Practice learning: Who is failing to adjust? Black African student experience of practice learning in a social work setting

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Summary: The nature of social work as a profession and the increasing demand for social workers to reflect the ethnic and cultural communities which they serve, means that social work programmes should seek to recruit and train students from many different backgrounds and ethnicities.

This article will draw upon a wider evaluation, undertaken by three academics, all teaching on undergraduate and post qualifying modules on Social Work programmes. The broad aim of the evaluation was to develop an understanding of the Black African student perspective on their life experiences and its impact on their learning whilst studying social work. The particular focus will be on students' experience of practice learning.

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Introduction

Through teaching experience, the authors noted that repeatedly, Black African students on the Social Work programme appeared to struggle more with their academic studies, achieving lower grades and failing more modules. Similarly, Black African students were more likely to fail their practice learning module or have serious concerns raised about them by their practice teachers/assessors. This has been recently confirmed in a national report by the General Social Care Council (GSCC, 2009). Previously, it has been suggested that social work educators are anxious about failing students, especially black students, due to fears of allegations of racism. (Brummer, 1988)

A curiosity about what the cause of this might be, led the authors to conduct a focus group within their own establishment. *The University of Northampton welcomes international students and values the richness and diversity brought to the academic community*. Words to this effect can be found on most University websites and marketing material. The unwritten part is that the driver to recruit more international students is often income-generated led, (Hyland et al., 2008) which should, but often it does not, result in an increased responsibility for the quality of the international student experience.

The University of Northampton, like many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), has a drive to internationalise the curricula. Whilst this is vital in terms of inclusiveness and preparing students for a contemporary global world, this too, can be viewed as motivated by income generation. If university programmes explicitly include (either within their modules or course titles) an internationalism component, then they become more attractive to international students or 'home' students wishing to ultimately return to their country of origin.

In 2007, the Prime Minister launched an Initiative for international Education and provided funding for various pieces of research and surveys into the support available to international students in HEIs, with the aim to 'ensure that the United Kingdom maintains and improves its reputation for the highest quality for international student support' (UKCISA, 2007, p. 1). Whilst this initiative was greeted with enthusiasm, the very definition of 'international student' as any student not normally resident in the UK was limiting and not representative of many other types of 'international' students. For students to be eligible for home fee status, they must have been ordinarily resident in the UK

(or elsewhere in the European Union) for at least three years.

The General Social Care Council (GSCC), which regulates Social Work Programmes, in recent reports state that over the last three years, there has been a significant increase in students of African heritage enrolling on the social work degree and that this group make up about 11.9 percent of social work students in the country (GSCC, 2007; 2009). This number has recently been reported to have risen to 14.2 percent (GSCC, 2009). The report concludes that Black African students are the second largest group studying social work in England, after British students who made up 68.7 percent (GSCC, 2007; 2009) This reflects the general growth of Black African students studying in HEIs in the UK (Maringe & Carter, 2007; GSCC 2009)

The aim of this paper is to evaluate and make recommendations based on the experiences of practice learning for Black African students on the social work degree at the University of Northampton. Drawing upon the students' personal accounts, the authors hope to identify the key themes for Black African students specifically in relation to practice learning as a distinct component of social work training.

Terminology

The terms 'international' , 'EU' or 'home' students are used regularly within HEIs. These are terms which reflect the fee status of the student, but little else. (Trahar, 2007). It must be noted that fees for International students are considerably higher than those for home students.

The term 'international student' does not reflect the entire Black African student population on Social Work programmes. This focus group involved 15 Black African students. (From the enrolment data available from the University, it is estimated that Black African students make up between 9-10 percent of the social work student population.) Three of these students were considered 'international' students. The other 12 students are deemed 'home' students due to their period of residency within the UK, and subsequently qualify for a GSCC bursary and are of Black African origin. It is debatable whether these 12 students consider the UK to be their 'home'.

The inquiry, which led to this focus group, was not based on whether the Black African students were deemed 'international' or 'home', but

the significant factor was that their country of origin is Africa and this is where they all undertook their formative education.

