

# The MANDELA model of practice learning: An old present in new wrapping?

Prospera Tedam<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article introduces the MANDELA model as a new and innovative tool for effectively engaging social work students of black African heritage studying on social work qualifying programmes across England and Wales. The article explores in depth this proposed model drawing upon initial feedback from two critical friends- a white male practice educator and a black African female third year social work student. The potential challenges and strengths of this model are examined, as well as guidance on its use and application within the practice learning environment. The MANDELA model draws upon existing strategies and adds a distinct and unique African flavour, whilst not losing its pedagogic relevance for lecturers, practice educators and students.

**Keywords:** MANDELA; practice learning; black students; social work; anti-discriminatory practice; engaging black students; diversity in social work

1. Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader, Division of Social Work, University of Northampton

**Address for correspondence:** University of Northampton, Boughton Green Road, Northampton NN2 7ALEmail: [prospera.tedam@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:prospera.tedam@northampton.ac.uk)

**Acknowledgements:** I would like to thank my two 'critical friends': a black African social work student and a white male practice educator who provided initial feedback and suggestions about the MANDELA model and its use in social work education.

## **Introduction**

Despite the growing cultural and ethnic diversity amongst social work students in England and Wales, there continues to be a dearth of literature acknowledging the range of strengths, addressing their learning and development needs and proposing strategies for effective engagement with different groups of students. Black African students are one such group whose experiences of social work education in England have been little researched, in spite of the growth in numbers enrolled onto social work programmes. This paper proposes the MANDELA model which seeks to provide a framework for practice educators who are enabling the learning of social work students in practice placement settings. As we constantly seek new ways of learning and knowing there is the possibility of revisiting existing ways of learning using different modes of enquiry to reach new or different conclusions.

The term practice educator will be used to refer to the professional who is responsible for supporting and assessing the social work student during practice learning.

Social work in England and Wales occurs in a variety of sectors (voluntary, statutory, private) and in a range of settings (domiciliary, residential, educational, field and healthcare). Practice learning will also include differential patterning and intensity across the various higher education institutions and geographical locations. Whatever the model, students have to meet minimum practice learning requirements of 200 days of assessed practice. Practice learning forms half (fifty per cent) of the social work curriculum and students have to demonstrate competence in direct practice with service users as well as in the academic requirements (Department of Health, 2002). Social work teaching and learning will be effective if they have been packaged and presented to students using a variety of methods and tools which suit their learning styles. It is therefore not surprising that practice educators place emphasis on preparing themselves, their teams and their organisations to welcome students who in addition to the social work knowledge, bring significant personal and life experience which can benefit or hinder their work with service users. The initial relationship building between the student and the practice educator can create anxiety and any competent practice educator would want to ensure that this anxiety is minimised through open and honest supervision and ongoing support.

It is with this issue in mind that a tool for use with social work students of African heritage is proposed, particularly within practice learning environments. It is hoped that this new way of teaching and learning will yield benefits for all involved in the learning process.

The paper will begin with a background to, a justification for a new model, and an examination of the model and its application. Drawing upon initial feedback from two critical friends, an exploration of the model's potential strengths and challenges will be undertaken. The implications for social work and proposals for the way forward will conclude the paper.

## **Background and justification**

A plethora of teaching tools, methods, models and reflective activities aimed at enhancing social work students' learning both in University and whilst on practice placement exist in different formats and at different levels. Examples of these models include Social divisions by (Thompson, 2009) and various Reflective Learning Models by (Davys & Beddoe, 2009; Doel & Shardlow, 2005; Doel, 2009; Taylor, 2010). Whilst many of these tools and frameworks are extremely useful and relevant, there appears to be a distinct lack of similar resources tailored to meet the needs of students from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. In particular, the needs of African students of social work in Higher Education Institutions in England and Wales continue to be compromised by the scarcity of tailor made resources. Before proceeding to propose a new model for engaging black African social work students particularly within practice learning environment, it is critical that the context for this work is fully explored and analysed.

