



Research Paper

Advancing Youth Empowerment through Life Skills

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ABSTRACT

Gitterman and Schulman define Group work as a professional method of social work that focuses on enhancing the group members social functioning, social support, coping skills, personal fulfillment and facilitating social action. It provides for an intervention strategy to be applied within the practical arena. Group work with youth is a pragmatic and fruitful approach to unite the youth of a community and channel their thoughts, ideas, and action to infuse and facilitate empowerment and gradual social action. The utilization of group work as a method emanates from the attribute that even a smaller group has immense power and potential, which could be harnessed for problem-solving and enhanced societal relations. The group work method is potential enough to empower the youth through life skills training, which will facilitate their decision-making throughout life.

This paper is largely based on secondary sources of data. It will focus on life skills and their application in group work with youth, which shall empower them to make informed decisions in their lives and uplift other group members in a favorable environment, leading to the overall betterment of the group. It shall be supported with the pieces of evidence available in the literature and will include the ways of maneuvering to help youth in the community unite and take up social action on various issues, as per requirement. It will be concluded by analyzing the role of the social worker in empowering the youth through life skills and the gradual independence of these capable young lives in standing up for themselves and others in society, ultimately fulfilling the prime motive of the social work profession.

Index Terms- Empowering Youth, Group Work with Youth, Life Skills, Youth Development

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I. INTRODUCTION

The term Youth refers to the population which is young and capable enough to support massive transformation through their energy, agility, smartness, competency, courage, fearlessness, dynamism, action orientation, physical strength and much more. The youth is brimming with immense potential that only needs to be harnessed in a positive manner with adequate guidance and support at the right time. According to United Nations, persons between the age group of 15-24 are referred to as 'youth', without prejudice to other definitions by Member States (United Nations). This definition emerged during whilst preparing for the International Youth Year in 1985. It was validated by the General Assembly in its (36/28) resolution in 1981. This phase is also understood as the transition journey from a dependent childhood to an independent adulthood. According to the United Nations, the population of young people aging 15-24 across the globe stands for 1.2 billion, which is extrapolated to reach 1.3 billion by the end of 2030. Today's era of globalization, technology and modernization has paved way for prodigious opportunities for the young generation. However, at the same time, these also exert pressure over the youth to push themselves and compete in order to secure their place in this accelerated world. In a country like India, which is also called a young nation because of the larger number of youths, the youth encounter severe issues like financial instability, unemployment, educational paucity, emotional distress, psychological problems, peer pressure, depression, discrimination, comparison etc. It often thrusts them into the abyss of social issues such as alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, theft and mental health issues as well.

The vulnerability of this phase drives the attention towards catering to the issues faced by the youth. The youth belonging to the marginalized sections of society suffer multifold as their living conditions add on to their stress. Poverty, lack of education, absence of basic facilities such as water, electricity, sanitation and health expose them to the harsh realities, impelling them to drift away from it by engaging in drug-abuse and alcoholism. The lack of familial support and right guidance make their life even tougher. It is highly unfortunate that the education system is not holistic enough to infuse children with life skills at an early age, shielding and

empowering them to lead their life. The young people look forth to be a part of social, cultural, political and economic sphere and strive for it. They require parental guidance, elderly support and institutional assistance in order to channel streamline their thoughts into action with ample education and finance. Youth is indubitably the cornerstone to the development of the nation and therefore needs to be empowered to prosper in life. Life skills are crucial for the growth of a person as individual and taking decisions in his/her life. The absence of life skill education and training hurls the youth at the whims of their emotions, which mostly lands them in a tough spot in life, leading to disastrous consequences. It is therefore highly important for the youth to be trained with life skills so that they are capable enough to deal with the issues in their lives skillfully. These skills are intrinsic to the process of youth development.

