Beyond Qualification: Experiences of Black Social Workers on a Post-Qualifying Course

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Citation:

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Abstract

This article reports on the findings from a small-scale qualitative study of the experiences of five black women studying on a Post-Qualifying Child Care Award (PQCCA). The study considered the expectations of the women, their experiences of recruitment and selection, and support for the candidates from their agency and from the universities offering the programme. Also reported are the experiences of the course content, course completion and the specific experience of being a black candidate on the course. The article sets all this in the context of post-qualifying education, current child care practice and the relevant literature. We make extensive use of the rich data provided by the five respondents in the study, and conclude with recommendations arising from the black women themselves and the researchers' reflections on their experiences.

Key words race**;** black social workers; post-qualifying education; child care practice; supervision

INTRODUCTION

The background to the research

The Post-Qualifying Child Care Award (PQCCA) is one of several initiatives launched in the late 1990s which were intended to improve the quality of social care provision.

'One focus of post qualifying teaching was to help students, experienced social workers who had not been in education for some year, to understand the importance of reflecting critically on their practice and to rethink the conventional, academic relationship between theory and practice and research' (Saltiel, 2003: p 105).

This article is based on the experiences of black students in two cohorts of the Post-Qualifying Child Care Award programme in northern England, with a third cohort close to the end of the teaching programme. Outcomes to date, which are similar to those found in other courses (TOPSS England, 2000,) suggest that between 40% and 50% of all students in each cohort have deferred completion of the assessed work of the course, or of the course itself. At the start of the research none of the black students registered for the course had completed.

A number of factors may be at work here. The support given to line managers and the efficacy of staff replacement schemes are two significant factors raised by the interviewees. These issues of non-completion have caused concern elsewhere (TOPSS England, 2000). However, it is the particular issues which concern and have an impact on black candidates and their completion rates that are the focus of this study.

Interviews were undertaken with five black students, one in cohort 1, two in cohort 2, and two in cohort 3. The interviews were designed to elicit the black students' experiences of the course, in terms of recruitment and selection, their expectations of the course and preparation for it, the direct learning they experienced, support from the workplace, the specific experience of being black in relation to post-qualifying study, and influences on completion of the course. The focus of the research was to identify factors which may have a bearing on course completion, including obstacles and perceptions, and the identification of strategies to enable successful completion.

With regards to the division of labour between the co-authors, all interviews were conducted by the black female co-author. We were aware of literature that highlight the pros and cons of matching, as far as possible, the social divisions

and status of researchers and subject. (Mac an Ghail 1988, Frankenburg 1963 Channer 1995). Draft versions of the paper were sent to all interviewees for their comments and their views on our interpretations of the work in progress.

The small numbers taking part in the study mean that we can only be tentative about drawing general conclusions, but it did enable us to gather rich data about the experiences of these particular black candidates for the post-qualifying child-care award.

The context of childcare practice

Social work is by nature a stressful profession. A fear of violence from service users, unmanageable workloads, staff shortages and a drive towards new technologies are just some of the reasons why social workers are the most stressed professionals in the UK (Kumar, 2004 p16).

Recent years have seen multiple government initiatives which have resulted in social work being under the microscope. For example, 'this year social work and social services will again be under a spotlight. The inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbie ... will present a series of challenges for the profession which it would do well to consider in advance.' (Practice, 2002, p3.)

Qualified workers said staff levels of child care workers are severely stretched in England. 'Retention policies are at best unimaginative and more often non-existent. … At times the stress level has been high. In some instances this has been a reflection of poor office design, hot-desking and lack of resources. At other times it has been the direct result of intimidation and the lack of understanding about the needs of black workers' (Tickle 2004, p26).

The weight of new initiatives designed to improve services can, ironically, create additional stress or remove the more attractive elements of the work. For example, the effect of a London borough's piloting of volunteers to visit families where a child is on the child protection register is queried by Leason (2004, p32): 'It is difficult to argue against any initiative designed to improve the support of

children and young families in need. But nonetheless the same question keeps popping up; won't the volunteers merely be doing what, in an ideal world, social workers would have the time to do?"

