

Title: Black Minority Ethnic Students Navigating Their Way from Access Courses to Social Work Programmes: Key Considerations for the Selection of Students

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Black Minority Ethnic Students Navigating Their Way from Access Courses to Social Work Programmes: Key Considerations for the Selection of Students

Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of predominantly black minority ethnic students navigating their way from further education access courses to BA Social Work programmes. It discusses tensions associated with balancing academic and professional entry requirements for social work education with principles of social justice enshrined in policy initiatives to widen participation to higher education and to the professions for those from less privileged social backgrounds. Drawing upon findings from the author's doctoral study, she argues that entry to social work education is not without problem for some black minority ethnic students. Building upon recommendations from a recent Social Work Task Force report, she calls for abolition of the UCAS tariff system to facilitate admission criteria giving equal weighting to academic skills, life course experiences and related 'softer skills' denoting personal suitability for social work.

Key words: access, black minority ethnic, life course, selection, widening participation

Introduction

The social work profession has come under considerable criticism following the high profile child abuse cases of Victoria Climbié and Baby Peter. Independent inquires into the deaths of these children (Laming, 2003 & 2009), and the final report of the Social Work Task Force, in particular, calls for reforms that:

...begin with clear, consistent criteria for entry to social work courses – with a new regime for testing and interviewing candidates that balances academic and personal skills – so that all students are of a high calibre (DCSF, 2009, p. 7).

These recommendations provide an opportunity for social work education to take stock and develop more holistic admissions criteria. However, this presents challenges as social work education has a commitment to social justice, articulated through widening participation policy initiatives to increase entry to higher education

(HE) and to the professions to those from less privileged social backgrounds; and in keeping with social work's value base. The paper discusses findings from the author's doctoral study indicating that increasing numbers of applications and an concomitant over-emphasis on academic admissions criteria have had unintended consequences for some black minority ethnic (BME) students' entry to social work education. It argues that non-academic skills related to social background factors and life course experiences, in addition to academic credentials, are equally important when selecting students for social work education.

Social Work Education Entry Requirements

The Department of Health (DH) outlined four key entry requirements with the new qualifying degree in social work introduced in England in 2003: Key skills in English and mathematics equivalent to GCSE grade C; the ability to communicate clearly and accurately in spoken and written English; a Criminal Records Bureau check (CRB); and demonstration of "appropriate personal and intellectual qualities to be social workers" (DH, 2002, p. 2). These requirements were in response to concerns that social workers did not always have the apposite literacy skills to fulfill essential social work roles (Rai, 2004); for example, ability to write the court reports that can determine whether a child is removed from their family. The DH stipulations place an increased onus on social work educators to admit students with appropriate academic skills and with the potential to become competent, accountable social workers (Dillon, 2007). More recently, a Social Work Task Force report stated that only those mostly likely to "excel", and to "enter the workforce as confident, competent practitioners" (DCSF, 2009, p. 18) should undertake social work training.

The Social Work Task Force

The Social Work Task Force report, *Building a Safe, Confident Future*, followed a review of frontline social work practice (DCSF, 2009). Whilst this report recognised that the qualifying degree in social work have attracted a higher proportion of students from BME groups, it believes that current selection arrangements "do not go far enough to ensure that all institutions are assessing candidates rigorously enough to ensure they have the right mix of intellectual and personal qualities to succeed as social workers" (DCSF, 2009, p.18). It calls for "a mix of analytical skills,

insight, common sense, confidence, resilience, empathy and use of authority” (DCSF, 2009, p. 17). A Social Work Reform Board will take forward these recommendations and a key challenge it will face is ensuring any entry criteria developed balance academic requirements with more individualistic aspects of suitability for social work. Academic skills and ‘potential’ can be assessed, to some extent, by academic qualifications and examinations. Personal characteristics and other social factors denoting suitability for social work are, however, far more nebulous, being more difficult to gauge and assess. Given social work education’s fundamental gate-keeping role (Barlow & Coleman, 2003), it is imperative that any new admissions criteria is not only balanced, but also permits a fair and rigorous scrutiny of non-academic attributes.

Widening Participation

Widening participation policy responds to historical concerns about the under-representation of students in HE from less privileged social backgrounds; notably, students from low income families, particular minority ethnic groups, those with disabilities, and women (Robbins, 1963; Dearing, 1997; DfES, 2003a); it, therefore, strives to encourage HE entry from those currently under-represented within British universities (QAA, 2008a). A government target to increase participation rates among students between the ages of 18-30 to 50 per cent by 2010 (DfES, 2003b) has improved the situation; participation rates are currently around 40% (Cabinet Office, 2009). Students from less privileged social backgrounds, however, are still under-represented in the older, elite universities and over-represented in post-1992 higher education institutions (HEIs) (HEFCE, 2009).