Whilst the students within this study are referred to as Black African Students, it is noteworthy to mention that this broad term is a somewhat Eurocentric view (Maringe & Carter, 2007) and important to remember that Africa encompasses 53 different countries with differing languages, cultures, beliefs and traditions. Despite such difference, some cultural norms were identified within the focus group and are highlighted in the themes raised, in particular associated with gender, family loyalty and experience of racism.

Literature review

Research and writing in respect of minority of black students' learning needs is largely confined to children rather than adults. (Delpit, 1995; Fleming, 1998; Gonzalez, 1996; McIntyre, 1996)

There is some research on the experiences of international students (Carroll & Ryan, 2005) and those from black minority groups, which are not necessarily subject specific (Bradley 2000; Kinnell 1990). Research relating to social work programmes remains largely about the American Black African student experience (Rai, 2002), and to date, the authors can find no specific research available on the experiences of Black African students undertaking English Social Work programmes.

Methodology

As mentioned, the focus group involved 15 Black African students. The students involved in the study came from a range of countries within the African continent including: Ghana, Zimbabwe, Cameroon and Nigeria. Of the 15 students, 2 are male. [Based on University data available men make up 4 per cent of the social work student population, compared to 13 percent nationally (GSCC, 2009)]

Following Ethics Committee approval, all Black African students on the Social Work programme (part time and full time) were sent a letter of invitation to take part in this focus group, together with a participants'

pack. This pack outlined the purpose of the enquiry, the intent of the use of information by the authors, and the participants' explicit right to disengage from the study at any stage. The letter invited students to participate in a focus group. Those that could not or preferred not to attend, were all offered individual interviews with one of the authors. Two students took up this offer.

The focus group was approached by the authors with the intention of gaining the students' 'lived' experiences of practice learning. In order to listen to the narratives of the students, a focus group was set up, to which all Black African students were invited where the authors asked a series of questions relating to the students experience of:

- Previous work and education
- The Social Work degree programme, both the taught and practice learning elements. (This paper will focus on the evaluation of practice learning.)

A control group, of a similar size and randomly selected White students were invited to a separate focus group, were given the same information as the Black African students and posed the same questions. It was intended that the control group's experience would be used as a comparison. Unfortunately, only three students attended the focus group, making it difficult to compare. Reflections on reasons for the low number of White student participation will be considered later.

Practice learning

Practice learning has posed different challenges for our Black African students. Within the focus group, they indicated a strong need for further adjustments and described the placement opportunities as 'another world'. To date, nine of the social work students have failed their placements since the commencement of the degree programme; 50 per cent of the students are of Black African origin. The one common characteristic of the students failing their placement is their gender – they are all women. However, as noted Social Work education programmes have a high predominance of women (GSCC, 2009). Focusing our reflections on the Black African students' experience

of practice learning by listening to their narratives some themes are beginning to emerge.

As previously stated Africa is a vast continent and home to a large number of countries, languages, cultures and differences. However, clear cultural norms were identified within the focus group, which has led the authors to be able to cluster the student's experiences within a thematic framework. The emerging themes are associated with:

- Gender roles and expectations based on cultural and traditional norms
- Financial pressures and difficulties
- Health related problems impacting on placement competency and continuation
- Homesickness and culture shock
- Lack of practice experience based on unfamiliarity with UK welfare state and systems
- Cultural diversity and its impact on social work practice and decision making
- Students' motivation to study social work and preconceived ideas of the profession
- The experience of individual and institutional racism

Gender

Historically, the Black African student population was predominately male, but due to inclusive attitudes towards the education and employment of women across Africa, since the 1980s the number of men and women coming to the UK to study has become more equal. (Daley, 1998; Laird, 2008) All of the Black African students have family responsibilities and others (usually children) are dependent on them, either emotionally, financially or both. Many of the students found themselves juggling managing their home, families, placement, part time employment and study. This constituted a major source of additional stress.