Attempts to raise standards are also raising expectations, and many staff are likely to fear falling short of these standards, especially when they are often expressed in abstract ways, or in interminable lists of bullet points. As Cooper and Rixon (2001: p709) state, 'The burgeoning policy documentation on modernisation and raising standards is replete with jargon phrases such as performance management and practice outcomes measures. It would be remarkable if there were not widespread anxieties and fears amongst social work staff about being judged as not up to standard.'

The relevant literature

The potential literature is ranges wide around post-qualifying studies, Race, experiences of black social worker students and black feminism. There have been a number of articles over recent years reflecting on the general theme of post-qualifying studies and others have focused specifically on the PQCCA programmes in England and highlighted key themes such as integrating post-qualifying study into the workplace (Cooper and Rixon 2001; Doel et al, 2008), the impact of the PQ award on social work practice (Mitchell 2001) and the need to teach reflective research and practice, (Saltiel, 2003).

Moreover, the use of a number of terms in this paper deserves attention and clarification. Although the concept of 'biological race' is now largely discredited, there is little doubt that the concept of 'social race' understood as 'a variable, contested and changing social category' (Gillborn, 1990) plays a major role in discussions about black learners.

Gillborn also offers a helpful definition of the word 'black' and its current usage. 'Many people use the term 'black' to refer to people of different nationality, ethnic and religious backgrounds who are believed to share a common experience of 'white racism' (Mukherjee, 1984 p8; Mac an Ghaill,

1988, p.156) This use of the tern is currently very popular; its strength lies in highlighting the shared experiences of different ethnic groups. However, such an interpretation is not without its problems; for example, many people of South Asian descent do not describe themselves as 'black'. Furthermore, by combining different ethnic groups together under crude general headings we may lose sight of important differences in opportunity and experience. 'It cannot be assumed that one label is appropriate in all cases, even for the same person, the complexity of the situation reflects the dynamic and political nature of the issues at stake' (Banton, 1977, p7). These views reflect much of the experiences of the women interviewed for this paper. Discussion about their similar and different racialised experiences, how their community groups were affected by and exposed to racism, formed a central part of the interviews. All interviewees were comfortable with the use of the term 'black' as a descriptor, and there was recognition that, in other circumstances, these same individuals may use other descriptors.

Ahmad (1996) questions the need to provide a definition for 'Black perspectives', given that there is rarely a demand for a definition for white perspectives; nevertheless, she offers the view that Black perspectives 'is more a statement against 'White norms'; it is an expression of assertion that cannot be bound by semantic definition ... The motivation that energises a Black perspective is rooted to the principle of racial equality and justice. The articulation that voices a Black perspective is part of a process that is committed to replacing the white distortion of Black reality with Black writings of Black writings of experience' (Ahmad, 1996, p3).

The experiences of black candidates on PQ programmes are not extensively covered in the above papers. Channer (2000) focuses on black Christian social work students as a specific example of a group whose membership of a faith community and personal value base is challenged by the pressure to absorb certain 'professional' values. The chapter suggests that the conflict between personal and professional values results in learning which is experienced as traumatic by these students.

The importance of the experience of black social workers is underlined by themed issues in the literature devoted to this topic, such as. the *British Journal of Social Work* (1999) which covered a range of issues relevant to all social workers and to many black workers in particular. For example, Graham's (1999) contribution examined social work education and the need for it to take ownership of these concerns*. Social Work Education* (1996) has also focused on the theme of the development, implementation and evaluation of training programmes for black practice teachers. Channer and Franklin (1995) contributed to the discussion of black participation in higher education by offering a reflection on the experiences of black lecturers. They drew attention to the roles black educators play in shaping and moulding higher education, in particular the need for clarity about the curriculum and the quality of the learning experiences of black and white students.

In an attempt to understand the experiences of black British women, the authors draw on feminist and particularly black feminist alternative perspectives on 'malestream' social science (Abbot, 1987). Black feminist authors in Britain (Bryan, 1985; Nwketo Simmonds, 1997 and across the Atlantic (hooks, 1989; Hill Collins, 1991; Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 2003) call attention to the limitations of feminist writings. They identify eurocentric and androcentric theories which exclude and/or pathologise black experience. Nwketo Simmonds (1997, 226) grapples with the tensions of being a black female sociologist: 'The word that I inhabit as an academic, is a white world. This white world has a problematic relationship with blackness. Academic discourses of the social have constructed blackness as the inferior 'other' so that even when blackness is named, it contains a problem of relationality to whiteness.'

