

## **LISTENING TO BLACK STUDENTS... A CRITICAL REVIEW OF PRACTICE EDUCATION**

### **Introduction**

From an practice educator's perspective this chapter focuses on an area of practice which supports Black students. This can be a challenging area of practice and, in presenting this chapter, we want to demonstrate that despite having a cumulative 26 years as practice educators we are still confronted by an unsettling realisation that we are not adequately supporting Black students in various practice settings. There is an inherent tension and fear of 'rocking the boat' when considering the competing pressures of retaining placements in a stretched social care arena and also being open to exploring the 'elephant in the room'. Our intention is to share our learning from our students' experiences and recognise the gaps we have found that are still present in practice education, both of which impact greatly on the experiences of Black students during their social work placement. Within the chapter we hope that you will be prepared to grapple with the 'thorny' issues that the case study explores, and engage fully with the reflective points that will help you to enhance your own practice, and draw you naturally into critical reflection.

### **Context**

We are a Practice Learning Team based within a Social Work Directorate in a Higher Education Institute (HEI). As part of our role we prepare students across both undergraduate and postgraduate social work programmes for their assessed placement experience. The make-up of our student population is enriched by a diverse group of students from all over the world, the majority of whom are British citizens. In the academic year 2015/16 33% of our social work students were from Black and Minority Ethnic (B.A.M.E.) groups with that figure rising to 34% in 2016/17.

Within this chapter we are questioning the endemic racism present within our society and its impact on the experience of Black students on social work programmes. Although the majority of Black students on our social work programmes are British citizens there are wider considerations, as Hawkins (2017), states, 'Students from outside the European Union make up 60 percent of entrants to postgraduate full-time taught master's degrees'. International marketing strategies and partnerships encourage these numbers and attract students to join the U.K. HEI community and this in turn is reported to, '...generate[s] more than £25 billion for the economy...'. University UK, (2017). As we know the kudos of an international link is held in high esteem and greatly considered within Universities' strategic

commitments; from international research to University world rankings. Within this chapter we begin to question the ethical and moral stance of universities working towards recruiting students from outside the European Union and their commitment to ensure that their experience of practice within the wider UK community is equal to that of the experience of white students. Research by Johnson, (2016), 'addressing barriers to student success', names BAME students as one of the groups of students 'most affected by differential outcomes', this is heightened by factors such as; poverty, disability and being older.

Miller and Donner (2000:34) state that it "is imperative that when writing about issues of culture, race and/or ethnicity to first establish one's own cultural identity." As a staff team, we are a mix of ethnicities: one is Black British, three are white British, and one white Irish. We recognise that our own experiences of life and our identities, as well as gender, disability and sexuality will shape how we respond to the students we support. Within this chapter we present a very personal and honest reflection of our learning and development as both individuals and as a team. We hope our sharing of this learning will assist other colleagues in practice education by offering a different lens with which to view this area of practice.

As part of the social work qualification students are assessed for 170 days in practice, divided across two placements. The student needs to successfully pass both placements to qualify and progress towards professional practice. Assessment requires a thoughtful and proactive approach from practice educators as passing or failing a student has a significant impact on all involved. Research into the impact on practice educators of failing a student is limited, but from our experience and ad hoc reporting, we have observed that the decision to fail a student has a long-term effect on many practice educators, at times affecting their decision whether or not to continue in their role as a practice educator. As with any assessment process practice educators must be guided in their decision-making and should note possible bias within this process given the disproportionate representation of BAME students within the group of students who fail placement. Many students take the opportunity to repeat their placement at considerable personal and financial cost, the complexity of such situations being recognised and acknowledged. This is not a new issue and indeed has been the subject of discussion by others, (Bartoli, 2013). However, listening to the students' voice ensures that, as a practice educator, we can tune in and respond to

the challenge of supporting students more effectively alongside nurturing their professional development.

