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Discourses of Diversity: ‘Top down’ and grassroots approaches to recruitment and retention of Black and Minority Ethnic people in social work education.

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Introduction and Background

The central theme discussed here is of the contrasting discourse of ‘top down’ government initiatives in recruitment and retention of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) social work students and a grassroots, community based initiative. The discourse of the former tends to recognise and work with difference, putting aside personal prejudice and the provision of support to people who are ‘different’. Whereas, the discourse of the latter has a propensity to challenge institutional racism, foster partnership between education providers, community groups and networks within the local voluntary sector and draws from a strengths-based black community development model. A starting point for this paper is the understanding that the nature of language of inclusion of people from BME communities in social work education either reflects and reinforces, or challenges the power relationships embedded in these arenas. We contrast the language and approaches of top down government policies with a grassroots community project to identify opportunities and challenges in these differing approaches. To contextualise this conversation, we draw on the work of Harris (2003), who traces the unfolding discourse of social work education from the late 1970s to early 21st Century.

Institutional and government responses to racism and social work education

The discourse of professional social work education regulatory bodies has waxed and waned over the past 40 years. Two significant themes can be identified over this period. One is the profession’s claims to status as a profession and another revolves around a central question of the role of social work and social workers relational to structural inequality and oppression. Harris (2003) suggests that at least part of the early thinking of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work, (CCETSW) the UK-wide body set up to regulate social work education was an attempt to curtail the influence of the embryonic radical social work movement on social work training. On a more emancipatory note in 1989 the organisation approved a 2 year Diploma in Social Work as the qualifying award for social work, accompanied by a set of rules and requirements (CCETSW 1989), containing a more explicit reference to

combating discrimination and oppression in the social work context, and the role of social work in promoting equal opportunities and furthering anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice.

Over time the social work education discourse was reduced to notions of knowledge and understanding of diversity and individualistic approaches to managing difference, limited to role and context. Harris describes this as an example of creeping managerial-ism in social work education, designed to reflect and prepare social work students for the increasingly business led approaches to social work practice. New institutions such as the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) have been created to monitor and regulate social work education. According to Harris, these institutions tend to be characterised by centralised ‘top down’ approaches, promotion of uniform curricula across social work programmes, greater stakeholder involvement and erosion of professional self regulation. Phung (2007) reflects that there is reduced consideration of the impact of social division and oppression replaced by a blander view of diversity as differences social work students may encounter.

The current language in the standards and requirements for social work education in Scotland (SSSC, 2003), repeats the commitment to a strong ethical basis for social work education and calls for a balancing of the rights and responsibilities of people who use social work services with the interests of the wider community. It promotes a qualified, toned down and seemingly individualistic approach, that social work students must:

‘work effectively and sensitively with people’s whose cultures, beliefs or life experiences are different from their own. In all of these situations they must recognise and put aside any personal prejudice and work within guiding ethical principles and according to professional codes of conduct’(SSSC, 2003).

However, this statement does not require a student to critically challenge their own prejudice, nor develop an awareness of the use and abuse of power and the discrimination which flows from this. It is self evident that social work students will encounter a range of different people in the course of their practice. Surely all social work practice should be sensitive and effective? This apparently diluted approach to discrimination and oppression experienced by users of social work service is reflected in a major review of social work in Scotland: Changing Lives, the report of the 21st Century Social Work Review (Scottish Executive, 2006). Within the document, there is little reference to the role of social work in challenging discrimination and oppression

experienced by BME people in Scotland. The strongest expression of the need for a social services workforce which meets the needs of diverse communities emerges from the User and Carer Panel, who acted as consultants to the review:

‘The workforce should reflect the diversity of the population. Social workers should come from all sections of the community, e.g. the deaf community and minority ethnic communities, etc. (Scottish Executive 2006, p. 64).

The report represents a missed opportunity to contribution to the debate about the role of social work in relation to structural discrimination and oppression, conducted over the last 30 years, in relation to the experience of racism. There is no acknowledgement of the factors that inhibit or promote involvement of BME people in social work or in social work as a positive career option. Indeed there is no acknowledgement of the impact of ‘institutional racism’ highlighted in the earlier CCETSW paper (1989) and reinforced by the McPherson Report. A lack of reference to the existence of and experience of institutional racism, we argue is a serious flaw in initiatives to address the social work needs and career potential of BME people.

There have been a number of initiatives in Scotland where the recruitment of BME social work students has been considered. For example, one such report (SSSC 2006) re-emphasises the responsibilities of social work education providers under race relations legislation, though there is very little reference to pro-active strategies to achieve this. Whilst welcoming such initiatives, the language utilized in these approaches to the development of a more diverse social services workforce reflects the “fresh talent” policy of encouraging people from other countries to come to Scotland to meet the anticipated decline in population and the services workforce. Scottish government discourse is one of demographics and economics pertaining to new immigrants and refugees. Little reference is made to existing BME communities or indeed to factors, such as cultural differences in social work and education and institutional racism which inhibit participation. We turn now to consider an alternative approach to recruitment and retention of BME social work students.