The research process

Semi-structured interviews were used with the five PQ candidates. The questions aimed to gain an understanding of the respondents' expectations and experience from start to finish of the award, that is from recruitment through to delivery, assessment and (non)completion (see Table 1).

Table 1 Questions used to shape the semi-structured interviews

1 What sort of information did you receive about the course before it commenced?

2 What were your expectations of the course?

3 In what ways did the course match your expectations and in what ways did it fail?

4 What sort of preparation did you have for the course? How do you feel you might have been better prepared?

5 If you were advising another student going on the course, how might you suggest they prepared for the course in terms of study skills, academic ability for the quality and level of the required work?

6 What sort of support did you receive from
>   Your agency?
>   The university?

7 In your opinion do you feel that being a black student was advantageous or disadvantageous or neither? How do you explain your views?

8 In a multi-racial society it is assumed that race issues will be integral to the core curriculum. To what extent do you feel these were covered in the course?

9 What were the particular strengths and weaknesses of the course?

10 To what extent do you feel that the issues above have impacted on your completion/non-completion?

11 What is your view about the reasons for your completion/non completion?

First, however, we would like to introduce the respondents. In order to protect their identity, we will offer a general introduction which highlights significant aspects. Names used to identify individuals (in quotations) have been changed. The respondents are all black women, since the only black man in the sample was on sick leave and unable to participate in the research. These women have been practising as qualified social workers for a number of years in the same agency, completing the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) or the

Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (CQSW) during the period from 1987 – 1999.

One of the respondents already had a Masters degree and another was pursuing postgraduate study, as well as the PQ. One of these black women did not see progression in managerial positions as an attractive option while another was interested in being in a position to influence policy.

All respondents felt that a change of career was likely. All pointed to what they regarded as discrimination as playing a part in this decision. One respondent summed these feelings up: "probably, years ago, I would have said I will stay in social work - now I don't see myself retiring in social work.'

THE FINDINGS

1 Recruitment and selection

Why did the applicants wish to join the course? How are these drivers particularly relevant to black workers?

A strong theme that emerged from the conversations with the participants was a realisation that, as a black worker, career progression could not be taken lightly and they need to be strategic in manoeuvring around race and gender barriers in organisations.

There are many different reasons why a social worker undertakes post-qualifying studies. Perhaps one useful way of understanding these is to consider those that come from a desire to pursue the studies for their own sake (intrinsic) and those that are driven by other, external factors (extrinsic).

Intrinsic motivations
All the candidates volunteered to undertake the post-qualifying course. They wanted to improve their professional expertise to develop their understanding of

the relationship between theory and practice and to access the most recent research findings.

Extrinsic motivations

One candidate was encouraged to join the course with the promise of career promotion. Rafia was forthright that 'the only reason people do it is to become a Level 2. It's the money at the end of the day.' Three of the candidates referred to the pressure from the possible consequences of a failure to progress. For example:

'People were getting in a panic about the report, because if you didn't get it finished then you couldn't work as a social worker and if it came to an end then you wouldn't be able to practise, so people seemed to be going into it because they wanted to keep their job - so there was a lot of that going around.'

(Portia).

However, this same candidate continues by saying 'but I wanted to go into it for academic reasons really.' Another, Sonia, remarked, "my ambitions are somehow to try to marry my interests through academic development and practice development, with a particular emphasis around black perspectives." This is representative of the fact that all of the respondents had mixed motives, some of them intrinsic and some extrinsic. It is likely that different people are best motivated by different 'mixes' of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations.

How systematic were the recruitment and selection arrangements?

The arrangements for selection appeared non-systematic, even *ad hoc.* Two of the respondents had heard about the PQCCA through the grape-vine. 'I heard about it through other people who were doing the course' (Sonia), and another that she received very little information about the course and had to pursue it herself. These respondents clearly had to take the initiative to negotiate their

way on to the programme. Others in their agency had been selected, but for some unexplained reasons these black candidates were not initially selected. Participants did indicate that racism played a role in what thy perceived to be as exclusion from training opportunities. However, one of the respondents said that applying for the PQCCA felt like an automatic progression after completing PQ1. She did not know any other path to progress her studies. 'I didn't know there was anything else.' Her decision to join the PQCCA does not suggest it was a positive, informed choice, but more of 'a track'.

