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FRAMING THE EXPERIENCES OF BME SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS WITHIN A NARRATIVE OF EDUCATING FOR A CULTURALLY DIVERSE WORKFORCE

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Abstract

The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) has noted that a higher percentage of black and minority ethnic (BME) students fail or take longer to complete their social work degrees, compared with the white majority student population. In response to this and related evidence, a national study was carried out in 2013 to explore this phenomenon and ways to support BME students in social work education in Scotland. BME students from five Scottish universities were interviewed, along with lecturers from six Scottish Universities, and practice educators from around Scotland. The background to the study is discussed and a review of the literature on race, whiteness, diversity and a strengths-based perspective is provided. The methodology of the study is explained, followed by a presentation of some of the key findings covering the themes of cultural difference, discrimination and valuing student strengths. To prepare social work students to practice in a culturally diverse and culturally aware workforce the paper argues for framing of social work education within a strengths-based perspective, of valuing diversity and other knowledges and for this approach to be embedded within a critique of both race and whiteness.

Key words: Black and minority ethnic, race, whiteness, diversity, discrimination, oppression, strengths-based perspective.

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Introduction

> 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 above quotation is taken from *Changing Lives: Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review* (Scottish Executive, 2006) a key policy document that contextualises current social work in Scotland. The document calls for a more culturally diverse workforce in Scotland as part of a strategy of renewal and innovation in the social services. Drawing on data collected for a national study exploring the experiences of black and minority ethnic (BME) students in social work education in Scotland, this paper explores the readiness of the profession to achieve a culturally diverse workforce.

The study emerges at a time when the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), the governing body overseeing workforce development and training in the social services in Scotland, is grappling with the tension between creating a more culturally diverse workforce at the same time as addressing evidence that exposes a higher percentage of BME students failing or taking longer to complete social work degrees, compared with the white majority student population (SSSC, 2012a, 2012b). Recent evidence from England confirms this to be a wider UK-phenomenon (Fairtlough, *et al.,* 2014). The General Social Care Council's report on social work education in England in 2009-10 identified a trend of black students taking longer to progress through training, which had persisted over several years (GSCC, 2012).

Scotland's BME population is smaller than in other parts of the UK, however, in the decade between 2001-11 it has doubled from 2% to 4% (Scotland Census, 2013). Asians represent the largest minority ethnic group (3% or 141,000 people), with the next largest ethnic minority being Polish (1.2%). Urban centres have the highest level of ethnic minorities: Glasgow, 12%; Edinburgh and Aberdeen, 8%; Dundee, 6% (ibid.).

In 2010/2011 around 3% of students admitted onto social work degrees had a black or minority ethnic background. This was a 1% decrease from 2009/10 and a further 2.8% decrease on 2008/09 (SSSC, 2012c). These figures include both UK and international students, which make them more difficult to interpret, and would therefore benefit from further interpretation. As Scotland evolves as a more culturally diverse society (Scotland Census, 2013) coupled with a discourse of internationalisation becoming embedded within social work qualifying programmes, we would anticipate an increase in the numbers of BME students choosing to study in Scotland. To accommodate this shifting demographic profile of social work students, change is needed if equal access to social work programmes is going to lead to equal outcomes (Fletcher et al., 2013).

For administrative purposes in Scottish universities the term 'black and minority ethnic' is understood to mean 'people from minority groups, particularly those who are viewed as having suffered racism or are in the minority because of their skin colour and/or ethnicity' (Universities Scotland, 2013). A number of participants in the study expressed discomfort with BME as a category, notably for being homogenising and depersonalising. Whilst we call for the problematizing of race and whiteness the limitations of the paper do not allow for the

concept of BMEto be critiqued, the term is therefore used recognising that it is problematic and contested (Cree, 2010).

This paper draws on interview data with BME social work students, social work lecturers and practice educators on the experiences of and challenges faced by BME social work students. A strengths-based perspective is used to help interpret the data, and this approach is understood within a broader context of disrupting privileged and dominant world views of race and whiteness in social work education.