### **Case study**

This case study explores the challenge of how the team responded to the reporting of racism by two Black African female students. The two students had been in a placement setting which had been quality assured by the University and had a tested history of student social work placements. Within our teaching we stress the importance of students listening to service users and carers to develop an understanding of their needs and to respect them as experts in their own lives. In the same way, we as educators must listen to students about their experiences on placement; but this time, listening was not enough - we needed to act and effect change.

We firmly believe that the experiences of students need to be heard and who better to seek this knowledge from but our students. The co-creation of the exploration and learning which took place between students and our team members has been an emotional extremely important experience. We are keen to share this amongst the practice educating community with the aim of enhancing the placement experience for students. We confront the 'uncomfortableness' of racism, and power within the assessment process, using our combined knowledge and the shared experiences of our students.

The placement offered direct work with children and young people. Both students had been supported by an experienced offsite practice educator, and the onsite supervisor was an established team member within the agency. The agency had been quality assured as a first placement setting and increasingly students were able to engage in safeguarding work with vulnerable teenagers. Given that the placement engaged with our review process and made adjustments year on year, it was assessed as a quality practice learning experience.

On completion of the 70-day placement the students submitted an electronic evaluation of their experience. This tool aids in the evaluation of the student experience and includes: the allocation and induction process; support arrangements; accountability and role clarity; learning and assessment. Feedback is quantitative with students being encouraged to include qualitative narrative accounts alongside this. Overall the two students rated their learning experience between good and excellent. However, their narratives provided a more

detailed account of their experience; this included direct reports of racism. On being asked about the arrangement of having an off-site practice educator and an on-site supervisor, one student indicated *"I preferred speaking to an independent person"*. Both students' highlighted features of racism - one described being excluded from professional forums including meetings and reviews regarding 'Looked After Children', *"due to discrimination"*. Whilst she noted that *"This placement is actually a great learning tool overall in relation to building relationships and getting experience with children getting involved in child protection..... There also I feel is a culture within the placement to discriminate against people of colour and or different ethnicity as staff took a long time to acknowledge us or talk to us"*.

Whilst it was evident that the non-Black students in the same setting reported difficulties with some elements of the placement, it was clear from analysing the responses that the Black student's race provided an additional layer of oppression.

This experience is linked to Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality. Carbarido et al, (2013:303) describe intersectionality as *"... a method and a disposition, a heuristic and analytic tool"*, which is *'...Rooted in Black feminism and Critical Race Theory.'* This perspective of intersectionality helps to explore the additional layers which can exist to further oppress people within our society, in this case the two Black female students. Crenshaw (1989) explores how the elements that we were aware of from the 'external representation' based on their race, identity, skin colour, and gender worked against each other and against them, impacting on them receiving fair and equal supervision and support. Both students, expressed concerns that the discrimination was on an organisational level, believing the staff team within the placement had developed a culture which was not welcoming to Black students.

**Reflective Point:** *At this point it is worth pausing to think how you currently/hope to address issues of intersectionality with your student? As a start consider when you have been treated as 'the outsider' Smith, (1992). How did this feel and what did you do? You may have been in a gendered setting .....Then consider another moment of when you have considered someone else 'the outsider'? This may include, for example, making assumptions about someone based on age discrimination. Personal factors such as age, height, weight, cultural identity could be considered. Progress this further to think about your personal experiences*

*with a student, acknowledging that each is unique but that the layering of each factor equates to intersectionality. Make a note of your thinking.*

Drawing on the literature, Crenshaw (1989:140), challenges the notion that we can help forge change with our external voice on behalf of students, suggesting utilising student's comments to raise our complaints and concerns is still not enough:

*'These problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. Thus, for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating "women's experience" or "the Black experience" into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast'.*