Cooper and Rixon (2001) explored the role of Employment Development Reviews (EDR) in the choosing of post-qualifying candidates. They suggest that EDRs were introduced to provide a formal structured process where individual decisions about training need and plans could be made within the supervisory relationship. These reviews were intended to be the focus for staff development decisions and were an integral part of overall operational priority setting within the team. However, there is no evidence in the data that any of the candidates experienced a formal or structured process such as the EDR. The role of a supervisory relationship as described by Cooper and Rixon (2001) appears to have been absent in the experience of all these candidates.

The information for the programme seems to have been 'hit and miss' in terms of its impact on the agency. The lack of adequate direct email seems to limit the availability of information in some practice settings, so that practitioners are dependent on the vigilence and care of those managers who do have access to the system.

Word of mouth emerged as an important factor, and even poor publicity did not deter an application in this candidate's case:

  'There was quite a gap between the three introduction days and us
  starting. It was really quite daunting because only one set of students had
  done it before us and they really weren't recommending it.'

                                                                      (Rafia).

Rafia noted that 'they let me on a lot sooner than they should have and now they don't let you on until you've been practicing for a whole year'. She understood the reason was a pragmatic one, and that the agency could not fill its numbers with 'eligible' candidates. However, this led to later complications and confusion about the candidate's eligibility for Level 2 status.

Support from the candidates' agencies

In two cases it was clear that managers selected those who had recently completed DipSW and therefore had the skills to tackle a post-qualifying course. In two other cases managers resisted the workers' wish to apply to the course on the grounds that being in practice for some years without engaging in any academic studies was deemed a disadvantage. The fifth 'recruited herself' and met neither resistance nor encouragement.

The team in which they worked emerged as a significant factor in the pull and push of recruitment to the course. This is mirrored by Rixon and Cooper (2001), who noted that team colleagues' response to other members' opportunities for continuing professional development has a significant impact on candidates who embark on study while at work:

> 'The Department's initial development strategy targeted newly qualified staff as those most likely to enter the profession possessing the skills of portfolio preparation within competency frameworks … [and made it a requirement for all newly qualified social work staff]. In this context it is understandable that there may be expressions of frustration, envy and resentment from experienced staff about being left out of the emerging framework for post-qualification opportunities. (ibid, pp 709)

Interestingly, as we see later in section 4, some experienced practitioners seem to resent both the implication that they are in need of further training *and* the fact that newer practitioners are receiving it when they are not!

2 Expectations and preparation

The candidates' expectations of the course

It is important to recognize that candidates studying for post-qualifying awards have practice experience and are usually in current practice, so their circumstances are very different from students on qualifying courses. By the time experienced social workers come to post qualifying study they have 'a substantial store of knowledge, expertise and experience … reflecting on that experience is more useful than teaching chunks of 'new' prepositional knowledge' (Saltiel, 2003: p106). Candidates expect to have this experience acknowledged and respected.

Conversely, some practitioners seem to feel that they have nothing new to learn, as this rather worrying statement from Rafia indicates:

'I spoke to a few people in our team. The average age in our team was 50 - I was the youngest. They had a very cynical view - 'What can you teach us?' I can see where they were coming from; it must have been quite degrading for them. After thirty years of practice, we said 'Right - now prove that you can do it!' But with me I really liked it'.

(Rafia).

Moreover, some candidates may already have experience of the of the *style* of post-qualifying awards, particularly the gathering and presentation of evidence of their learning and practice in a portfolio:

'When I did the PQ1 [Part One of the Post-Qualifying Award in Social Work] that gave me a good insight into the childcare award. I did the [PQ1] portfolio, so I knew what that would mean … So there weren't any great shocks.'

(Rafia).