Conceptual Context

Over recent years the evidence base on research which addresses the admission and retention of BME students in higher education has started to expand (e.g. Jacobs *et al*., 2007; Singh, 2011; Equality Challenge Unit, 2012a). Several studies specifically address BME students and social work education (Wainwright, 2009; Williams and Parrott, 2012, Fairtlough *et al*., 2014). Cree's (2011) work covers the experiences of international BME social work students and highlights that they have academic, social and cultural differences that impact on their experience of social work education. Cree (2011) argues that educators ought to reconsider how students are supported and valued and points to the challenges that students face including stress, social isolation, financial insecurity, language difficulties and different academic conventions and expectations. She suggests that international students need to be affirmed and supported, acknowledging the additional pressures that they may be facing.

The social work community in Scotland has a strong history of responding to racial inequalities notably through the now disbanded *Scottish Anti-Racist Federation in Community Development and Social Work* (Scottish Anti-Racist Federation, 1998; GCU, 2001; McPhail and Sidhva, 2008). A study by Singh (1999) sought 'to establish the current position in Scotland regarding access, recruitment, training and support for Black and Minority Ethnic people in social work training' (Singh 1999, p. 4). Singh (1999) argued that policy and practice were 'piecemeal' and 'uncoordinated in strategy'. In a later paper Singh (2005) raised concerns about social work education including, a Eurocentric bias, structures of racism and discrimination, the dilution of anti-racism in generic approaches and the pathologising of black students.

Critical understanding of BME students within social work education and practice emerges from a rich, diverse and interconnected literature on race, anti-oppressive practice, diversity and cultural politics. Two key narratives that are threaded through this literature are first, the need to re-examine how we conceptualise not just race but the broader concept of oppression. This requires interpreting oppression as complex and multi-layered, understanding that race is just one of many factors (including gender, disability, class, sexuality) that shape an individual's life experiences, their identity and their perceptions of oppression (Keating, 2000; hook, 1990). A second key narrative is how we construct and make sense of BME students' experiences without, as Jeffery (2005) argues, reproducing whiteness as the dominant way of 'knowing' and 'doing' social work. Jeffrey (2005) calls for social work education, to be a learning journey that prepares students to work with people experiencing multiple layers of oppression, through problematizing oppression and privilege. She calls for exploring positionality and specifically how 'whiteness' offers a privileged

world view that shapes the discourse of race within social work education (in a Western context). McIntyre (1997, p.149) argues that we 'need to address our own complicity around issues of educational racism and be accountable for some of the exclusionary and racist practices that exist'. Whilst the focus here is on race the same discourse of oppression and privilege can and should be applied to other potentially dichotomous relationships: male/female, disabled/abled-bodied, rich/poor. In doing so the focus shifts from binary divisions that conceive of people through a single lens to seeing the richness and complexity of multi-layered identities and multiple layers of oppression. The following quote from Jeffery's (2005, p.416) work usefully highlights how students' understanding of these issues develops their self-awareness and prepares them for practice,

> [it] is learning to 'be' with whoever – your client … no matter what a person's experience is, their background, and to be able to somehow listen and engage with them in ways that maybe we haven't been able to before. And so it's breaking down our personal resistance, being more self aware, being more critical of ourselves as people and as practitioners.

Part of the journey to self-awareness is being exposed to difference, to other ways of being and the valuing of other knowledges. A cornerstone of 21st century social work is the collaboration with service users, to value their experience and knowledge, in essence to frame practice from a strengths-based perspective.

The reframing of social work practice away from a deficit model that is problem orientated, towards the use of a strengths-based perspective is well established within the social work literature (Saleeby, 2012;Weick, *et al.*,1989). The work of Saleeby (2012) and others is premised on social work practice contesting the assumption that service users are the source of the problems they encounter and the pathologising, labelling and stigmatising of the very people social workers seek to assist and support. In its place a strength-based perspective builds on service users' strengths, their resilience, knowledge and experience. Harvey *et al.* (2010, p.70) argue that it is the responsibility of social workers 'to understand culture and its function and to further recognise the strengths that exist in all cultures'. Harvey *et al.* (2010) and others provide an insight into ways of framing practice from a strengths-based perspective, whilst Probst's (2010) focus is on the teaching and integration of a strengths-based perspective into the social work curriculum, and Gray (2011, p.7) calls for social workers to

> change the way they think about clients, and an important part of this change lies
> in changing the language they use in their conversations with clients and with
> fellow workers, agency managers, policymakers, and so on.

