Carey (2012, 101) calls this "competent" participants who have been provided with full information and made fully aware of what will happen with the findings. Thus, participation was entirely voluntary.

## FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1 provides a summary of questions posed to student respondents in this study.

**Table 1:**   Questions posed to students

| Questions | Response | Response | Response | Response |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| What is your gender? | Male = 19 | Female = 74 | | |
| What programme are you currently registered for? | BSWG = 93 | PSYC = 0 | SOCL = 0 | Other = 0 |
| Did you have group work as a module? | Yes = 91 | No = 2 | | |
| Indicate the relevance of the said module to the role play | BSWG211 = 4 BSWG212 = 1 | BSWG213 = 0 BSWG222 = 0 | BSWG221 = 86 BSWG224 = 0 | |
| Did this module require a proposal? | Yes =87 | No = 0 | Don't know = 4 | |
| Did you have input in the compilation of the proposal? | Yes = 90 | No = 0 | No response = 3 | |
| Did you take part in the role play? | Yes = 92 | No = 1 | | |
| Did your role speak to the proposal? Was there a link between your role play and the proposal? | Entirely = 79 | Partially = 11 | Not sure = 3 | |
| What was the level of cooperation from other group members? | Good = 80 | Poor = 2 | Could improve = 11 | |

(Summary of questions grouped together: n = 93)

The students in this module were 104, but only 100 questionnaires were distributed and 93 questionnaires were received back. Seven of the questionnaires were spoilt; it was established later that two failed to make it to the second year and the other two students were absent on the day the questionnaires were administered.

The questionnaires returned showed the gender distribution as follows: there were 74 female and 19 male students who took part in this survey. All participants were students on the BSW programme and have completed the second year of study where role play was a part of the practical component of the Group Work Theory and Practice module. Ninety-one students responded in the affirmative about having had group work

as a module. Four of the students in the survey could not identify BSWG 221 as the current module being surveyed and marked BSWG 211 instead, while one marked BSWG 212, one was unmarked and one marked all the boxes. The rest, 86, marked the correct module BSWG 221. This module comprises both the theory and practice components and is the Introduction to Group Work as a method in social work. Students needed to have completed this module before proceeding to the advanced level offered in the third year of study. Role play and writing of a proposal introduce the student to the foundations of establishing a group and conducting social work sessions.

Following a question whether this module required the writing of a proposal, it was interesting to note that four of the 93 students replied, "don't know." The response is not only interesting but strange as two of those students who did not know if a proposal is required for setting up a group responded that they had participated in the drawing of a proposal. Only one responded in the negative while one was unmarked. The rest, 87, responded in the affirmative.

The follow-up question was whether the respondents had any input in the drawing of a proposal and the answer was in the affirmative for all save three who left the question unanswered. The one student who responded in the negative regarding the need for a proposal indicated that they had no input in the writing of the group work proposal. Four responded in the negative about input in the writing of the proposal albeit two indicated that they knew that a proposal was needed.

Table 2 provides some of the different roles that students participated in for the role play (the first column identifies the role played and the second column depicts the number that a particular role was played).

**Table 2:**   Roles of students during role play

| Roles performed | Number |
|---|---|
| Social worker and convener | 9 |
| Professional expert | 8 |
| Professional nurse | 1 |
| Pregnant school girl | 7 |
| Alcoholic pregnant teen | 8 |
| Patient | 8 |
| Client | 8 |
| Abused woman, housewife | 10 |
| Depressed single mother | 1 |
| Alcoholic sex worker | 1 |
| Parents with autistic children | 7 |

| Alcoholic teacher, mom, graduate, father | 8 |
| Struggling learner | 3 |
| Alcohol- and drug-addict teen | 4 |
| Motivational speaker | 3 |
| Disabled person | 8 |
| Foster parent | 7 |
| Psychologist | 1 |

The roles tabled above were simulated in the role plays as set out in the proposals submitted by the students. In the drawing of the proposal, the students were set in groups of eight, each group was assigned a specific task to fulfil, and a group mark was then allocated. The proposal set out is played out during lecture times and individual marks would then be assigned accordingly. Thus, the link between the proposal and the role play should be clearly aligned. Key to this was the formation of the group, the rationale of the group as well as the purpose of the group. The students were required to indicate group processes, group dynamics, various skills employed in the execution of the group, and reflect on the type of group experienced. This was done to integrate the theory they had learnt in class with the practical for better comprehension of what other components of group work constituted and the implementation thereof. The significance of role play lay in that the students could communicate about and relate at different levels, mimicking real scenarios for better understanding and articulation. This action ensured that through role play (as a technique in social group work) skilling is enhanced, interest is peaked and communication is enhanced. The subsequent question asked whether the students' role play had any link to the proposal they wrote before they took part in the role play. The response saw 79 affirming this against 11 who indicated a partial link and three who were not sure. It could not be confirmed whether or not these three were part of the role play as there were no names attached to the questions.