It is nearly four years since two of my colleague lecturers and I became interested in the experiences of black African students enrolled on the social work programme at our University. With anecdotal evidence about what their experiences might be, we embarked upon a qualitative study using focus groups with black African students, with a view to gaining a detailed understanding of their experiences, needs and indeed what strategies could be developed to better support them in their studies. It soon became apparent that research into the experiences of African students studying social work in England was sparse, with the available literature focusing on

black and minority ethnic students more generally (De Souza, 1991, Aymer & Bryan, 1996; Bernard et al., 2011) and research into the experiences of international students, which also includes black students (Carroll & Ryan, 2009; Bradley, 2000; Kinnell, 1990). The gap therefore was with specific reference to black African social work students in the UK more generally and in England and Wales, more specifically. The consequence of this scarcity of research was to prompt our own research into the experiences of African social work students at the University of Northampton. This exploration highlighted a number of areas of concern for the students mainly around: homesickness, nipped wings (where students reported that they felt constrained and prevented from achieving), lack of practice experience and financial constraints (Bartoli et al., 2008). Of particular significance to this paper is the view by student participants that practice learning felt like 'another world' (Bartoli et al., 2008, p. 79). The findings also highlighted the fact that black African students were also more likely to fail practice placements than white students and that some practice educators attributed this to black African students misunderstanding the requirements and expectations of placement. Although few students proposed racist attitudes on individual and institutional levels, others viewed their placement allocation as being of poor quality due to the University having low expectations of their abilities and competence (Bartoli et al., 2008). This reinforces Razacks (2001) study of the placement experiences of social work students in which ethnic minority students suggested that they had experienced different levels of racism during their field placements.

With growing globalisation, increasing migration and an increase in black students enrolment on Social Work Programmes in England (GSCC, 2007; 2009) it is becoming increasingly important to ensure that the learning needs of this growing group are met and that the over-reliance on Eurocentric models of teaching and learning is rectified. To evidence this point further, a study of BME students' transitions from Access courses to social work training in Higher Education in England by Dillon (2011) identified black African students as the largest BME group, reflecting the GSCC's own research findings in 2007 and 2009.

Alongside the growing numbers of black African social work students in England is the continuing over-representation of black service users in the areas of child protection, mental health and youth justice (Laird, 2008) and the need therefore ensure that teaching methods and tools are helpful

and do not hinder the progress and achievement of black social workers whose contribution in the workplace cannot be overemphasised.

In addition to the above, Daniel (2011) advises social work educators and students to examine and produce literature that reflects the historical and cultural experiences of groups that have been omitted in the social work curriculum and the MANDELA model is rooted in historical and cultural significance for many people of African descent.

For teaching to be effective, the teaching must draw upon the students' willingness and motivation to learn. In this regard, Willcoxson (1998) suggests that academics generally tend to teach their students using techniques and strategies that were effective for them as students. Reflecting on this point, I would agree that a personal learning strategy for me as a student was through memorising short, meaningful statements and mnemonics. For example, the statement- 'My Very Eyes May Just See Under Nine Planets'- stands for Mercury, Venus Earth Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto- the nine planets in the universe learned over 30 years ago and which I recollect to this day with ease.

Writing specifically about practice learning in social work, Doel and Shardlow (1996, p. 33) stress that in order for practice educators to promote anti-oppressive practice, they should be 'recognising, naming and valuing differences, while not sentimentalising them'. They continue to explain that this 'means challenging stereotypes, checking assumptions and keeping anti-oppressive practice and practice teaching on the agenda, even when it gets uncomfortable'. The MANDELA model provides a forum for these areas to be discussed and examined.

In addition, Darylmple and Burke (1998), in exploring the relationship between practice educators and students in an anti-oppressive practice learning environment, acknowledge the importance of practice teachers examining and unpicking their own values, assumptions, beliefs and experiences. This, they argue, will provide a platform on which a professional relationship will develop. They suggest a range of reflective exercises adapted from Morrison which provide opportunities for practice educators to self-reflect about their experiences of working with students from a different racial background to theirs. Whilst success in the placement is the responsibility of the social work student, it is clear that the practice educator has a role to play in ensuring a worthwhile and positive practice experience.