Black Minority Ethnic Students Experiences

Educational inequalities among BME students are a persistent problem in terms of differential outcomes in access, progression and degree attainment, despite such students being more likely to take HE qualifications than their white counterparts (Connor et. al., 2004; HEFCE, 2006; Tolley & Rundel, 2006; Archer & Francis, 2007). Whilst social work education is attracting increasing numbers of BME students (GSCC, 2008 & 2009), they disproportionately experience problems with progression compared to their white counterparts, being more likely to defer, to have

academic work referred, and also have higher withdrawal rates (Hussein et al., 2007; GSCC, 2008 & 2009). A study by Bernard et al. (2009, p.2), illustrated the “multiplicity of factors” that BME social work students have to balance, for example, child care, employment and socio-economic disadvantages, and how juggling these commitments and issues can seriously impair their ability to succeed. With the exception of Jones (2006), few studies have explored the experiences of BME students striving to progress to social work education from access courses. Cropper’s (2000) study did focus on this topic, but within a HEI setting and revealed issues of colour-blind and ethnocentricity *vis-à-vis* learning and teaching. Another study by Holmstrom and Taylor explored progression problems for social work students post-enrolment, concluding that:

A renewed focus upon the support needs of students at different stages of the social work student ‘life-cycle’ is long overdue. [We] want to argue that a focus upon the pre-application stage in the selection process is much needed. The influence of the image and status of social work as a profession and the range of factors motivating applicants to apply for social work programmes is an important field of investigation (Holmstrom & Taylor, 2008, p. 834 - 835).

This emphasis on the gathering of additional contextual information at an earlier point of the education life course is important and would permit a more holistic assessment of applicants’ suitability for social work.

Access Courses

Access courses have a well-established history in England, dating back more than thirty years (Jones, 2006) and provide progression pathways from further education (FE) to HE. They are designed for students with the potential to study for a degree or professional qualification, but who have perhaps under-achieved academically or had their education disrupted because of personal circumstances or social disadvantages (OCN, 2007). Their key objective is to build confidence and to equip students with the skills to study at HE level (Jones, 2006; QAA, 2008b). Such courses play an important widening participation role for BME students. More than 24 per cent of ‘Access to HE’ learners in 2006-07 were from ethnic minority populations (QAA, 2008b, p. 5-6). Access courses generally focus on subjects that students intend to read at university and, therefore, not only equip them with academic skills, but also with relevant subject

knowledge. However, the intrinsic value of access courses is not consistently recognised by HEIs; students following the 'traditional' 'A' level route are far more likely than 'non-traditional' students pursuing vocational routes such as access courses to be offered university places (Wolf, 2002; HEFCE, 2009).

Access to the Professions

Inequality of access is also an issue among professions such as medicine and journalism. A central concern is that entry routes to the professions have not widened, resulting in decreased social mobility:

..the glass ceiling has been raised, but not yet broken. Despite increasing numbers of people from black minority ethnic backgrounds in professional jobs, many professions are still unrepresentative of the modern society they serve. And most alarmingly of all there is strong evidence [...] that the UK's professions have become more, not less, social exclusive over time (Cabinet Office, 2009, p. 6).

Issues of under-representation have been linked to the increased emphasis now placed upon credentials and professional qualifications, and selection and entry procedures underpinned by cultural and attitudinal barriers (Cabinet Office, 2009). Credentialism, also known as 'qualification inflation', refers to when the stipulated academic credentials of specific jobs do not match the inherent skills required, or the demands of particular professional roles (Levidow, 2002). Qualification inflation is considered by human capital theorists as a response to demand and supply issues, being most common when there is an excess supply of labour (ibid). Manifestly, such dynamics may pose problems for people who are disadvantaged and who are already competing in an unequal economic and social playing field. An overemphasis on academic credentials also heightens the risk of less priority being given to essential softer skills such as openness, honesty and 'warmth'. Problems of credentialism are evident within nursing and social work, associated with these professions having shifted from diploma to graduate level entry (Cabinet Office, 2009). A 'Fair Access to the Professions' panel has been set up to advise on how professional careers can be opened up "to as wide a pool of talent as possible" (Cabinet Office, 2009, p. 5).