Social work educators should also be added to Gray's (2011) list of professionals who need to change the language they use. Academic and practice educators could benefit from reflecting on how their established teaching practices potentially construct race, whiteness and oppression through the way they perceive and talk to their clients: social work students. It is this interaction between social work students and academic and practice educators that is

identified in this study as ripe for change in preparing for social work in multicultural societies (Bø, 2014). The paper calls for the use of a strengths-based perspective to frame the interactions between academic and practice educators with BME students along with their responses to the cultural differences and oppression presented by diversity in social work education and practice.

Methodology

Data were collected through a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews with three groups of participants involved in social work programmes in higher education in Scotland: BME social work students, university lecturers and practice educators. Members of the projects' steering committee, made up of representatives from the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), Multi-Cultural Family Base (MCFB), Edinburgh and seven Scottish partnership universities (Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow Caledonian, Robert Gordon, Stirling, Strathclyde and The Open University), facilitated the process of identifying potential participants to take part in the interviews.

Group 1: students self-selected to participate in the study based on meeting the following criteria. Students were required to be studying on an undergraduate or postgraduate qualifying social work programme or have recently completed their social work training at one of the seven participating universities; to have completed at least one long practice placement (a minimum of thirty days) and defined themselves as minority ethnic. Ten students came forward to participate in the study from five Scottish universities (Table 1). The specific ethnicity of the students is not disclosed to protect their anonymity, but they represented heritages from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. Only one student was British born. Seven of the students were female and three were male (Table 2). The small sample of students required particular sensitivity in the design of the project to protect their confidentiality and location. For example, it was evident that some of the accounts shared by educators referred to students that had already been interviewed. These challenges were overcome through anonymising cases and being non-specific about the ethnicity of each student.

Group 2: academic tutors/lecturers self-selected to participate in the study based on their experience of working with BME students. Seventeen academic tutors/lecturers were interviewed from six of the participating universities (Table 1). Two of whom identified themselves as minority ethnic.

Group 3: practice educators self-selected to participate in the study based on their experience of having worked with BME students. This group consisted of ten practice educators from both voluntary and statutory social work settings. Geographically the practice educators were located in the central belt and north east Scotland, and two identified themselves as minority ethnic (Table 1).

Academic tutors/lecturers and practice educators experience with BME students ranged from general contact in the teaching environment to supervision of BME students, and in some cases supervising students who had significant problems linked to their ethnicity (e.g. racism).

Table 1: Overview of Participants

	Students	University Lecturers	Practice Teachers
No. Interviewed	10	17	10
Female : Male	7 : 3	8 : 9	6 : 4
BME	10	2	2

Table 2: Ethnic Origin of Students

	African	Asian	European	South American
No. of Students	4	3	2	1

The interviews consisted primarily of open-questions and ranged from general to more directive questions. General questions explored the students' experiences of their social work programme and academics and practice educators' experiences of working with BME students. Whilst the more directive questions covered perceived challenges for BME social work students, what educators saw BME students bringing to the education experience; and strategies for supporting students better. Certain questions encouraged the participants to think about the positives that BME students brought to their experience of social work education, for example: What has been most helpful to you in your SW education? (to students). What has been helpful for BME students in their social work education? (to educators).

A thematic approach was taken to data analysis to explore the commonalities and variances of experience. Each interview was listened to systematically by the researcher and themes were recorded using Excel. Emerging themes were organised under three main headings: challenges; strengths and resources; strategies and support. Specific themes were organised under these headings and the number of occurrences for each theme was recorded for each case. The themes were subsequently organised under sub-headings (e.g. personal pressures, racism, equipping staff). The most commonly occurring themes became the basis for the findings of the report. Once the outstanding themes were identified the interviews were listened to again and specific quotes related to the prominent themes were noted. This process was aided by notes taken during the interviews and summaries composed subsequently. The findings were subject to on-going monitoring and review by the project team. Issues around perceptions of social work, personal pressures and support, both social and academic are addressed elsewhere (see Hillen, 2013). The findings presented in this paper coalesce around discrimination, diversity and cultural strengths and how these were valued and integrated into the students' learning experiences.