3 Experience of the course

The experience of the course in the light of the expectations

The workers in the sample had clear expectations of the course: they wanted to attend the programme in order to improve their practice. This respondent had made the distinction between the benefits she expected from the PQCCA in comparison to other courses she had attended:

> "What I expected is that it would develop me in a way that maybe in-service training and pure practice, just doing things over and over again, hadn't. That this would have been like a step up. A new way of sort of learning new ideas for practice."
>
> <div align="right">(Sonia)</div>

Aspects of practice for improvement were assessment, child development and using theoretical models and research. Both Portia and Sonia felt these expectations were met:

> "I think it matched my expectations because I did learn a lot about child development. I started looking at my assessment in terms what does this mean in relation to child development. I did think about how I could use theory in my work. Academically there was a lot of new and exciting material; it was great to learn about attachment theory and how it worked. If you like to read and like the academic stuff then it is very stimulating."
>
> <div align="right">(Portia)</div>

> "It matched my expectations in regards to some of the teaching around significant harming and research around that. A major piece of learning for me was for the first time I actually understood child development and how the theory of it of it how I was going to commit that to practice, I never ever recognised that before. What I felt that I did was that over the years I was able to pick up the signs and what I thought was about as a course. The way that person or that parent

behaves the way they do, it shouldn't have been such a shock. Some of the strengths were the academic input and was definitely up to date research. That was impressive, bearing in mind that a lot of the training I had done within the agency up to that point, it didn't incorporate new research at all, so that was really refreshing."

<div align="right">(Sonia)</div>

Portia also highlighted the central role of research in the course content, and she continues to be highly enthusiastic about the course.

"Anyone working in a profession with people should always update information. Society changes so that means you need different methods. A lot of social work research had happened and we had not had chance to reflect on it and to read it and the course provided that research that we'd heard about … "I think I've not been disappointed with the course, to be frank. I did go quite regularly so I did enjoy it. It gave me an insight …you started to get pictures of how you could make a difference. It was quite exciting actually."

<div align="right">(Portia)</div>

The candidates valued the academic input but offered comments of concern about the application of knowledge and limitations to the use of theory.

 "I did feel it's ok to cite someone's book but when you are standing up in court a parent is fighting for their child you feel that you need to be really careful how you use evidence."

<div align="right">(Veronica)</div>

Other critical comments about the course content was about the focus and emphasis of the teaching, one respondent felt that there needed to be more consideration of the social context and less pressure on workers to strive for perfection in practice. In this lengthy quote, this worker draws attention to the

organisational context as well as the longstanding nature of problems faced by some users of services.

> "The weaknesses, I didn't feel some of the stuff wasn't applicable and I don't think it took into account the context in which we work. There was all this talk about best practice and working together with parents, sometimes you don't feel people were taking responsibility for where their families were. It can't just be about who is a good practitioner it is about the social context and learning. They tell you to go and learn, that you must try and try and try, but when does that stop? That was the message I got. I did feel that there was the attitude that the social workers needed bringing up to standard because they are flagging and I disagreed with that. There was a really good standard. Yes we could improve but there was so much focus on us and very little on the organisation, at the end of the day you were just seen as a social worker."
>
> (Rafia)

As well as course content, workers had expectations about the management of the course. They expected help or clear advice with the organisation of their academic workload. They recognised the potential conflict between regarding themselves as students while in full time work. Some felt that this tension was not given adequate consideration by course planners. One candidate who had recently completed her Diploma felt that the PQCCA matched her expectation in terms of the level of work. She was not overwhelmed by the standard required. However, it was a struggle to attain the required standard of academic work alongside a full caseload. This candidate had expected more time to study as well as advice on how best to study. She was concerned that as the standard of work increased she may need to improve her time management so as to be an effective student.

4 Agency support during the course

A recurring theme raised by all five respondents was the lack of support from their agency. Key to this support would be a manager who was prepared to keep discussion about the management and content of the PQCCA course as central to supervision. Workers wanted acknowledgement that once they had been accepted onto the course, it was a clear signal that the agency was prepared to offer ongoing and relevant support. Two workers spoke about replacement staff that should have been employed to undertake some of their workload, yet neither of these candidates appeared to benefit from this arrangement.

> "There was money available to employ another member of staff. That never happened!"
>
> (Claudette)

Portia noted that although another person was employed, they were taken as extra staff to cover duty and help out other people, so they were not of direct benefit to her workload.

One worker became aware that her manager was asking other colleagues about her attendance record, despite her enthusiasm for the course and regular attendance at teaching sessions. This questioning of her commitment and surveillance in what appeared to be an underhanded manner left the respondent feeling undermined.