For the two Black students in this case study, neither student felt able to raise their concerns with either staff at the agency or with their tutor, practice educator or the academic lead within the placement team. This lack of reporting could be viewed negatively, as potentially being unable to challenge effectively which could be linked to a student's ability to practice in the world of social work. If you are unable to raise concerns on your own behalf, how will you be able to safeguard others?! However, the students' experience highlights them being in a 'no win' situation. This is reinforced by Nayak (2017), who introduces the power of being silent or silenced in her work with women who have experienced sexual violence. Nayak (2017) suggests there is a recognisable thread which appears to be woven into the experience of racism which our students have clearly experienced too;

*"Silence operates on an individual, family, community, societal and global level... [it is a] clever tool for a number of reasons; Silence regulates and controls... Silence shifts the shame and blame from the abuser to the abused... Silence isolates."* Nayak, (2017:10)

We are already aware from the research of Johnson's (2016) research that poverty and racism are often interlinked – translated this equates in practice- 'don't make a fuss or this will cost us'.

**Reflective Point:** *Does this ring any uncomfortable bells? Have you any experience or observation of the dilemma that students may face? Should they raise an issue and suffer the consequences, for example, the worry of a placement ending or say nothing and to pass their assessment, but knowing the status quo will remain and nothing will change. Consider how easy it would be for students in your organisation to raise concerns? Make a list of the barriers that might prevent a student from voicing their concerns. Consider how you will take action and seek support for yourself.*

Understanding that oppression can result in feeling 'silenced' is hidden knowledge. Such knowledge derives from delving into the 'experience' of racism, facing the uncomfortableness and hearing the pain and observing the embarrassment. The activism of challenging of oppression by making 'political noise', such as attending protest rallies, can be more comfortable. However, as Nayak suggests the 'silencing' is so powerful in the way it separates, divides and weakens people's experiences. It is no wonder that to conquer such silencing, individuals must become one, in order to be heard and make some noise. Although this is done with caution, and is a learnt skill which is developed by one's lived experience of being Black, it can help to develop internal mechanisms, which dictate whether the risk of reporting racism is worth the potential consequences. All these elements, shifting and shaping, were experienced internally and negotiated daily by these two students, alongside their learning, their ability to grasp and understand the concepts of the social work framework for assessment (Professional Capabilities Framework), to learn ways of working with service users and to link theory to practice. This seems an additional challenge alongside navigating their experiences of racism and discrimination.

**Reflective Point:** *Now can you begin to comprehend the additional layers? Intersectionality shows us how the weight and experience of these additional layers has an impact on BAME students. As a practice educator you could well have been involved in political action but*

*now we ask you to consider the more personal zone. How would you respond or support a student who is experiencing being treated as 'outsider'?*

### **Responding to concerns – reports of discrimination**

The students' experiences concur with those reported by Thomas et al. (2011) who evaluated a pilot study of a mentoring scheme to support BAME students on placement. They found that research indicated, *"that progression and retention rates for students from marginalised groups is lower than the sector averages and that specific support systems can improve the likelihood of course completion, as well as increasing student confidence."* In their analysis Thomas et al (2011), draw on Rowe, (1990:160), who likens the impact of being made to feel an outsider in joining a new group as "a dripping tap" effect ... "whereby students are subjected to different treatment, for example, irritation in the tone of voice being used, being ignored within the team, or not greeted as other members of staff are."

The feedback from the two Black students affected the Practice Learning Team in different ways and created different responses. We have since reflected on this as a team acknowledging our own differences and how it impacted on each of us. On reviewing the feedback from the students there were emotions from the team of feeling shock and dismay. The academic who arranged the placement, felt personally responsible for the students' experience, given their responsibility for the development of the setting over several years. There was an immediate acknowledgement that this was racism and needed to be addressed rather than buried. Other members of the team felt too close in terms of their lived experience, and were not shocked. The danger in this was acknowledged i.e. the silencing of Black students could also be experienced by their Black educators, and hence a resistance to face the situation head on or feel unable to effect change based on past experiences. This led to reflections as a team on our differences and perspectives on the situation, some felt keen to respond immediately, others sat back and reflected and others began to support colleagues by offering to assist in looking at ways to understand this. The strength of the team and their ability to grapple with the issues honestly resulted in a full team approach to ensure that we were proactive and not silent.