One of the challenges and limitations of this study has been the small number of students who met the inclusion criteria; in particular, restricting the inclusion to students who had completed at least thirty days in practice. The sample was also self-selecting. In relation to the students, the decision to identify study participants through self-selection rather than purposive sampling or alternative sampling techniques was based on the sensitivity and emotional connection of students to the study aims. On this basis it was agreed that students would be asked to volunteer to take part in the study and, with the knowledge that overall

numbers of students who met the inclusion criteria would be low, all the students who volunteered were interviewed.

In relation to the academic and practice educators the use of self-selection was more complex and raised questions over those who volunteered having a particular interest in or strong opinions on the research topic. It was evident that the BME educators had reflected deeply on issues of ethnicity in social work education but the non-BME educators also had significant knowledge about BME issues. However, it should be noted, that whilst most of the professionals seemed to be sympathetic to non-discriminatory, anti-racist and culturally aware education and practice, they appeared to represent a broad range of opinions and experiences. Further research would ideally pick up on the themes that emerged from this project and seek responses from a larger and more diverse sample.

Findings

Cultural Differences

Cultural difference emerged as a recurring theme in the data from all three groups of participants. Discussion tended to centre, implicitly and explicitly, on the juxtaposition of the students' cultural values with those of Scottish culture. Common aspects of cultural difference that were developed in the interviews related to socio-cultural values and power. Issues of power presented contested and challenging concepts for the BME students, especially in relation to authority, respect and gender. On campus, students reported that their perceptions of academic authority initially hindered them from asking for help from their tutor, but over time they slowly learned to be open with and trust academic staff and practice educators.

> *…for more than two months, I struggled, I didn't know how to ask, I didn't know if it would be okay to ask [my tutor]… I'm not used to asking things when I was in [my country], I didn't really ask about my assignment to my professor… we don't really ask… the lecturer is just too, authority. My tutor… she made this place that I could feel easy to talk, I was able to talk to her, yeah, talk to her or just even cry in front of her.*
>   (BME student)

In the practice setting, students talked of feeling uncomfortable and unfamiliar with taking on an 'authoritative role', and lacked confidence or the experience to question and 'challenge people'. The latter was particularly evident in relation to students talking to 'parents about the care of their children'. Whilst such feelings are not uncommon for most social work students, especially early on in their studies, there appeared to be a cultural dimension to the experiences of the BME students. Gender also proved to be a particularly complex issue, especially for the female students. Some of the female students expressed uncertainty about ways to question and challenge men without being seen as 'disrespectful'; for others they struggled with a 'sense of self-worth'. Further examination of the women's narratives revealed these challenges to be situated within and a reflection of their own experiences of female subordination and oppression within patriarchal societies.

In the context of social care the narratives of the students elucidated awareness of cultural differences in caring roles between their own country and Scotland. Students noted that they had experienced more community and 'family centred' approaches to social care in their own country, in contrast to the more individualistic, person-centred approaches they were being introduced to in Scotland. This example suggests that BME students are using reflection to link and make sense of past and present experiences. This is a skill that could be used by academic and practice educators to develop understanding of alternative perspectives, theoretical approaches and political ideology through the use of practical examples based on 'other knowledges'.

The ethnocentric or Eurocentric nature of Scottish social work education was raised by both students and lecturers. Interviewees emphasised how the theory and research that informs social work in Scotland has a strong Western bias (originating chiefly from Britain and the USA). Cree (2010) suggests that we need to beware of ethnocentrism since our way of thinking is certainly not the only way.

Students and lecturers suggested that there should be a more international focus in social work education, allowing students to explore social work perspectives originating from a range of cultures. Interviewees from each of the three groups of participants supported the idea of open dialogue around issues of race, ethnicity and culture between students, between educators and between students and educators.

Whilst suggesting that BME students be supported to make sense of their experiences within a Scottish and global context, the learning opportunities should not be restricted to BME students or be circumscribed within the socio-spatial context of Scotland. Rather issues of power, and specifically gender and respect, are fundamental to any social work programme but all too often students fail to grasp the complexities associated with such concepts (Dominelli, 2002). Drawing on the experiences, knowledge and understanding of BME students, we argue, can create a space for open dialogue for all students on a range of pertinent issues including, but not limited to, anti-oppressive practice, social justice and universal human rights; the fundamentals of social work. While some BME students faced unique challenges as a result of cultural differences, these differences could also be a source of strength for them. This theme will be discussed more fully below.