These women saw themselves as financial providers alongside their male partners, resulting in gaining part time employment to feed either their immediate families in the UK or sending money back to the

families they had left behind in political unrest, danger or poverty. The part-time work is usually unskilled and low paid employment (e.g. office cleaning) a source of embarrassment for the students, which they keep secret from relatives and friends for fear of undermining their decision to travel to the UK and 'better' themselves. (Daley, 1998) For Black African students, who are also women, they 'juggle' their studies with traditional expectations of them as wives and mothers thus combining a traditional role with an emerging professional one. This is further compounded by what Wright (1997, p. 101) refers to as the 'socially constructed value base of the two institutions, the home and university' where for women these are rarely compatible but mutually exclusive.

Finances

Based on the authors' experiences as academics, it is not unusual for mature students to supplement student loans and bursaries with part time employment, which as demonstrated above was also common to the Black African students. However, the focus group highlighted the additional pressure for them as Black Africans needing to financially assist not just their immediate families (in the UK) but those in Africa too. The definition of 'family' for the focus group was far reaching and included what might be viewed from a euro-centric perspective as 'extended family' (aunts, uncles, parents, siblings). This is reflective of the levels of political unrest and poverty experienced by the Black African students' relatives at home, which is not relevant to other students.

In addition to supplementing the family income, as stated above, a number of these students find themselves dependent on family members or friends to fund 'sponsor' their academic fees. Therefore, the fear of failing brought with it the perceived 'shame' and 'losing face' to their sponsors, causing an additional burden. International student fees are considerably higher than 'home' students, and within social work education, this forfeits their ability to benefit from GSCC, albeit limited, travel bursaries whilst on placement. This places additional financial stress on international students.

Four of the students have experienced the death of a close family member (father or sibling) whilst studying. This has necessitated them

to fund medical treatment (no free healthcare is available in the students' countries of origin) and travel expenses to arrange and attend funerals in Africa. This has caused an inordinate level of financial hardship, rendering one student incapable of continuing to fund her studies. This financial struggle has impacted on students' continuation of placement. For some students the pressing need to continue with their studies has hampered them from experiencing the natural grieving process.

Health

All of the Black African students have had personal health complications, either emotional or physical, whilst on placement. The additional factor of attending medical appointments had a direct impact on their continuity on placement, concentration and unspoken questions (from their practice teachers/assessors) concerning their commitment and capabilities began to prevail. However, the students were unwilling to either pause or suspend their studies, demonstrating an inordinate level of resilience, possibly drawing upon coping strategies used in the past in the face of political persecution and war (Laird, 2008).Instead they chose to 'struggle on', despite the growing reality that failing the placement was inevitable. For some students, disclosing their health complications was understandably daunting. Despite a desire to remain private, offering no explanation to their practice teacher/assessor of their absence was not an option either. As Bradley (2000, p. 421) highlights 'Some students may be right to be wary, particularly on professional qualifying programmes where disclosures . . . may trigger issues of 'fitness for practice' '. This 'wariness' (Bradley, 2000) was further complicated when students' asylum status was tenuous and anxieties were raised where there was political unrest at home.

Homesickness

This 'other world' of social work practice, coupled with ill health and bereavement, exacerbated students' sense of isolation and longing for family members, particularly missing their own mothers. For those

more recently arrived in the UK, 'culture shock' was evident as a process of further adaptation for students comparing social need (e.g. poverty) and accessible services relative to their personal experience (Furnham, 1997).

Lack of practice experience

It could be argued that like any other inexperienced student, the Black African students shared the steep learning curve both in terms of unfamiliarity of social work practice and relating theory to practice. However, unlike the inexperienced white student, the Black African student is trying to contextualise the complex bureaucratic frameworks of the UK welfare state, education and health systems, bewildering threshold criteria, and organisational nuances steeped in history that they will be unaware of. All this is set against a landscape that bears no similarity or familiarity to their own lived personal or political experience. Coupled with this, they then endeavour to identify and apply theoretical social work methods and models to this newfound and unfamiliar practice context. This level of adjustment and learning often goes unnoticed by both universities and placement providers, thus no supplementary strategies are offered, and teaching methods rarely differ to meet this particular learning need despite students from Africa being a 'feature of Britain's educational institutions since the 18th century' (Daley, 1998).