## **The MANDELA model**

The MANDELA model is presented as a teaching and learning tool for use within a supervisory relationship between the student and the practice educator. It is cyclical in nature with a clear starting point and flexible enough to be used at different paces in recognition of the student's learning style and comfort in engagement. The cycle is representative of most aspects of a student's identity which together with the practice educator can be used to understand and appreciate the similarities, differences and life experiences which the student brings to the learning process. Razack (2001) argues that practice educators set the tone and pace of practice placements and therefore if discussions about a student's race, ethnicity and needs are not undertaken, their learning and development is compromised.

## **Make time**

Whilst one appreciates the time constraints on practice educators and managers, it is important to avoid fast tracking the student into difficulty and/ or failure. There is the need to ensure that the student has sufficient time to understand the context of the work to be undertaken and their role within the organisation or agency. Practice educators will draw on their own experience in terms of time allocated for supervision. Some Universities provide guidance about the frequency and timing of practice supervision, however the practice educator, in consultation with their student, must make the final decision about how much time will be spent with their student and the frequency of such meetings. Practice supervision sessions which are not rushed and which allow for critical exploration of the students' learning are recommended. Interestingly, one critical friend who is also a practice educator commented that 'time was something MANDELA had more than enough of' and that he is often portrayed as a 'patient and tolerant man'.

## **Acknowledge Needs**

The second area is about the needs of the student both within the practice learning environment and also in the University setting. These needs should be specific and could include areas such as: English Language proficiency, general communication skills, relationship building skills,

critical writing and reflective skills. They may also include discussions about the use of a car/transport for placement and the implications this might have on the student's learning. Students will undoubtedly have a variety of needs some of which may be unrelated to their practice learning experience but which could ultimately impact on their learning, such as part-time employment, health needs etc as was the case in the Bartoli et al., (2008) study. Whatever the needs, practice educators should be able to view these from the perspective of the student and address them in a timely and appropriate manner.

### **Difference**

Once the student's needs are identified and discussed, issues of difference should be explored and understood. For example, simply stating the difference in race and ethnicity may be sufficient to begin with; however practice educators and students are encouraged to examine this in more depth throughout the placement. Gatmon and Jackson (2001) concluded that honest discussions about difference and similarity between the practice educator and student, (not their cultural or ethnic similarities), is central to the formation of a good working relationship. If there is a gender difference, this must be examined with an understanding of the student's perspective on this and any implications for practice. In the view of Thompson (2011), difference does and can form the basis of equality or inequality and so every effort should be made to achieve the former i.e. equality in the practice educator-student relationship.

### **Educational Experience**

Educational experiences are a significant dimension to bring into the learning and supervisory relationship as this will provide some insight into the student's understanding about the role and purpose of education generally and their attitudes to learning. During the discussion of educational experiences, it is crucial that the student's preferred learning style is discussed and any strategies explored early on about expectations and levels of writing. Bartoli (2011) concluded that the black African students in her study sample fared better in exams, where short answers were required, than in essay type assessments which required lengthy narrative writing.

This information is important if practice educators are to provide learning opportunities for students to develop areas which may require attention such as their report writing skills. In addition to this, understanding a student's prior learning experience either in the UK or abroad will assist the practice educator in devising an effective practice learning plan.

### **Life Experiences**

A student's life experiences which may or may not include experiences of poverty, war, migration, HIV/AIDS, ill health, abandonment, unemployment, abuse, neglect, racism, asylum and domestic violence will be significant in terms of their own approach to service users with similar experiences. Caution is advised when discussing these due to the sensitive nature and students may not always feel able and/or willing to provide this information until they feel comfortable and safe to expose themselves in this way. Awareness of such experiences may help the practice educator understand better the student's levels of motivation and resilience. Shepherd (2003) posits that we can only understand the resilience and strengths that have enabled marginalised people to survive by embracing and understanding their lived experiences. Practice educators should be mindful that the discussion of life experiences could generate emotions which had not been envisaged. As with all discussions of personal experiences, practice educators should support the student to make links, wherever possible with service users experiences. For many black African social work students, issues of faith and spirituality will be an important part of their lives and they may openly question the relevance or otherwise of faith during their interventions with service users. The response to this is important and the practice educator must ensure that their response is clear to the student.