Life skills

World Health Organization describes life skills as the capacities that facilitate positive and adaptive behavior which helps individual in dealing with their daily life issues and meeting the demands of life (United Nations Organisation). UNICEF explains life skills as an approach to behavior development which is designed to incorporate knowledge, attitude and skills (United Nations Organisation). This definition emanates out of the research which compounds that behavioral shift is difficult without the appropriate balance of the mentioned three aspects. Life skills play an important part in the cognitive, emotional and behavior growth of an adolescent and eventual success (WHO, 2016). (Powell, 1995) portrays life skills as the skills that are necessary to cope up with the challenges of life in and intrinsic to human development in various domains like cognitive, physical, sexual, vocational, emotional etc. These life skills have the potential to promote the development of these young lives into productive persons by making them capable of dealing life situations and challenges effectively (Prajapati, Sharma, & Sharma, 2017). Elucidating the efficacy of life skills as a medium of intervention with young people, writes that these have been utilized and fit into the conceptual frame of programs such as sexual and reproductive health, sports etc. The aim of Life skills is to infuse certain key skills namely critical thinking, decision making, team work, self-awareness, communication, problem solving in people which are essential to protect themselves against any sort of exploitation (UNICEF, 2015; WHO, 1993)

Life skills such as critical thinking, decision making, creative thinking, problem solving, scoping with stress etc. are not new to the social work profession, but, forms the essence of it. The social workers could use these skills while working with youth in group work setting for intervention.

Group work

Gisela Konopka defines Group work as “a method of social work which helps individuals to enhance their social functioning through purposeful group experiences and to cope more effectively with their personal, group or community problems.” (Konopka, 1983).

According to Trecker, “Social group work is a method through which individuals in groups in social agency settings are helped by worker who guides their interaction in programme activities so that they may relate themselves to others and experience growth opportunities in accordance with their needs and capacities.”(Tecker, 1955)

In Indian context, Group work denotes working with a small or medium sized group of people for basic matters as everyday discussion to behavior modification eventually. It also facilitates deliberation and execution of tasks leading to social change. The group worker utilizes her/his professional skills to bring the group closer and encourages them to acquire their group goals, keeping their individual needs and societal norms in consideration (Siddique, 2008).

Group work as method of social work is the means for the group to engage in purposeful communication with the fellow group members resulting in their strengthened social operation enhanced capacity of dealing with their personal issues. It is not restricted to one person but caters to the needs of the group as a whole, where everyone is cooperatively involved to escalate the efficacy of the group. The intent of this paper is to understand the use of life skills in group work with youth to facilitate youth development. For that, it is important to understand that the principles of group work aim to develop an individual as well the group. Life skills as described above have the same purpose, as these help individuals to face their life in a much confident and positive manner, learning skills like critical thinking, coping with stress etc. An individual who is able to manage their life’s functioning well, shall be able to contribute in enhancing the functioning of the group and the society at large.

II. GROUP WORK AND LIFE SKILLS

Group work offers a safe setting for people to understand each other’s experiences and connect with them by sharing their own issues as well. It is the responsibility of the group worker to provide an amicable and healthy environment to the group to facilitate their growth as a group. By means of various principles given by different social work authors, the following principles could be encapsulated:

- Planned group organization
- Equality to all the members
- Encouraging each member of the group
- Considering each member as a key member of the group
- Considering amicable relationship with the group members as the way to problem solving of the issues of the group as well as each member, promoting group development.
- Freedom to the group to conduct their discussion on the basis of their need analysis and not ordering them as per your will
- Freedom to express themselves in the group and participate in problem solving
- Acknowledging the important of group experience in shaping the lives and experiences of the group members
- Understanding the group processes such as group structure, role and responsibilities, division etc.
- Moderating the group in a manner that doesn't hinder the authenticity of the group
- Respecting the group dynamics and guiding constructively
- Awareness generation about the opportunities that the group seeks and ways to achieve it
- Group worker should consciously use himself/herself in the working of the group. Use of constructive limitation should be the focus to avoid unnecessary interruption
- Scientific action plan should be created after properly understanding the needs and issues of the group
- Accepting the group members as they are and not condemning them for their flaws
- Clear norms and values of the group should be stated during group formation and adherence should be ensured
- Group worker should mobilize resources to facilitate the need fulfillment of the group
- Principle of evaluation, continuous examination and evaluation of group activities.