Discrimination

Direct forms of racism and discrimination were generally rare among the students' experiences, while they did articulate indirect forms of racism and discrimination, how this manifested itself was often difficult to express.

> *People don't know how to talk to you, or how to approach you... it's there, even though it's not shown... It's really hard to explain... people judge you before you actually do anything... a kind of superiority, it's there.* (BME student)

Students were aware of the presence of racism, and both lecturers and practice educators suggested that racism was institutionalised and embedded in Scottish culture. The following examples provide a glimpse into some of the complexities and subtleties associated with racism in the lives of BME social work students in Scotland. The experiences help to explain

the evidence from the SSSC (2012a, 2012b) and GSCC (2012) that BME students take longer to progress through their course.

Student experiences in class ranged from being laughed at for their pronunciation, an unwillingness of students to meet up with BME students for group work and a white minority ethnic student experiencing direct discrimination in a class discussion. In placement settings practice educators shared instances where BME students were rejected by placement providers in ways that suggested discrimination. Such discrimination on the basis of ethnicity also seemed to play a role in some cases where students had their placements terminated or failed. Even those students who did not personally experience discrimination were aware that there is, as one student put it, a'recognition that you're not White Scottish', you're not part of the 'majority' white population. A black student who was born in the UK was not immune from experiencing discrimination, and not necessarily based on skin colour, but on their regional origin and accent. These last two examples evidence that race and whiteness can't be homogenised as neither are experienced in a dichotomous relationship but as complex and multi-layered. It is this complexity rooted within concepts of race and whiteness that needs to be deconstructed, problematized and integrated into the learning journeys of all social work students.

Social workers have traditionally championed anti-racist, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, yet racism and discrimination is still a part of everyday life for black and minority ethnic people (CRER, 2008; Ferguson and Woodward, 2009; BBC, 2013; Fletcher et al., 2013; Lavalette and Penketh, 2013). Social work education and practice are not immune to the trends in wider Scottish society. As one lecturer put it, BME students are often 'pathologised as if it's their problem…[but] it's a wider societal problem, which we are all somehow embedded in and responsible for'. Another lecturer was adamant that 'entrenched' white Scottish norms, assumptions and values that promulgate discrimination need to be 'tackled' head on. Thompson (2006, p.176) suggests that there is no middle way, arguing that social work cannot avoid 'the question of discrimination and oppression'. How we respond will either challenge and undermine, or tacitly condone and reinforce discrimination.

Some participants proposed that there should be more teaching content 'around culture and race, within the programme'. A number of educators suggested that anti-racist practice was 'watered-down' in the curriculum, and therefore should be a more 'embedded' part of teaching and academic dialogue. There were also many participants who suggested that both academic and practice educators should receive better training around racism, anti-discriminatory practice, ethnicity, culture and cultural competence. One student was hopeful that social work education would produce 'culturally competent social workers', who are 'aware of the diversity of culture, and race and ethnicity'.

One practice educator noted that it was important that social workers do not ignore inequality in relationships with other social workers. If they are to address power inequalities with service users there is a need to open up a space to be able to talk openly and frankly about discrimination between educators and social work students. That should include what it means to be a white social work student/lecturer/practice educator, and whether the world is viewed from the 'privileged majority' or the 'oppressed minority'. Such an approach can facilitate for the development of self-awareness and a more reflective and critical

understanding of anti-oppressive practice; and in so doing lays the foundation for a strengths-based perspective.

Identifying and Valuing Student Strengths

Despite the challenges faced by the students, they all exhibited a wide range of strengths. The students interviewed displayed great resilience and maintained an attitude of enthusiasm and positivity about their studies and their own cultural background.