The two female students were invited to meet with a member of the team, to explore their comments and both welcomed the opportunity to talk about the issues they had raised.

Both were certain that they had made the right decision to complete the placement rather than flag up the concern, based on their judgement that it was likely their placement would have been terminated early. Bartoli et al (2008) highlight the increasing number of Black African students who fail the practice component of their qualification, which is mirrored in the experience of students at our HEI. The two students highlighted issues of power imbalance in the assessment process, to the extent they felt unable to raise the issues with their practice educator or any university staff. They supported each other throughout their placement, acknowledging that this helped, but seeing another student being ostracised due to their race and skin colour only added to the harrowing experience.

Echoing Rowe's (1990) research, one student stated:

*"I felt oppressed in my placement as even before I came it was not fully explained what to do if you are discriminated against due to race or bullied. I have also watched another student be discriminated against."*

Both students considered they had little choice but to continue with the placement and achieve the end goal of completing 70 days of practice without drawing attention to themselves. They considered it inappropriate to challenge the agency staff or to raise the issues with the practice educator or academic staff. Again, this concurs with Bartoli et al's (2008:84) findings of 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."*

**Reflective Point:** *The Mandela Model is a tool that has been created specifically for use in the supervisory relationship between student and practice educator (Tadam, 2011) This is an excellent tool to explore the specificity of identity and cultural difference within the practice learning supervisory role. Consider the supervisory relationship with your student and use the Mandela Model to guide you. Note any actions points including arranging to talk to other practice educators about their experiences.*

### **The 'elephant in the room': Reflecting on the impact of race in education and practice**

As practice educators we are always encouraged to consider the core values of our professions whether it be social work, nursing, or any other allied health and social care



profession. The expectation of valuing the students we educate must be high on our agenda throughout the placement period. The inclusion of race, culture and identity is crucial to the relationship between the practice educator and the student. Acknowledging this at the beginning of the relationship in your supervisory agreement is necessary as it enables you to return to identified issues and explore any uncertainties which emerge along the placement journey. The power imbalance must be understood in all contexts and shared honestly with the student. Thus the ownership of the introduction to this exploration must lie with the practice educator however uncomfortable it may be.

**Reflective Point:** *How do you explore power relations with your student? When is the right time? Is this aspect of your relationship discussed with the student at the beginning of the placement? Is it included in your supervision agreement? Do you make reference to Codes of Conduct within these discussions? Do you return to this agreement throughout the placement to review whether it is working for you both? The discussions around power and oppression should become deeper and more meaningful as your relationship with your student develops.*

*Using your professional code of conduct not only helps us to remind students what they will be expected to adhere to when they enter the profession, but it also allows you and students to use these as points of reference in their reflection and academic work.*

Based on our combined experiences of practice, as students, as practice educators and as academics and through listening to the lived experiences of our students, we embrace how difficult it may be to introduce discussions on these topics. Acknowledgment of power in relation to race, gender or class is hard to broach, especially when working in such a diverse field as Health and Social Care. This may be particularly pertinent if the practice educator has little experience or indeed when the student and the practice educator do not share the same identities. We know that it can be a complex topic to understand and to know how to open conversations and that sometimes this can lead to complacency or even ignoring areas which need clarity such as race, culture, identity, disability, sexuality.

However, we also acknowledge that supporting individual students will be different each time and we cannot be complacent, expecting that treating everyone in the same way is

sufficient or fair. When it comes to issues such as race and identity we must adapt, revisit and refresh our thinking regularly. There are intricate elements within a person's culture and identity that need to be explored and cannot be duplicated and applied in the same way with each student. As mentioned earlier, their personal experience, based on features including skin colour, skin tone, ethnicity, accent, facial features, hair type, cultural linguistics, will all affect the way in which people are treated within society, and within practice, and ultimately if they are to be accepted. However, if we are to better understand the nuances of racism and offer students' appropriate support these elements need unpicking.