### **Age**

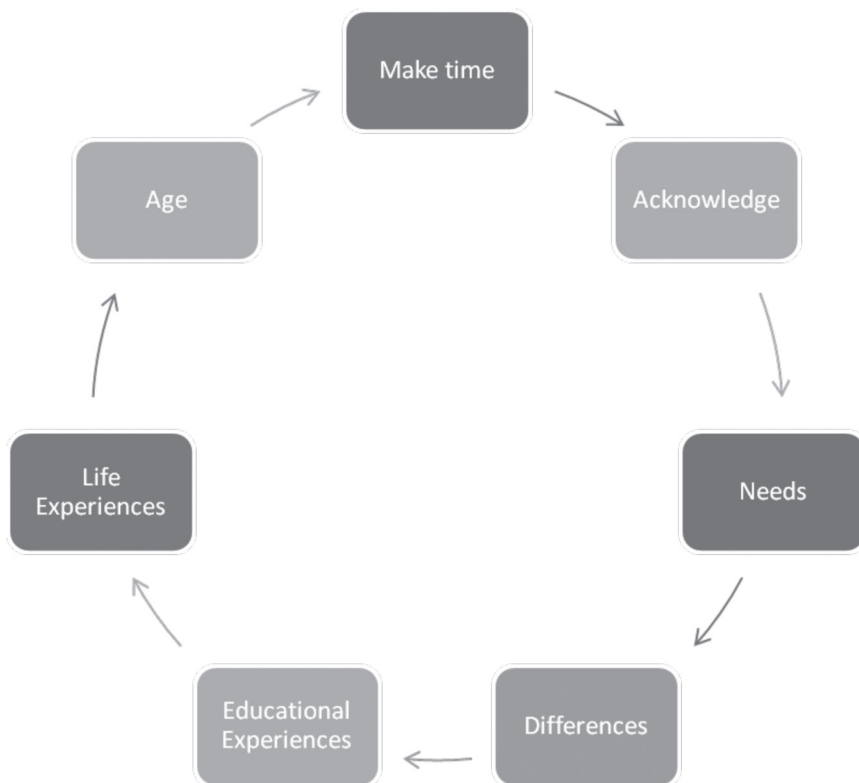
Finally, it is important to acknowledge the age of the student. Within most African contexts, age is an important variable used to understand relationships and social interactions among and between people. It gives permission for issues of age/generation to be discussed. This is not new as reflective students will usually be required to consider issues of power in the learning relationship and it is not uncommon to find students



highlighting age as a potential source of power inequality. This is not to suggest that students should be interrogated about their age, nor should students feel obliged to provide this information if they do not feel able to do so. However some discussion about broad age ranges might be useful in understanding each other's perspectives on the various issues that affect the users of social work services.

This cyclical model should be used and viewed as an on-going process with elements that can be revisited until the end of the student's placement. There is no reason why this model cannot be adapted to meet the needs of all students. Its relevance and appropriateness cuts across the diversity of students and will appeal to a range of students. It can also be used by supervisors/managers working with black African social workers in practice. It models best practice in that it provides an open, honest and reflective forum in which discussions about experiences, needs and differences can be examined, respected and understood.

Figure 1- The MANDELA Model of Engagement



Nelson Mandela, the former President of South Africa is well known for his long and committed struggle to end apartheid. His many national and international awards said to number around 250, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 is further testimony to his dedication towards alleviating the disadvantage of masses of African people. Few will be unaware of the struggles and successes of Nelson Mandela and the values he promoted. He epitomises fairness, justice, equality and reconciliation and has been referred to as 'a revered statesman'.