The students were further asked if there was cooperation among group members in the writing of the proposal as well as the actual role play. Eighty students said the cooperation was good, while two noted poor cooperation and 11 said "it can improve." Ten students who observed only a partial link in the previous question together with the three who were not sure of the link formed part of the 80 who affirmed the cooperation within the disparate groups.

The last question posed was what suggestions the students had for improvement of the programme. This was an open-ended question which produced an array of responses. Thirty-eight gave no suggestions at all and the rest were summarised as given in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Suggestions and experiences of the respondents in group work

| Suggestions | Symbol | No | Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|
| Benefits of role play in social group work | [A] | 4 | 4 |
| Group processes and group dynamics | [B] | 2 | 4 |
| Application of theory | [C] | 2 | 6 |
| Preparedness | [D] | 4 | 6 |
| Planning | [E] | 4 | 6 |
| Assessment (Time allocation) | [F] | 2 | 5 |

The symbols attached to the suggestions were used to identify and point out prominent tendencies. The numbers indicate how they were grouped, how they were brought forth and finally the frequency they were reported.

- "To allocate enough time for scenarios so we can demonstrate skills more clearly." This item was mentioned five times by different students. [F]
- "Role play enhances the module and makes it practical about what is expected in reality. It was enjoyable." This is linked with the suggestion that "role play improves communication among students and lecturers." [A]
- "Group members must do research on topics and should focus on new issues not only obvious ones, for example alcohol, domestic violence and AIDS." Research was mentioned twice in the suggestions. [C]
- "To engage the audience."
- "To take this serious and accommodate all group members." [B]
- "Students must link social work methods and skills." [C]
- "Not make role play into drama": this was named twice in the suggestions. [D/E]
- "Students must be punctual and should cooperate, be realistic and professionally therapeutic." Two students suggested this. [D/E]
- "We should be more prepared and practice more." [D]
- "Focus must be on content more with more feedback and strong relations." This can be seen in the line of cooperation and the suggestion on focus on other issues than the obvious ones mentioned before. [C]
- "Some students lack confidence and are nervous and shy but role play will help them." [A]
- "Rehearsals via videos before actual role play are needed to improve." [D]
- "We should have more say on the proposal." This is linked with the suggestion that there "can be room for improvement in proposals." [E]

- "Students must stick to the rules and topic." Three suggestions about this came forth. [B]
- "Student social worker has learnt a lot from this experience." [A]
- "Eye contact is important." [A]
- "Apply frameworks, theories, code of conduct." This statement was made twice. [C]
- "I suggest more logistic issues like furniture and physical facilities to be user-friendly." [E]
- "Marks should be allocated per group like in the proposal and not individually because some roles are more prominent than the others and those who don't have bigger roles are disadvantaged." [F]

The following suggestions are from seven of the 11 students who responded that the cooperation could improve; only four did not make any suggestions. Some suggestions might be repeated but their impact is seen in the light of their objectivity in substantiation of their "could improve" responses.

- "More dedication and team agreement are needed."
- "Group mark allocation must apply for role play too." Two students mentioned this aspect.
- "Respect for time." This was mentioned twice.
- "Take care of logistic issues like physical facilities and furniture."
- "Students must not act but role play real life situations and be more realistic and professional."
- "Role play must have not more than five members."
- "Students must not disengage from group norms."

## DISCUSSION

From the evidence elicited and presented in the foregoing, it is clear that different views prevail among the research participants in both the role play and the survey itself. An intense intervention is still needed in this regard. Students were cautioned about engaging in drama than making sure the gist of social group work comes to the fore. The tendency of playing roles allocated more than depicting and ensuring that theory is integrated in role play arose from time to time and in order to bring the students back to focus. A "post mortem" approach was adopted where the class would critique role play as a practice and point out interesting projections and underlying principles relevant to social work. This was done to steer students in the direction of the fundamental purpose of role play in social work.