**Reflective Point:** *Think of the practice placement as a microcosm of society in general. Revisit your social work practice in terms of ethics and values. Consider principles of respect and the impact of small acts of kindness on each other. Develop and note some actions points for your next students' supervision session.*

We know that discrimination and racism can be present within all our lives, cultures, and upbringing, without us even knowing it. Social work education is well known for considering these elements, helping students to self-identify where the subtlety of racism can spill over into our everyday lives, and can be easily considered as 'the norm' of one's cultural ideology. These ideologies which are created and shaped by these elements in our lives can tend to creep back in through the cracks of complacency or when we feel threatened. The danger is that this complacency can become the 'norm' again, as we revert back to the safety of what we grew up with or how we were taught. The 'norm' is what we as practice educators must understand and be clear about within our roles as educators as it is this honesty, which helps us to formulate our own ways of working.

The following quote from Lorde, resonates with us and reiterates the need for us to grapple and stay with this self-reflection;

*"I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices."* Lorde, (1979:101).

**Reflective Point:** *Considering Lorde's quote above, think back to your own education, that moment when you question yourself, or someone close to you, based on what you have read, heard, learnt, or listened to in a lecture or book. Recall the 'uncomfortableness' and the realisation, that what you have learnt, done, been taught as a child, may have been wrong, may have been offensive, may be inflicting pain on an emotional level, to someone else. Dig deep! Sharing this honestly with your student, may be one way of encouraging them to open up and discuss difference. The Johari's window (Luft and Ingham, 1961) would be a useful tool to open up a reflective discussion.*

We need to ensure that practice educators who are training, work hard to uncover and discuss any of these differences in working with students. It can be a challenge to make time for this, especially if you are a practice educator immersed in practice yourself or an off-site practice educator with many students to support. Another difficulty to consider is noted by Rooks (2014), who states;

*"Far too many of us consider the act of discussing structural racism to be racist in and of itself. It's a problem in society and it's a problem in the academy, [HEI's] too."*

Therefore, we need to ensure that we create an environment from the outset, which ensures BAME students are able to feel at ease to share their 'lived' experience and feel able to express these without fear of retribution, which could impact on the assessment of practice. This environment needs to acknowledge the element of power which is present and can often become a barrier to open discussion in the student/Practice Educator relationship.

Hill Collins, (2000: vii), reminds us of the need to consider ... *'the complexity of ideas that exist in both scholarly and everyday life and present[ing] those ideas in a way that made them not less powerful or rigorous but accessible. Approaching theory in this way challenges both the ideas of educated elites and the role of theory sustaining hierarchies of privilege'*.

### **The blind spot - cultural assumptions and how to create change**

In Bellack's (2015:63), paper she refers to Banaji and Greenwald's (2013), perception of the blind spot, in relation to our 'unconscious bias'. Discussing, the areas of ourselves that we

are not yet aware of, that 'operate as hidden blind spots, ones that are difficult to see and which we are unaware yet influence our beliefs about and behaviour towards others'.

**Reflective Point:** *This leads us beautifully into our suggestion that you read Peggy McIntosh's, (1989), 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack' and consider using this as a reflective tool which could be used on a 1:1 with your student or with your colleagues as an exercise aimed at developing together their understanding of oppression. It will hopefully encourage discussion, expression and demonstrate that you as a practice educator are open to learning that there are differences between each one of us.*

Within our own case study our immediate response was to talk with the students and then approach and challenge the practice setting, however our overwhelming concern was whether this was a hidden issue and that as an HEI we had been culturally blind to the 'lived' experiences of BAME students.