> *From the [twenty plus nationalities] that I've worked with, they have all carried a determination, that, "I need to get through this, and I need to manage it," and with the appropriate support they can do it.* (Practice Educator)

One student reflected on the positive aspects of coming from a mixed cultural heritage, with parents originating from two distinct black cultural heritages. The student thought that this diversity brought 'an understanding' to their practice. This theme was repeated by many of the lecturers. With one emphasising, 'the richness different cultural knowledge brings'. They said this richness, 'shouldn't be lost, it should be emphasised'. Another lecturer talked about BME students having a 'richness of experience and diversity' which they can bring to the 'cohort as a whole'. Practice teachers also supported the view that BME students could broaden and deepen the learning that students bring to placement agencies through offering 'alternative perspectives'. Many students carried with them cultural values, beliefs and varied life experiences that could enrich learning and practice. Some also brought specific social work practice experience and social work qualifications from their own countries. The varied challenges faced by many BME students highlight the need for action to be taken. As one tutor stated, 'doing nothing and expecting integration is naive'.

The range of experiences represented through the narratives of the interviewees reflects the diversity of BME student experiences. Each person had their own particular set of characteristics based on their ethnic and cultural background and a whole range of personal differences, including belief systems, gender, sexuality, age, disability and class. Using labels like black or BME uncritically risks constructing everyone with a similar skin colour, or from the same country, as the same. Academic institutions did not always recognise this diversity or the multi-layered dimensions of oppression. One student recounted that they were 'seen in terms of race,' but there was no recognition of their country of birth and what that difference may imply. A number of academic and practice educators suggested that when a BME student is seen to be experiencing difficulties responses are too often framed within a deficit model. With the challenges the student may be facing being reduced down to race or culture rather than exploring alternative explanations, including the role of whiteness and privilege in the construction of students' problems. There was a clear message that all students should be seen first and foremost as individuals through the adoption of a strengths-based perspective in both teaching and practice.

Many educators talked of focusing on the positive qualities that BME students bring to social work and to 'celebrate diversity', rather than 'pathologise' student weaknesses based on difference. Yet several practice educators shared stories which suggested that students were expected to conform to the Scottish context and placement providers were often blind to

the skills and experiences that students brought to their practice. Despite many negative examples, positive placement experiences were also highlighted as affirming students' ethnicity and cultural background. Some, for example, allowed students the opportunity to share their cultures with service users and/or staff. But the negative examples highlight the need for academic and practice educators, as well as workplaces, to be proactive in asserting the diversity of experiences that students bring to their social work education and practice.

Conclusion

Black and minority ethnic social work students are a diverse group of individuals from a wide range of geographical origins, ethnic communities and cultural backgrounds. They encompass international and home students, black and white students, asylum seekers and UK born ethnic minorities. The diversity of BME students therefore makes generalisations difficult. However, despite the differences between students this study has highlighted that there are a series of factors that are common to many BME students; in particular, the experience of racism and cultural differences. These were especially visible in practice placements but were also evident in university campus settings and ranged from students' own cultural values conflicting with Scottish cultural values, to issues of power and gender concealing challenges to communication. Exposure to discriminatory attitudes and behaviours conceals the many positive qualities and rich experiences that BME students bring to social work education, and appear to be hindering the development of a culturally competent and ethnically diverse workforce.

This research exposes that more can and should be done to respond to the disparities in completion rates between BME and white majority social work students. More specifically, changes in attitude and approach are required to recognise, value and work with the diversity of BME students, to actively challenge discrimination on a personal and institutional level and to implement a more multicultural approach to education. The evidence highlights that the central tenets of a strengths-based perspective; of valuing strengths, capacity, resilience and knowledge; are too frequently absent in BME social work students' learning journeys. We have also called for the concepts of race and whiteness to be contested as a means to deepen the self-awareness of staff and students in making sense of race and as a means to value other knowledges, other ways of being and other ways of viewing the world.

Whilst this paper has introduced discussion on social work education and practice, it was neither within the aim nor scope of the paper to develop detailed discussion on pedagogy or the practical application of the findings to practice. Rather the paper has created a space to open dialogue on some of the challenges faced by BME social work students in Scotland and suggests ways that social work education can respond to these challenges through problematizing race and whiteness within social work education as a basis for framing learning experiences within a strengths-based perspective. Viewing student learning through the lens of a strengths-based perspective, whereby academic and practice educators mirror the essence of the approach in their interaction with students, has the potential to begin to contest discrimination and oppression and contribute to creating a culturally diverse workforce able to work within a culturally diverse society.

Acknowledgements

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