Mandela's core values very much reflect those of the social work profession in that he has declared 'war on poverty' stating that poverty leads to hunger, depravation, homelessness and ill health (Speech, International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, 17 October 1996). He is concerned about the vulnerable including the elderly, disabled, children and women. He urges us not to consider the eradication of poverty as an act of charity, but rather as an act of social justice. It is therefore the view of the author that a person with such exemplary values of social justice, anti-racism, equality and fairness is one worth knowing about and remembering. With this in mind, the model being proposed is built upon the values of respect for diversity and fairness.

**M**ake time  
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**N**eeds  
**D**ifferences  
**E**ducational Experiences  
**L**ife Experiences  
**A**ge

### **The Mandela model as an anti- discriminatory/anti-oppressive tool**

Anti- discriminatory practice in social work can be understood as the conscious undermining of structures and processes which allow inequality and oppression to exist. Within the context of practice learning, it involves respect for all aspects of diversity and the prevention of discrimination on the grounds of race and ethnicity, gender, age, disability and sexuality.

The international definition of social work formulated in 2001 places

an emphasis on social justice, equality and empowerment and students of social work are expected to develop and integrate these values into their every day practice with service users. More recently, the Social Work Reform Board proposed nine capabilities which social workers should possess with varying degrees of competence and at different periods of their careers. Of these, at least four capabilities are relevant to the MANDELA model. These are:

- Engage and respecting diversity whilst applying anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles in practice.
- Applying knowledge of human growth and development, psychological and social sciences in differing social and cultural contexts.
- Take responsibility for the professional learning and development of others through supervision, mentoring, assessing, teaching, and management
- Advance human rights, social justice and economic well-being.  
(Social Work Reform Board, 2010)

### **Benefits of the model**

The MANDELA model is useful on a number of levels and the following discussion will provide an appraisal of its benefits.

Firstly, the acronym, 'MANDELA' is likely to invoke notions of hope, resilience, determination and success and sends a positive message to the students engaged in the learning process using this model. One critical friend puts it succinctly: 'the name Mandela says it all'. The inference here is that MANDELA is more than a name, it symbolises values that may be important to African students of social work. Also, as already mentioned students are very likely to remember what the acronym stands for and are most likely to engage with the concept from the start. The other critical friend suggested that MANDELA conjures up words such as 'determination and success'.

In addition to the above, this model of practice with student social workers can also be used to develop good practice with ethnic minority and/or African service users. The view that social workers are too busy to build relationships with service users is unethical and debateable. Practitioners can draw on the principles of MANDELA as part of the process of building rapport with their service users. Information gathered

using the model could also be used towards assessments and other forms of evidence for intervention. For service users who require interpreters, the term MANDELA is probably one of the few words which will not require interpretation. The model acknowledges the existence of oppression and discrimination based on race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation or other socially defined divisions in many areas of social work practice and social work education. Within the practice learning environment, any oppression will impact negatively on the learning experience of social work students and should therefore be explicitly examined within the practice educator- student relationship. It attempts to expose social work educators to the world of their student and vice versa in a way that is safe and open and according to Gay (2010, p. 31) builds a bridge between practice learning and students 'lived sociocultural realities'.

Another benefit of this model is its transferability to other working and professional relationships. It can be adapted for use between social workers and their managers/supervisors and could also be used across a range of disciplines and professions including counselling.

The model can be used by practice educators from any ethnic background with students also from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. It is adaptable and flexible in its use.

## Challenges

Whilst there is much to be gained from using this model, it is envisaged that there will be some challenges in its use.

The first challenge is around practitioner's knowledge and understanding of Nelson Mandela, the history and context of his struggle and fight against oppression and discrimination. This will be a key determinant of the extent to which this model is understood, respected and used. Not all practice educators will be familiar with Mandela and his work and so it is imperative that practice educators and/ or managers are fully engaged in this process, familiarising themselves with Mandela and what he stood for. Students could be a source of information for practice educators and supervisors who are unfamiliar with the background to Mandela. A useful opening reflective question for practitioners and practice educators using this model would be 'what does the word 'MANDELA' mean to you?'