These principles clearly describe that individuals are the essential component of the group and they shall be respected for who they are, where they come from and what contribution they make in the group. The group worker's professional values and skills may guide the group in a manner which supports their deliberation on any issue, sharing of experiences openly, helping other group members to open up and contribute. The concept of group work has only been designed to bring people of a certain age group, category, having similar issues, belonging to a same area etc. to come together and discuss on the issues that they may face and initiate problem solving. The group worker time and again guides the interaction of the group to ensure the correct trajectory. Youth groups have the potential to not only grow as a group but also take up several issues outside the group eventually. Group work with youth is a fructuous approach for they understand each other and their issues better, as they belong to the same age category and face similar situations in their lives. They work together in the group to look up for the options that lead to change, while at the same time relating their position to that issue. J.Moon postulates that learning could only be optimized by drawing the youth closer to share their issues and understanding other group member's experiences(Moon, 2004).

In the Indian society, the youth faces various issues such as unemployment, peer pressure, emotional distress, psychological issues, familial issues etc. and the absence of ears to listen to their problems make them prone to deviations like alcohol and drug abuse, which is considered an easy escape. The changing society, modernization, changing family structure, maladjusted relationships, changing need of the current generation, generational gap, and transformation in social and cultural sphere has exposed the youth to various issues which the family usually doesn't recognize (Partners in Life Skills Education). Group work with youth shall give them a safe space to open up about their issues and empathizing with the other fellow young group members, deliberating on the issue and facilitating decision making. The education system takes care of the intellectual growth of the children but overlooks the importance of life skills in dealing with the daily life struggles. As per an article focusing on African American and European American youth(Gutman, Peck, Malanchuk, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2017), to develop assets, the youth needs support and guidance from the community to become productive assets of the society. Youth intends to contribute to the society but lack of resources and services hinder their journey to be a productive citizen and effectual part of the social sphere. The absence of resources and people to discuss their issues with further deteriorates their situation. Therefore, the need to bring Life Skills in the domain of group work with youth is the need of the hour.

Imparting life skills is important to promote socialization, prevent youth from resorting to social evils and to enable them in taking their life decisions analytically and constructively. According to UNICEF, life skills are a set of interpersonal skills and psychosocial competencies that facilitates better communication, analyzing ability, cordial relationships, empathetic outlook and positive dealing of life issues (UNICEF). UNICEF, WHO and UNESCO enumerate the following as the core life skills, approach and techniques (UNO):

1. Problem Solving
2. Critical Thinking

3. Effective Communication Skills
4. Decision Making
5. Creative Thinking
6. Interpersonal Relationship Skills
7. Self-Awareness Building Skills
8. Empathy
9. Coping with Stress
10. Coping with Emotions

Learning life skills promote healthy relationships, conduct and mental well-being. These skills prepare the youth to take charge of their lives and become empowered in true sense. Participatory learning methods are an intrinsic part of life skills teaching and the same applies to the conduct of social work practice, therefore including it in group work shall result in better outcomes. Group work is one of the important methods to facilitate life skills teaching (Partners in Life Skills Education). For youth, learning the above-mentioned skills are necessary to acknowledge and live with oneself, to establish cordial and healthy relations, to understand their feelings, thoughts and behavior, to induce a positive approach towards life, to set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely) goals and to make informed decision with patience in their lives, which prevents at-risk behavior altogether. These psychosocial and interpersonal skills could be imparted into the youth through group work in various sessions. Different activities could be used to train them in specific skill. Developing life skills helps the youth construe information, knowledge, values and guidance into healthy behavior. For example, in an activity undertaken in the group by the group worker, he/she uses various tasks to make them understand the relevance of SMART goal setting. By the end of the activity, the group members will be able to fathom the importance of setting realistic and pragmatic goals in life and that a SMART goal will help them achieve their aim. This will not only provide a guidance in terms of their aim and the way of achieving it in life, but also prevent unnecessary stress that the youth put on themselves due to lack of awareness, motivation and guidance. It will further help them in decision making and understanding the significance of patience.