Utilisation of social group work skills as well as the application of applicable theories was emphasised, and this tied up with the integration of what the students had learnt in class and how they would implement that. Group norms and group dynamics were pointed out in mid role play as well as during the class discussion after the role play. The researcher agrees with the statement made by Strydom and Strydom (2010) in Nicholas, Rautenbach, and Maistry (2010, 149) that during role play, students are enabled to transfer their learning to the real world.

The theoretical framework saw two theories being utilised, namely the systems theory and the learning theory. These two theories were chosen for their relevance to group work activity as applied by the students.

The practical group sessions were conducted during the normal lecture time which prompted cogent suggestions from students. Time management is a key component of a well-managed life and students were encouraged to utilise time allotted and to pace themselves. A well-planned session should run within the normal scheduled time and here students were spared the surprises and unpredictability of clients in a normal agency situation where the unforeseen is likely to happen. Students regulated their own behaviour and the upshot here was to be able to establish a group, conduct a group session and reach set goals according to what the group purpose was initially.

It was established that the students could think outside the box thus improve their learning and realise what problems are encountered in the country currently. Thinking about "other" social problems indeed shows how students could stretch and apply their minds. This free thinking is encouraged as it indicates that they are in touch with reality. This is in line with the developmental approach that the Department of Social Development is advocating for. The upholding of social developmental approach has in itself, according to Midgeley (1995, 27), the adoption of a macro focus that directs attention to communities, regions and societies. This, with the principle of Ubuntu which the researcher sees as collective interdependence relationship, will see our students as future social workers reaching out and bringing about change to communities. The researcher believes that this will help students realise that community problems can be handled in many ways and that group work is one of the methods to go about. Toseland and Rivas (2012, 329) agree that a community's awareness of social problems and increased commitment to group work services can be dealt with in various ways.

One other benefit of role play is that the students are able to understand themselves better, thus making it possible for them to understand others. The students should therefore carry the dynamics of group work forth into their third year of study at an advanced level where they are required to conduct own groups for six to eight sessions.

Unlike other group work programmes, the students were not required to write a report, a crucial factor in social group work which also helps in assessing and evaluating the success of the group. They were, however, encouraged to practice multiculturalism to outline the current trends playing out in real practice, thus promoting multicultural competency. Cultural bias in social work is rife, thus it is impertinent to avoid cultural

faux pas by presenting diverse cultural situations in role play, even to dispel this potential professional fiasco. DuBois and Miley (2014, 12) could not emphasise it more than stating that "cultural diversity is more than ethnic or racial diversity" and the ignorance of such diversity may impede development. The researcher agrees with Toseland and Rivas (2012, 137) that when one understands the dynamics of race, ethnicity and culture, which is a necessity for effective group work, one should be mindful that people also differ in terms of gender, social class, geographical background, educational and disability level, language, level of acculturation and assimilation and also age. Our students come from diverse cultural, geographical and language backgrounds, and some played out this diversity in the role plays.

Important to note is that these groups become support groups for the students themselves. Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2013, 367) call this "a process of increasing an individual's personal, interpersonal or political power." In role play, students play out what clients may exhibit in real-life situations, and how clients see their situations was critical to the students' understanding of these dynamics. As Egan (1982, 85) emphasises, as a helper, the social worker needs to know how to communicate in a way that facilitates participation. This facilitates listening and some semblance of self-awareness in recognition of what they might also be going through, especially if the circumstances are the same. Egan (1982, 86) calls this accurate empathy.

This survey sets the tone for more in-depth research to improve the integration of theory and practice.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Because of the research processes engaged in this study, and the tentative findings established, several recommendations are hereby made. Further role plays with this relevant group (second-year students) should be conducted as a foundation for further group work processes especially at third-year level. Further in-depth research should be conducted to cover aspects that might have been left out in this study as the actual role and significance role play are utilised as a method of teaching and learning to improve learning and raise interest. Through this, active listening, better communication, deeper understanding of the client as well as improved service delivery to the clients could be assured; that leadership be encouraged to provide platforms for those students who show leadership qualities and awaken leadership in those reticent students. This is to promote growth, truthfulness and effectiveness in individuals who would otherwise not have been enabled to gain self-mastery. Personal development is also ensured, besides academic prowess. It is also further recommended that role play as a technique in social work be upheld so as to ensure that group work does not lose its meaning, as established in this context, and that advanced and in-depth research be undertaken to improve social learning and thus promote innovation.

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