Two respondents were clear that they recruited themselves to the course and that support form their line managers was not forth coming. One respondent said that she had 'literally no support' from her agency. In the end she wrote to the personnel section to complain about the manager blocking her application.

5 Being black on a post-qualifying course

Pros and cons

It emerged from the study that black candidates experienced differences from the very earliest stages of recruitment and selection:

'I remember one of the comments. A white worker [in my team] wanted to go on it [the course]. It's not like she wasn't allowed, but the manager didn't think she was ready for it. I got on it and I had only just joined the team for four months. And she said "oh well, it's reverse racism".'

(Rafia).

When asked whether being black was advantageous or disadvantageous responses seemed to be contradictory. Portia's response to this question was insightful. She emphasised the benefit she brought to the course.

"Once I was on the course, I didn't find it a disadvantage, it was actually an advantage because if there were issues involving race, as a black worker you would look at it differently. Some lecturers would look at things with a black perspective but there were others who didn't and you could say look at that, look at it from a different angle. So I brought something to the course."

(Portia)

On the one hand Veronica felt that she was neither advantage nor disadvantage. "I just felt like a student like everyone else." However, it was clear that she experienced a sense of isolation. "There were four black students to start with, two dropped out. So in terms of informal interaction that was difficult, so if one of you was off then you are the only one! … There were times when it did feel like, oh here she goes again." Veronica further explained that her isolation was rooted in the reaction of white students to her contributions to discussion topics. Franklin and Channer (1995) highlight the negative experiences of black students

who are compelled to endure courses where the focus on black families from teaching staff and other students is problematised and pathological.

"Other black students find such discussion unbearably painful. This is because studying contemporary racism means in all likelihood a prolonged discussion of discrimination against and exploitation of black people and that chronicle of multiple disadvantage black people have endured: slavery, imperialism, colonialism, segregation, immigration, as well as contemporary issues of social provision in housing, health, education and the law. This can leave many black students with an unbalanced view of their communities and little appreciation for the potential for greater personal and collective self-determination. For those students without strong familial, spiritual or community networks severe alienation is the result … "Initially the study of race and racism triggers in many white students feelings of guilt and/or denial and resentment. These feelings can harden into rationales supporting particular political and/or moral stances and can if unchecked get in the way of the learning process for individuals and the group." (Franklin and Channer, 1995, p 32-46*)

> "I felt like I had something to contribute but I didn't feel like that was
> received from the other students. That did put me off completely. So in
> that case it would be hard for me to talk about my family because
> you've already assumed that I'm substandard."
>
> (Veronica)

Veronica offered a clear analysis of her experience as a black worker and made valuable comments about the possible reasons for the reaction of some white workers.

> "Well you know it's such an explosive thing. Some people are quite
> sensitive and being round when they brought racism up and people
> used to cry and therefore you at times you did not know whether you
> were going to traumatise another lot! So sometimes you put the box
> up and they don't want to know after that so you did not know whether

to bring it up again. It's difficult to know how to approach it. You know it needs approaching"

<div align="right">(Veronica)</div>

Black students can also find the topic emotionally draining. Hitherto 'invisible' black students suddenly find themselves the focus of attention and are expected to be expert on relationships between 'their' communities and white people. They are no more likely to be informed as white students since formal 'race' assessments are not set to test knowledge of the black experience, rather the analysis of various theoretical approaches to 'race'.

More than one student expressed their preference to be in a learning environment where they were not the lone black student. They talked about a sense of belonging and support, the tendency to gravitate towards people who are similar to you, a common experience in groups (Doel, 2006). Robinson (1995) suggests that, at least for black people, the race of group members may be of greatest concern in small, intimate groups. It has been suggested that group members should, wherever possible, not experience being 'the only …' in a particular group.(p49)

One of the major problems of racially heterogeneous groups has been that these groups tend to be predominantly white, with few black members. Consequently, black group members 'instead of gaining support and strength, instead of sharing common feelings and aspirations have found themselves even more isolated and sometimes in threatening situations. (Robinson p50).

The strength of feeling from these black students is palpable. Rafia noted that 'it can be so isolating when you are on your own … the reaction of white students put me off completely."