Zevallos (2011) draws on Essed's (1991) research into everyday racism experienced by Black women to argue that, "*the power of othering includes opting out of 'seeing' or responding to racism*" (Zevallos, 2011). This was our fear and we were concerned that we had not addressed the issue of race and 'otherness' directly with other placement settings and felt we too had been part of the institutional racism inherent in our society. The two students could have approached the practice learning team removed from the direct assessment triangle, and able to be utilised for guidance and external support. Their reluctance to do so concurs with Maundeni (1999) and the characterisation of the African female university student's reluctance to ask for support to increase their understanding of the curriculum.

This knowledge sat uncomfortably with our growing evidence that a number of Black students were failing the practice module and, in particular, how a number of agencies opted to withdraw their support for the student on placement rather than working towards a clearly evidenced fail or offering a robust opportunity to be tested in practice with a positive outcome. This links to the 'hidden processes' which Bernard et al, (2011: 7) refer to in their research exploring the particular circumstances of Black and ethnic minority and disabled students to identify the specific factors that contribute to their experiences whilst on social work programmes. The cumulative effect of intersecting disadvantage, for example, student who have dyslexia, Black and ethnic minority students with financial as well as caring responsibilities, meant certain students were particularly vulnerable to the fear of delayed progression.

As part of our response to the issue of racism we sought guidance from our student network with the aim of listening more closely and learning from their experiences on placement. We collaborated with the student network to develop equality and diversity survey which asked specific questions of students on their experiences on placements for example;

- How would you describe the atmosphere towards you personally whilst on placement?
- Do you feel that you were treated unequally whilst on placement?
- Do you feel there were any factors about you personally which contributed to it?

These factors included, gender, race, class, disability, personal appearance, age, accent/ the way I speak/caring responsibilities. We also asked for qualitative comments regarding any unequal treatment experienced whilst on placement. Of the 39 responses, 7 responses were attributed to race, 5 to age, 5 to accent, 3 to disability, 3 to personal appearance and 5 were other comments which included the experience of feeling excluded from learning opportunities, not receiving information about cases or personal development, being ignored in training spaces, public criticism, difference in tone of voice used when being addressed. The majority of all respondents reported talking about difficulties to friends, family, practice educators and tutors, however 6 students stated they did not report issues due to not wanting to disrupt or endanger the placement. Just over half (55%) of all respondents reported a lack of discussion about equality issues within the placement environment. These results suggest that there is a lack of awareness of inherent racism on the part of those working in practice.

Surprisingly the findings from the student survey were not as strongly indicative of what we anticipated. This may link with what Bernard et al (2011) refer to as students will only consider sharing their critical analysis of experiences of race if they feel represented, listened to and taken seriously resulting in changes in practice.

As a team we felt that the process had been cathartic for the students involved and, based on their feedback, that they and we as lecturers had also learnt an immense amount from listening to students. The ability for the students to be able to 'speak out' about their experiences was crucial and the fact that we as educators encouraged them to share and flip the roles by the students becoming the educators was important to them and empowered them to speak.

**Reflective Point:** *Think about the principle of learning from each other. How do you actively engage in collaboration and partnership with your student? Think about how to begin an open conversation about equality and how the student will raise issues within the placement and what they may hide, for fear of 'rocking the boat'.*

*Draw up a section to address this within your induction phase. Building on your understanding of 'white privilege' Bartoli et al, (2015:246) ask us to consider this from other angles within academia, such as counselling and psychotherapy programs.*

*"...white privilege is often designed to address the needs of minority populations, and it rarely places Whiteness in the spotlight. Its structure, in fact, risks mirroring the very dynamics embedded in White privilege... which has a profound impact on the quality of communication and interaction within and across racial groups... ."*

### **Sharing messages – Challenge and Change**

In responding to the concerns of our two Black female students, and in asking further questions of our student group, we had started to hear some important messages. The messages impacted on us all in different ways but, for all of us, they began to promote deeper reflections and a recognition that we need to create and encourage opportunities for open and honest dialogue between practice educators and Black students. We were conscious of the fact that, as a team of academics who are all engaged in practice learning, we have opportunities to involve ourselves in dialogue and peer reflection, but that these opportunities are not so regularly available for practice educators in other settings. We therefore wanted to share the powerful messages from our students in a forum that would provide an opportunity for other practice educators to hear the voice of Black students.