In Project MYTRI (Mobilizing Youth for Tobacco Related Initiatives in India) - a controlled, school based, multiple component tobacco prevention program including cigarette and bidi smoking with the students of class 6 to 9, the intention was to modify factors such as knowledge, skills, meanings, societal norms and environmental factors that contribute to the engagement of young children in tobacco and cigarette consumption. While analyzing, it was found that life skills training program had a significant role in awareness generation about the negative effects of tobacco consumption and facilitating reduction in its use by the youth. Research shows that programs that were designed to develop life skills result in increased decision-making capacity, reduction in destructive behavior, enhanced self-image, improved relations, self-awareness, positive thinking, knowledge acquisition, social and emotional adjustment, healthy coping mechanism to deal with stress and anxiety, patient conduct etc. (UNO).

III. YOUTH LED INITIATIVES IN INDIA

Youth groups are active agents of change and are potential enough to undertake colossal issues in their respective societies. In the current time, youth groups are being recognized and supported for their ability to bring change in the society. According to an article titled Poverty Eradication: The Role of Youth Participation as a catalyst for Social Change (Nejati, Pourezat, & Gholipour, 2013), youth are becoming key participants in decision making and contributing to the social development by participating in civil society organizations, youth led development initiatives etc. As far as India is concerned, the youth is highly capable of being the catalysts for change, for they have seen the realities very closely and the marginalized section has suffered massively. The purpose behind discussing about the initiatives taken forth by youth group here is solely to understand that youth is the driving force of the society and skilled and empowered youth prove to be as asset to the society. Youth representation and development is the stepping stone to achieving sustainable development goals, poverty eradication and nonetheless the social change, which is a requisite of the time in which we are living which is crammed with prodigious discrimination, victimization, gender disparity, abuse, poverty, hatred, religious politics, nepotism and so on.

Youth is the powerhouse of creating substantive change in the society. For an abreast future generation, it is important to make youth an essential stakeholder in the discourse on issues including environment conservation (Giroti, 2020). The fresh perspective and discontent on the rampant issues in the society shapes their contribution in a positive change, which is not an overnight one but rather has a ripple effect. Engaging the youth in decision making, policy discourse, government initiatives, civil society organization's activism etc. shall foster dynamic involvement of theirs in the affairs of the society at large. It will boost their self-esteem and confidence to play a pivotal role in processing societal change and social action. To apprehend the relevance of youth groups and their contribution in social change, let us look at the instances mentioned below:

The Clean Seas Campaign Initiative by the United Nations Environment Programme observed that youth in India have been colossally participating in endeavors to curb plastic pollution, under a global movement. It implies that the youth is concerned about the protection of environment and has been coming together to take steps for the same. The strength of youth in communicating, advocating, decision making and sensitivity towards the environment helped them to discuss the environmental issues with their peers, families, schools, youth organizations etc. to spread awareness and initiate social change in this domain (Singh, 2020).

Youth from various universities volunteered in an initiative aimed at creating social change through volunteer action. Over 250 young people participated in the event organized by a non-profit organization, Leaders for Tomorrow. The event was conducted to collect food items and clothing for the flood affected people of Jammu and Kashmir, which turned into a huge success due to the active participation of youth. The manner, in which they interact with their fellows and other people, makes their intentions much clearer to them and cohesion takes place. According to the founder, youth are the leaders of tomorrow and possess huge capacity to promote social change. Youth's prolific participating in everyday events such as tree plantation, awareness drives, conducting skill development programs for underprivileged children, visiting old age home etc. connects them more to the society and results in escalated indulgence in welfare activities for the different strata of the society and the nature (PTI, 2014).