Race as content on the course

Candidates were clear that some lecturers were better than others in ensuring that issues of race were appropriately covered on the course. The views about

the amount of material presented that would help workers work effectively with black families were unanimous. Participants felt that there was not enough teaching about these issues. Sonia did give credit to lecturers who appeared to have put effort into researching these issues.

In an attempt to understand why some presenters seemed unwilling or unable to explore issues of working with black families in any detail, Portia suggested that the presence of black workers may have been to some degree intimidating for the lecturer. "It was not in depth, it was like 'as a matter of fact' then 'let's move on'. Veronica felt there was insufficient depth to the presentation and discussion of the topics and that *all* students were disadvantaged by the neglect of this area of work.

One respondent also expressed her concern about the association and connection of these issues with general matters of discrimination, diversity and oppression. Portia was not convinced that integrating these topics was successful in that focus on black perspectives was being neglected.

> "In fact blackness came under the same heading as disability and gays and lesbians - and they are completely different. What has being black got to do with disability? Or like a few Irish now, who call themselves minority! I remember one guy said 'I'm a minority', and I'm thinking, 'you haven't even got the Irish accent.' I was thinking you can walk down the road, no one bothers you, mate. I've only got to open my front door and walk out!
>
> (Portia)

In the debate over hierarcy of oppressions, it is important to be able to see both the similarities *and the differences* in the kinds of experience of different oppressed groups. Whereas gay people, for example can choose to 'pass' if they so wish, black people by and large cannot. The needs of disabled candidates are likely to be very different from those of black candidates. Respecting the different needs of different groups is likely to make the

educational experience more meaningful than general head-nods to 'oppressed groups'.

6 Completion and non-completion

Reasons

All the respondents felt they were unable to invest sufficient time and energy in the course because of lack of appropriate support from their agency and the university. They all regarded completion as an uphill struggle, with personal determination as the key factor for completion. This was also influenced by an understanding of stereotypes of black students and workers. The resolve to refute such negative images is not necessarily an adverse motivator, but it may cause unwarranted pressure.

> 'I completed it because I put in a whole year of sweat and blood. People dropped out and not that I think I'm a hero or anything but I thought I am capable of doing this. If anyone else can then so can I and I don't want the view that I'm deficient like the other black students dropped out. I thought I'm going to finish this if it kills me. It's like every time I was late it was like a self-fulfilling prophecy and I was determined to finish it.'
>
> (Veronica)

Another element affecting the nature of completion have already been discussed - course content and racial composition of the group. All five respondents stated that the neglect of race issues was a disappointment. Sonia talked about her decision to follow the example of the teaching staff and neglect the discussion of race issues, since she had learned from previous experience that an attempt to integrate these issues without the appropriate support could be detrimental.

> "I think I made the wrong decision on the CQSW, (Certificate of Qualification in Social Work) that I spent more time hammering on about the black perspective on race, and that was detrimental to the

academic stuff, and when I read back I thought there was too much emotion and not enough reading. So this time … it felt like it was already a struggle and I already don't have enough time to do it ... so just let me put down what they want. That affected how I felt about completing it."

(Sonia)

Rafia's expectation were more realistic and therefore she was less disappointed with the lack of interesting material on black perspectives.

"I didn't go thinking that they were going to do something miraculous just didn't have much expectations. It would have been so interesting to bring these things into academic discussion, that would have been great but I also feel that the race issues was only part of a general problem"   (Rafia)

Claudette was awaiting results and was not optimistic because of her experience of the university's lack of communication, amounting to a break down in communication. She described responses as unhelpful, evasive and heavily delayed. Her's was a poor experience. 'I just think I've been through the mill with this course and it shouldn't be like that, a bad experience from start to finish' (Claudette).

Portia had no doubt that she was expected to fail and these negative expectations affected her engagement with the course. There is considerable literature about the negative experience of black children, (Blair, 1995; Wright 2000), youth (Sewell, 1995) and adults (Channer ,2000) in the British education system. A range of factors including the low expectation of educators appears to have prevailing and significant impact on the education experience of these individuals. Ultimately, these pessimistic prospects resulted in self-doubt and damaged her self-esteem, but she was nevertheless determined to complete the course at a later date.