Cultural diversity

The focus group highlighted some culturally based values that made their adaptation to UK social work practice more challenging where 'western values are a potential source of conflict and discomfort' (Rai, 2000, p. 29). One of the Black African students stated that it is 'culturally taboo' for her to 'interrogate someone about their family'. Clearly, this has implications for assessment work and particularly enquiries into allegations of abuse. Another practice issue raised amongst the focus group was the issue of advocating on behalf of services users and

that 'culturally you only challenge gate-keepers once'. This parallels the perceived deference Black African students believe they should demonstrate to those in authority (including academic tutors and team managers) which is further compounded by the traditional deference expected from women steeped in patriarchal ideology and dominance.

Motivation to study social work

The Black African students' motivation to study social work is related both to previous work experience before embarking on their studies, and practice progress once on placement. All of the students had engaged in some form of 'care work', this typically involved responding to service users' practical needs (for example, feeding). This is a world far-removed from the placement experience, where they were asked to complete copious forms, assess people's needs, broker (rather than provide) services, apply legal frameworks (e.g. Mental Health Act 1983, Children Act 1989) and exercise their position of authority whilst maintaining respect and responding to social injustice.

For other Black African students, the inspiration to study social work was because of close family members (siblings, aunts) that were qualified and practising social workers within the UK. For these students, their perceived image of social work was based on their relatives' experience, which was usually within a statutory setting. Therefore, when these students found themselves in non-traditional practice settings (e.g. schools, residential homes, and community-based agencies) their learning environment did not match their perceived 'real' world of social work. This led them to feel unprepared for qualification and somewhat 'short-changed' by the University. These students understandably, but mistakenly, assumed that the matching process of student to placement provider was biased. That 'lower level' placements (e.g. schools, residential homes) were matched to 'lower level' students- the black ones.

Increasingly, placement providers are insisting that students are car drivers. This is particularly relevant to local authority placements, where teams are typically merging but covering larger geographical areas or offices are located in industrial estates with no public transport

networks. Eight of the Black African students either did not hold a drivers' license or own their own transport due to financial constraints. This has had an impact on their placement opportunities and further marginalised their experience of statutory settings. This will have implications on their employability prospects once qualified.

The focus group also highlighted that placements within African community groups and agencies were limited, and that this practice experience could widen all students' understanding and awareness.

Racism and 'nipped wings'

The most concerning experience of the Black African students was that of racism on an institutional level as defined by Macpherson (1999) from practice teachers/assessors. They described being covertly discriminated against and 'oppressed', being monitored more closely than other white students, to the extent that their progress was hindered. As one student vividly recalls the experience: 'if your practice teacher is a control freak and likes to be in charge, you don't fly and your wings are nipped'. Students described institutional racism on several levels and experienced in various forms (Laird, 2008). This included being treated inequitably, subjected to stereotyping, mistrusted, and patronised (Laird, 2008). All of the practice teachers concerned with failing the Black African students were experienced in supervising both social work staff and students but relatively inexperienced in supervising black staff or students. They either all held or were working towards the (then) Practice Teachers Award.

Control group

As mentioned previously, a control group consisting of randomly chosen White students were also invited to a separate focus group. Only three students attended, none of whom had experienced any particular difficulties with either their academic or practice modules.

As with the study recently published by The Higher Education Academy (Hyland et al., 2008) this study highlighted a lack of

engagement of 'home' students. This could relate to the possibility that the White students were unconcerned with the study, unsure of it's relevance to them or indeed saw no personal benefit. This resonates with bell hooks (1992, p. 13) who states that ' The truth is that many folks benefit greatly from dominating others and are not suffering a wound that is in any way similar to the condition of the exploited and oppressed. Alternatively, could it be that they are more disengaged generally with the internationalisation agenda, which preoccupies their university?