We invited a small group of Black students to work in collaboration with us to present their narratives in a workshop at a specialist conference for the training and development of practice educators called National Organisation for Practice Teachers England (NOPT). Whilst facilitated by members of the Practice Learning Team, the workshop was developed and led by the students themselves. The overarching aim was not only to promote the experiences of Black students but to improve the confidence of practice educators in listening to and working with Black students.

Bartoli et al (2008) found that whilst practice teachers were experienced in supervising staff and students they were relatively inexperienced in supervising Black students. Students in Bartoli et al's (2008:85) study reported "being covertly discriminated against and 'oppressed', being monitored more closely than other white students, to the extent that their progress was hindered." We therefore considered that influencing practice educators through the workshop might lead, indirectly, to a positive change within practice settings

promoting change, as well as addressing issues directly concerning placement settings. We were mindful that participating in such a conference was likely to attract a certain type of practitioner i.e. a reflective practice educator, as the workshop attendance was self-selecting, attracting those who have a more positive attitude to anti oppressive practice and development. However, we were motivated to start somewhere; even starting small would help us to engage more fully with the emerging challenge.

In preparing for the workshop, we asked the small group of students to identify issues that they believed had significantly impacted on their experiences on placement. One of these areas was communication and the students' response to this is presented as an example of how accepting the invitation to see things through their 'lens' can be a powerful tool for change (Hesk, 2017:198). A regularly reported aspect of communication on placement was the lack of understanding that some individual students experienced due to their accent or use of articulation. A number of Black students had been told that their accent was not understood and they needed to learn to speak more clearly. However, in our discussions with them they told us that they, too, often struggled to understand their white colleagues' accents. A number of students raised the issue of English not being their first language and at times they were marginalised by the fast pace of 'office chatter.' Differences in regional dialogue were also confusing. However, white colleagues were never told that they should try to speak more clearly! Although the students in our group came from a diverse range of backgrounds, they all agreed that if they struggled to understand a white colleague's voice they were unlikely to have the confidence to say this and so may misinterpret what was being said or miss key bits of information. This resonates with the findings of the study undertaken by Fairtlough et al. 2013 where some students reported that negative assumptions were made about their African accents. To highlight this within the workshop, practice educators were asked to repeat a phrase and this was passed around the room. The accents were varied and included a range of regional English accents, Scottish, Irish and African voices. The message was simple: 'it's not just us that's different: we're all different!' The impact of this exercise was evident and the two students leading the discussion were able to identify that struggling to understand and be understood is a barrier to effective and open communication particularly at the beginning of placement. However, the key message here is that communication is a two-way process and may require change from both parties.

**Reflective Point:** *Think about the make-up of your team. What regional accents or dialects are reflected amongst team members? What phrases or accents might confuse a student whose first language is not English?*

We were keen to provide practical insights into placement issues, so the workshop participants were asked to think of one thing that they would like to ask the students and to consider questions that may well be ‘the elephant in the room’. Students had also identified key areas that they wanted to raise with the group, with themes including the ability for practice educators to give constructive criticism and provide good use of supervision including meaningful and clear discussion about feelings. Messages from this discussion included the need for open and honest dialogue which was built on a foundation of mutual trust and respect. Whilst this is true of any practice educator /student relationship, the students’ testimonies illustrate the need for a reciprocal relationship which the PE listens to and acknowledges the world the student inhabits. This is particularly important when providing feedback to the student or identifying areas for improvement.

During placement, several of the students had been labelled as ‘struggling’ and as having ‘poor communication skills’. To see them in the workshop expressing themselves clearly, assertively and with confidence was a powerful experience for all and highlighted the racist ideologies which shaped and formed such negative labels. Valuing them as ‘experts by experience’ gave us a further perspective on the challenges they faced.