'It did impact on me. It did. It made me tense and nervous and made me feel undervalued and it just drained me down actually. Because they expected me to feel *[pause for thought]* it made me wonder 'well are they right?' … I'm not the first and I won't be the last. It will continue.'

(Portia)

Conclusions and recommendations

These conclusions and recommendations are drawn directly from the candidates' comments, with some interpretation by the authors. We hope, as Aymer and Bryan (1996, p14) did ten years ago to 'break this depressive cycle of "ain't it awful",' to see how improvements can be made. Those four candidates who eventually completed the PQCCA did so out of a personal determination to finish what they had started. All five candidates had played an active part in securing their places on the course. The wish to develop professionally was the principle motivation, with some evidence also of a desire for career promotion. They came with differing levels of expectation about the programme. All these black women reported that the experience of doing the course was not a pleasing one, in different measure, and this should be a matter of concern. However, they all also acknowledge some interesting teaching material and some supportive staff in the agency and the universities. However, these are outweighed by those aspects of the course content and processes which impeded their progress.

A contract

Given the rich experience of the respondents their recommendations deserve serious attention. They were unanimous in their view that all parties – universities, agency and candidates - should discuss all aspects of the commitment before the start of the course. Portia thought that a signed contract would clarify issues such as study time.

"I think they should have a contract agreement that is signed by the manager and the university saying this time is put aside that they

should stick to, even if it is to do reflective practice - even if it is just once a week - and a chance to read books. You know, books have come out that we've not even heard of and new ones have a lot of information. A contract, yeah. And you sign it and it's there. So you've agreed you can have this time out … You'd feel happy then, if you had this you'd feel responsible and it does have an affect on the study."

<div align="right">(Portia)</div>

Claudette thought that such a pre-course discussion should include a clear focus on the appropriateness of the work setting of the candidate to provide sufficient and suitable evidence for the portfolio.

"I think if someone had met with me and looked at the job and the type of work that I was doing before I was actually started then I would have had an idea of what I was actually talking about. 'You need to do this to get into that. Halfway through I actually suggested that that I do some duty work. But it all had to come from me, so that would have been more beneficial."

<div align="right">(Claudette)</div>

Supervisor involvement in the training programme

All five candidates were disappointed by the lack of support from their managers. Some acknowledged that their line manager was not sufficiently informed about the details of the PQCCA, and a pre-course contract could have dealt with that.   It was suggested that a training course for managers would have improved the experience of the candidates; certainly some form of involvement by managers in a programme has been shown to have beneficial effects, by giving the supervisors more insight into the programme and a feeling of commitment to it (Marsh and Doel, 2005) .

An assessment

Portia recommended an assessment to identify areas of strength and weakness for each candidate *before* course registration. This could be carried out as part of an appraisal system and it would allow more fruitful preparation for the course. She considered that those candidates who had been out of study for a number of years need a different level and kind of support to those who were just leaving a degree of diploma. A 'trial' assignment would help everybody concerned to see how much additional asistance the candidate might need to return to study.

A transparent team approach

The post-qualifying opportunity is a very individualised one and, in order to secure proper support from colleagues, it would be better if there were a team approach to selection of candidates. Perhaps this would lead to open discussion of the team's needs, as well as individual needs, and a more transparent approach to selection for post-qualifying study.

These recommendations are ones of good practice which would apply to all candidates on the course and, if time and resources had allowed, it would have been interesting to compare the experiences of these five black women with other – white and male – candidates, and to their recommendations for an improved experience.

The recommendations which arise specifically for black candidates on the course are:

- Ensure whenever possible that no training groups are composed where there is only one black member of the group.

- Ensure there is a reference group for black candidates on post-qualifying programmes (perhaps composed of successful black candidates from this or other similar programmes who might 'sponsor' black workers on subsequent programmes).

- Ensure that the course content is regularly reviewed with reviewers who include black practitioners and academics to consider how issues of race are covered and the appropriateness of case material used on the course.

- Ensure that the contract meeting recommended earlier includes discussion of academic and practice expectations in relation to race; an honest discussion of candidates' past experiences of academic assignments should help prevent candidates feeling the need to second-guess what the programme is looking for.'

In this way, we would hope that programmes in the new post-qualifying framework will incorporate good practices for all candidates in general and Black candidates in particular.

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