In another example, MUST BOL, a youth led campaign uses social media for social change against gender-based violence in India. Under this, young people engage in intriguing discussions around gender and violence and put forth their views and experiences openly with their young fellows. These constructive discussions surfaced the need for intervention and support for the women facing violence in different spheres, which generally is ignored for the gender disparity that is prevalent in our country. The group is led by 22 youth from diverse background that facilitate the talks and motivate people to open up in comfortable day to day spaces about their ordeals and experiences. It has reached numerous people so far and supporting inclusive talks with the intention of promoting problem solving with due discourse (Partners for Prevention).

IV. ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKER

Social workers need to use the group work method with the youth to contribute to their development. As social work professionals, it is requisite to utilize the principles of social work while using life skills in group work with youth. This paper has made it pellucid that the skills incorporated under the umbrella term life skills have been forming the core of social work practice for long. In other words, imparting life skills is an essential part of facilitating youth development by the social workers. Youth Development is a process that musters the adolescents from being dependents to independents, preparing them to be able to sustain themselves through various programs, policies and activities. It supports youth, in augmenting their potential, and strengths, to be a valuable part of society (Youth Development Strategies, 2002). Social workers' role in youth development is crucial, as they get to work directly with them in group work setting. It is important to generate awareness in the community regarding various opportunities available for the youth. Through rapport generation, the social worker should focus on planning and constituting groups with youth. In group work setting, the social worker should facilitate interaction among the group members to discuss on various issues concerning them. Life skill sessions shall help in empowering the youth which ultimately will lead to youth development. After life skill training, the social worker should encourage the youth to take up issues in their community and be vociferous about them. The life skills like leadership, communication, decision-making, critical thinking, team work etc. will help the youth to establish healthy relations with their families and communities, which will pave their way forth to a better interaction with them. It will further encourage them to bring various social issues on the table to raise awareness in the community and be a responsible citizen. The group that the social worker creates for meeting and life skill sessions has the potential to become a youth group in itself and endeavor social action. Once these youths are skilled enough with various psychosocial and interpersonal skills, they shall not only be able to deal with their lives in a better manner but would also become more active in the community. The youth are the leaders of tomorrow, and it is the responsibility of the social work practitioners to help them develop essential leadership qualities and foster their development.

V. CONCLUSION

Youth engagement in the current social, political and cultural paradigm is the need of the hour. Increased involvement of young people in social discourses, policymaking, advocacy, planning, environmental action, etc develops their role and constructive interaction in society extensively. The feeling of being heard and contributing to the social change boosts their self-worth, self-esteem, and self-confidence to increasingly participate in various issues and their discussions, leading to problem-solving. It is the responsibility of the social work practitioners to enable them to become a responsible part of the decision-making process in society. As discussed in the paper, the youth is deprived of various resources and guidance, pushing them into negative deviances that further deteriorates their situation. Through life skills education and training in the group work

setting, the youth forms a cohesive bond to reflect on their life issues, leading to the ventilation, deliberation, and problem-solving of the group issues' as a whole. Group work is a valuable approach that provides youth a safe space to open up and find effective solutions to their problems. In addition to it, life skills training to the group enables them to make informed decisions in their lives and become creative, optimistic, pragmatic, enthusiastic, and cordial. Such groups then become an asset to the society and their energy, innovations, thoughts, ideas, creativity, strength, communication skills, strategies could be channelized to encourage other people in the society to contribute to nation-building. Life skills through group work don't only empower the youth but also facilitate behavioral change, leading to their development. These empowered youth then act as the catalyst of social change in the society with appropriate guidance and motivation by the social worker, eventually augmenting their capabilities to stand up for themselves and various issues in the society to create change. The soul of life skills is intrinsic to the core of group work and social work principles altogether, therefore making them crucial to the empowerment of youth and their development. Youth from diverse backgrounds are like beautiful colors, which, with care, support, guidance, and skill-set would brighten up the canvas of the society and facilitate social change.

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