A grassroots, community-based approach to recruitment and retention of BME students to social work education

Research undertaken by Singh (1999, 2005) to survey access and support provision for BME students in social work across Scotland, and to ascertain views from BME communities about social work as a career found that despite positive statements of commitment by providers, policy and practices were piecemeal, fragmented and uncoordinated (Singh, 1999). Informed by this action research, staff at the Multi-Cultural Family Base (MCFB) in Edinburgh and The Open University (OU) in Scotland along with other education providers undertook an innovative 2-year pilot programme for supported access to studying at Higher Education level. The programme provides integrated one to one, group work and language support from experienced BME learners for BME students, studying short OU Openings courses. Its approach is underpinned by explicit principles. Firstly, the recognition and acknowledgement of the challenges faced by BME learners in undertaking professional study programmes in predominately white organisations, and the recognition of the strengths of students who may have experienced and developed strategies to deal with issues of cultural differences and discrimination in its many forms. A further principle is the recognition that the challenges learners face are located in unique permutations of cultural, gender, age, disability, socio-economic factors, etc., in addition to the operation of racism at individual, institutional and societal levels. Moreover it draws on the principles of empowerment and capacity-building from the Black Community Development Model.

The pilot is committed to facilitate access to social work education for BME learners, based on a continuum of support, from the point of stimulating interest in social work as a possible career option; developing locally based partnerships with BME voluntary organisations; facilitating access and providing relevant support throughout social work training, through into employment. It has focused on support for existing BME social work students and latterly on facilitating access to education in the general area of care. Support is provided by mentors from BME backgrounds, who have relevant experience of study at university level. The work is funded and supported on a professional rate of pay and conditions. The language used to describe the work of the project reflects the above principles and is one of building relationships of trust between social work providers and local communities and joint working with universities and colleges. Crucially it aims to hear, support and give voice to potentially excluded learners, ensuring that their experiences are built into programmes of support which are modified on an on-going basis. At

its heart is a moral imperative and collective response to the race relations legislation to ensure that social work education and as a profession is truly accessible to all sections of Scottish communities.

The pilot has had positive outcomes for all

Apart from successful completion of the course by learners who would not have considered undertaking a first level university course, there have been visible changes in confidence and self-esteem; in particular some learners have been able to continue with education despite varied barriers posed by family opposition and domestic violence. Additionally, there are a growing number of role models providing a positive example of the ability to progress via educational achievement.

The diversity of those that make up the OU and MCFB is quintessential to their partnership, and is marked by rich learning about barriers to education and the identification of structural and institutional practices which need to be dismantled and rebuilt. The provision of mentor and language support has helped to generate a deeper understanding of the experiences of potentially excluded learners. Additionally the programme contributes to wider governmental and professional aspirations to develop a social services workforce, which more comprehensively reflects the ethnic profile and needs of the wider community. An ongoing priority is to embed this learning and service provision for BME students in mainstream education services. It is expected that further learning derived from the evaluation of the programme will significantly enhance the development of cultural diversity in the social services workforce in Scotland, and reflect the grassroots approaches to recruitment and retention of BME people in social work education.

Discussion

We draw on the Hunger Project's Service Delivery vs. Empowerment model (1989) to compare the language and implications of top down service delivery approaches, contrasted with a grassroots empowerment model; and to throw light on how use of language serves to reflect and reinforce or to challenge existing relationships of power. The language of a grassroots empowerment model is of de-centralisation, of empowerment of local communities, promoting rights, building capacity and involving people as actors and catalysts to exert more control over their lives. This contrasts with the language of 'top down' government and professional initiatives, of provision of services to carefully targeted 'vulnerable' people, suffering from 'immutable conditions' that need to be compensated for their situation, coupled with tight centralised management and control. The experience in Scotland in the 21st century

to date is that top-down government initiatives do not appear to reflect the complexity and diversity of needs of BME people in the context of access to and support within the predominately white institutions of social work education. They do not fully embrace capacity building at individual and community level and are thereby unlikely to be sustained.

This community partnership project illuminates the viewpoint that we are active agents in the construction of our subjectivity (Ryan, 1999). Additionally, discourses are not passive bodies of knowledge; neither are they irreversible. Thus, a discursive formation may be confronted or resisted, although, those outside the dominant discourse often experience discrimination. Shi-Xu (2001) urges teachers, trainers and consultants to abandon the traditional role of imparting linguistic, cultural, and translation knowledge and try instead to develop a dialogue with students and practitioners through which we jointly initiate, (re)formulate, debate and execute such new discourses. Such a model is required with a focus on understanding and treating people as unique individuals whose multiple identities and abilities are respected and appreciated for their potential contributions (Ospina 2001). It is also a moral imperative, to respect differences in behaviour, values, cultures, lifestyles, competences and experiences of every member of a group, to improve social equity, to challenge discrimination and inequality, to stimulate creativity and innovation, unity and leadership to better reflect the diverse composition of society, and lead ultimately to the provision services which are genuinely relevant and accessible.

Conclusions

The argument presented here is that central to the development of culturally appropriate social work education is an understanding of the politics of race and identity, dynamics of capacity building, and acknowledgement of the need to address challenges faced by BME social work students in predominately white learning institutions and hierarchies of power at the root of institutional racism. This encompasses the arenas of access, learner support and the curriculum. Language conveys the fundamental value base – with some very real consequences for learners. We conclude that both top down and grassroots approaches are necessary constituents of the package of measures to address issues of discrimination in the context of social work education. ‘Top down’ approaches that are not based on an understanding of the narratives of individual and community relationships, or the need to challenge the assumptive world of predominately white organisations, and the cultural and practical realities for excluded learners, are likely to be unsustainable. Similarly grassroots approaches, which are not established on a

sustainable basis, are also likely to founder. An over-riding concern is to avoid a colonial type approach: of imposing structures from above, with superficial collaborative approaches which do not connect with the complex needs of excluded learners. Similarly grassroots community based approaches are in danger of becoming marginalised and impotent if not embedded into mainstream services and systems at institutional and government levels.

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