The emotional impact of listening to this group of students was immense for all participants present and feedback from seasoned practice educators, was that they valued the opportunity to honestly explore the ‘elephant in the room’ and not to be fearful of this. This was surely a transformative experience for all involved. *Knott and Scragg, (2013: 43) state that ‘there is increasing recognition of the role of emotion in critical thinking and deep learning’.* Engaging with the concept of ‘emotion’ let us consider reflection in our own practice as well as our students.

**Reflective Point:**

*Can you think of anything that you would change with regards to communication with your student? Maybe you could review how well things are working with your student during the*



*lifetime of the placement, rather than at the end. Be open to any critical learning from this and try not to fear change, as change and adaptation is good practice.*

Our aim for the workshop was to facilitate an open and frank exchange and that by listening to the student's voice practice educators would positively modify their practice and so enhance the experience for future students. The session concluded by asking participants to identify areas for change within their practice and feedback from this exercise reinforced our belief that listening to the narratives of Black students was powerful catalyst for change.

Our team want to ensure that the impact of the experience of listening to Black students results in action that is embedded in our teaching and learning activities. Subsequently we have purposefully taken what we have learnt from the Black student voices into the education and training of future practice educators, within Continual Professional Development (CPD) workshops, and mentoring support with the aim of creating spaces for dialogue. Our direction has provided more depth and focus and brought equality and diversity into a more open and honest domain. Feedback indicates that this has led to a wider understanding of the need for openness around cultural issues.

We have also linked our classroom teaching focusing on preparation for placement to include direct discussion on inequality and its possible impact on students. By raising awareness of introducing these issues and procedures to follow it up. It is hoped that students will be more open in reporting back to the practice learning team, any need for support. Our aim is to encourage and empower students to speak out at the earliest opportunity, to highlight and resolve issues of inequality and oppression. Feeling better prepared by opening up the conversation hopefully equates to a more positive student experience. The next step for us is to reach a wider audience by developing what we have learnt, we intend to create a video which allows Black students to teach students and professionals about their personal experiences. This could be used as a tool to open up dialogue in the placement setting.

### **Creating forward change**

In conclusion there is an overarching need for practice education to consider the student experience and long-term consequences of the impact of racism or any other form of discrimination. If we fail to do this we are in danger of creating a workforce of social workers, who never gain the opportunity to deal with the complexity of feelings which are required when understanding the use of self in contemporary practice. As social workers we need to be able to understand our own needs and rights and be able to articulate them. If we are not supported to develop these skills as part of our journey of lifelong learning, we are unlikely to transfer these skills to our work with services users.

Our experience has confirmed to us that part of the practice educator's role is to support students to voice their concerns and anxieties around placement issues. Building on this the practice educator needs to value the dialogue which comes from these discussions and enables a two-way learning process whereby the practice educators understanding of race is enhanced. In essence this would be similar to any other link to the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) domains! In the light of this the task of confronting racism would be located within the supervisory relationship, rather than being the responsibility of the student.

It is not possible to allocate practice educators with students from similar cultures, nor do the students we collaborated with consider this is the best way to encourage change. Practice educators can develop openness to discuss an array of challenging issues including race and discrimination and encourage openness from the student learner. By drawing out the students' skills, strengths and previous experience the practice educator can learn from the student and ensure they feel supported to be honest about their placement experience. The most powerful tool that the practice educators can use to support a student is to listen to what is being said; clarify what is being said and then take action.

As a group of practice educators, we recognise that the majority of our learning in this area comes from the students we work with, and thus they need to be valued as a 'live' resource, whilst encouraging us to be open to shared learning.

As a team this has led to a process of transformative learning, and encourages us to be open to collaborative working which has begun to shape our practice and we hope will have positive experience on the student experience.

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