Adjusting to the way forward

As mentioned earlier, the focus of this paper is on practice learning. However, the focus group dealt with wider issues relating to the students' previous educational perspectives and experiences of the academic elements of the social work programme. Three distinct issues arose from the focus group that is relative and noteworthy to both to the practice learning and taught elements of their studies.

The first relates to Black African students sense of being 'liberated' in being given a platform to express and share their experiences and for these to be listened to. The students also highlighted the advantages of continuing to share accounts, pass on advice and give one another support.

The second issue was that the Black African students assumed that the literature they should draw upon in assessments (assignments and portfolios) should be UK based. They expressed surprise that drawing upon African authors and works would be acceptable and welcomed. The authors were aware that this message had clearly not been made explicitly and planned to review current diverse literature available in the University library and on campus bookshop.

Lastly, the students discussed the benefits of mentoring scheme where they could be 'matched' with a Black practitioner who is not an assessor but that might act as a 'befriender' or role model for them to gain a better understanding of social work practices in the UK.

A number of recommendations have arisen from this evaluation. Typically, where the time and resource implications have been minimal, the recommendations have been implemented swiftly and easily by the

authors and maintained by the students. These have included:

Padare[1] Group

A peer support group run for Black African student social workers by Black African student social workers. Currently they meet every two months. Within the University, there is a hope that this peer support group will extend to other Black African students within the School of Health (where the Social Work Division is organisationally positioned) e.g. midwifery, nursing.

Notice board

Has been established within the Social Work Division, to vibrantly and overtly displays news of Black African social work interest (e.g. conferences, new books) and Padare Group dates.

Books

To build a library of relevant African authors and African centred books, which students can draw upon to provide alternative theories for addressing social work issues. This has been achieved through the support of the University Library Service and Campus Bookshop.

Teaching content

To incorporate and integrate international perspectives of social work into existing modules and teaching.

Teaching style

Ensure that examples used to demonstrate social work theories, methods and models are also African-centric and not restricted to a euro-centric paradigm.

African community groups

Establishing links with African community groups and agencies with a view to developing practice learning opportunities.

Other recommendations, as mentioned above, due to the time and financial commitments or institutional regulations involved are longer-term strategies for the Social Work Division at the University to implement. These include:

Mentoring scheme

Black social work practitioners to mentor Black African students. (Despite a number of practitioners offering to become mentors, to date, funding has been applied for twice and declined to implement this project to cover costs such as mentor expenses, training and administration.)

Shadow experience

To pilot a non obligatory 'shadow experience' for new students, support by an approved Mentor to enable students to gain some understanding of social work processes in the UK and to prepare them for their social work educational career. This eventually could extend to younger and/or less experienced social work students, from other ethnic backgrounds.

A 'two-way street' and the journey home

Social Work education is a journey. Whilst the destination remains the same, the Black African student's starting point is at a different place and their route might be less travelled. The path taken by the Black African Student is not wrong or inferior but their route is a different one. Their journey rarely has any short cuts enjoyed by other White students (e.g. accreditation of prior learning) and the terrain is less familiar.

As academics and practice teachers/assessors, the road map will need to adjust, providing pit stops (peer support groups) and at times roadside assistance (mentoring schemes). Whilst Black African students adjust to UK perceived norms and practices, social work educators will need to view the world through the Black African student lens to appreciate, value and incorporate their experience within practice learning.

The internationalism of the curricula and the recruitment of a diverse student body are laudable acts. If they are motivated merely as an income generator, without any thought to the challenges and adjustments necessary, the consequences will be fruitless and potentially further exacerbate the sense of 'us' and 'them'. An adjustment by all, and so encouraging a 'two way street' (Johnson, 2004) not just by the students, is necessary to make the journey as enriching and diverse as possible.

Note

1. Padare is a term from Zimbabwe meaning *Meeting Place*. The name was chosen by the students

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