Another challenge will be around practice educators' understanding of the various sections of the model which clearly needs to be fully understood

before it is used. To elicit information for discussion, practice educators will need to build in their own strategies for managing situations which may cause distress or anxiety. In addition to this, confidentiality must be maintained. Feedback from one critical friend cautioned making the assumptions that everyone knows of Mandela or indeed thinks highly of him and what he stands for.

To fully engage with this model, practitioners will have to adhere to anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice and gain some understanding of cultural competence. By design, this model requires practice educator to re-engage with their own values about fairness, equality, superiority and inferiority whilst addressing any internalised racism that might exist.

Attention was drawn to potential difficulties in using this model where onsite/offsite arrangements were in place. Whilst this is useful feedback, it is envisaged that at the planning stage and prior to the student starting placement, this is discussed for clarity about who will be leading on the use of this model and how and when the information might be shared.

### **Personal Reflections & The Way Forward**

As a black female African academic and Programme Leader, I have often been involved in difficult and sometimes uncomfortable conversations about students' progress and competence. When asked directly by black African students about useful and relevant sources of information to enhance their understanding of the social work profession, my recommended reading list has over the years, bar a few new titles remained the same. In addition to this, my own doctoral research is also confirming the scarcity of literature about working effectively with African social work students. It is for these reasons that I feel the MANDELA model is timely and relevant. Its use is currently being piloted and a more comprehensive evaluation of its effectiveness from the perspectives of students and practice educators will be disseminated in the near future.

### **Relevance for social work education**

The author has been involved in social work education for over ten years, beginning as a practice teacher/educator and currently as a Senior Lecturer in social work. In this time, little has changed in terms of culturally

appropriate resources for social workers who are from ethnic minority backgrounds. The students in the Bartoli et al. (2008) study also expressed surprise and relief at the idea that they could and should draw upon credible research and literature from around the world. This model is therefore intended as a response to the shortage of resources already cited and as a teaching and learning tool for use with social work students of African heritage.

The foundation for good social work practice is built upon establishing positive working relationships with service users. Practice educators have a better chance of modelling this by their own use of this model to build and maintain their relationship with their students. Ultimately, the service user benefits from the social worker's ability to form and maintain good working relationships.

For black social work educators, this model provides a useful addition to their repertoire of teaching and learning material that is written by a black female academic. In a study of the experiences of fifteen ethnic minority students on a Social Work programme in what she describes as a large urban university in America, Daniel (2011) concluded that students appreciated 'literature about people of colour by people of colour' (p. 255) and for one participant, hearing about the 'black experience from white authors' did not feel empowering.

For one critical friend, the MANDELA model will assist in 'breaking the silence' and will 'bring out in the open issues that can sometimes hinder a student's progress on placement'. For the other critical friend, the MANDELA model will enable practice educators to approach sensitive issues, providing a framework and clearly defined areas for discussion in practice supervision.

For practice educators who need 'permission' to be able to enter into the world of their student, the model makes this possible and can be used on its own or in combination with other tools and models.

Its success will depend on the extent to which students and practice educators engage with it.

## Conclusion

No single model, teaching or learning tool to aid social work practice will meet the needs of all students, nor should we expect this to be the case. The uniqueness of students and the experiences they bring to the professional working relationship within the workplace or practice learning environment must be considered and respected by all involved. All students need to have an equal chance of progressing and doing well and it is this view that has led to the development of the MANDELA model which is progressive, positive and empowering. It embodies a way of working whose time has come. It draws on existing concepts and good practice, but is framed in a way that captures a growing awareness of the subtleties of building cultural competence in university tutors, students and practice educators. It is hoped that the model is able to harvest the will to work in a more aware and effective way with black African students, and all those wishing to enter a profession whose essence is built upon understanding and meeting the needs of each unique person. Its strengths lie in its customised African flavour, delivered as an old present in new wrapping.

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