Professional Tensions

The volume of social work education applications has consistently grown (Hussein et al., 2007; GSCC, 2008 & 2009) and been influenced by a number of factors. First, widening participation policy initiatives have opened the HE doors to more students. Second, workforce development concerns related to sporadic shortages in the number of qualified social workers have resulted in recruitment drives and incentives to encourage more people to enter social work. Third, financial assistance for social work training (i.e. the non-income assessed bursary introduced with the BA Social Work in 2003) has made social work a more financially viable and popular career choice (Hafford-Letchfield, 2007; GSCC, 2009). Last, UK economic conditions have led to a renewed interest in social work and nursing as prospective careers:

There were signs that the recession was prompting people to apply to higher education as they sought to retrain... Compared with last year, the number of applications to study social work is up 41 per cent, while nursing is up 74 per cent (Times Higher, 2010, p. 1).

The impact of some of these dynamics can be illustrated in a localised context. Analysis of admission data collected by the author within her own department over a four year period, revealed a sharp year-on-year increase in the number of social work applications per se, but especially for the BA Social Work. Applications more than trebled between the academic years 2001-2005 (Dillon, 2004 & 2005). To provide one illustrative example, between January 2004-2005, 752 applicants applied for 18 places, a percentage increase of 42 per cent; the ratio of applications to entrants was 1:44 (Dillon, 2004). An earlier study of Social Work Admissions Tutors in and around London (Dillon, 2007) confirmed the growing numbers of social work applications and the challenges faced by admissions tutors with trying to differentiate between applicants' credentials in a context of high demand for places, whilst also striving to fulfil a commitment to widening participation. Whilst the increased popularity in social work as a career is generally to be welcomed, a key contention of the author is that qualification inflation and increased competition for social work education places has led to an over-emphasis on the academic components of the DH entry requirements, and concomitantly resulted in additional

entry barriers, and perhaps new educational inequalities among some groups of students.

Pertinent Theoretical Ideas

Life course, social reproduction and critical race theories and related theoretical ideas developed by Elder (2002), Bourdieu (1998) and Hodkinson et al. (1996), among others, provide possible explanations for the educational inequalities among some social groups, and useful insights for social work education. Life course development theories are underpinned by five central tenets:

Firstly, development is lifelong; secondly, people are actors with choices that construct their lives; thirdly, the timing of event and roles, whether early or late, affects their impact. Fourthly, lives are embedded in relationships with other people and are influenced by them, and fifthly, changing historical times and places profoundly influence people's experiences (Elder, 2002, p. 1-2).

These premises suggest that students' trajectories may be complex and non-linear. Moreover, key life experiences and social relationships may be significant motivating factors in students' career choices. In contrast, social reproduction theories focus on how privilege and social inequalities are socially reproduced across generations. Bourdieu (1998), for example, saw the education system as a hidden structure manipulated by the powerful to reproduce the overall society and described the social processes by which minority elites shape society and perpetuate their interests, thus advantaged in the process. Bourdieu (1998) referred to 'field' as a set of positions and relationships in different contexts (e.g. within the family or schools) linked to the possession and interaction of different amounts of cultural (e.g. knowledge of the arts), economic (e.g. financial resources) and social capital (e.g. influential social networks) that people possess, and how these can influence and shape life chances and opportunities. Bourdieu (1990) further argued that whilst adaptation occasionally takes the form of radical conversion (notions of agency), that social forces such as capital accumulation generally tend to be reproductive rather than transformative.

Hodkinson et al. (1996) expound the interplay between life course and structure and agency factors, suggesting individual social action can be shaped by three types of 'turning points' or key life events, classified according to their causes, *structural*, *self-initiated* or *forced* (Hodkinson et al., 1996, p. 142-143). 'Structural turning points'

include non-participation in education because of socio-economic disadvantage. 'Self-initiated turning points' refer to when an individual is self-determining in transforming their life. 'Forced turning points' result from external events such as an accident or bereavement and may prevent a student from completing their education. Finally, critical race theory, provides "a tool through which to define, expose, and address educational problems" among BME students (Parker & Lynn, 2009, p.148); in doing so, it legitimises and gives voice to the educational experiences of BME students so that they can be heard, and also embraces notions of agency and transformation (Fernandez, 2002).

The Study

The study focussed on the experiences of predominantly BME students enrolled on three FE college access courses in the South East of England and had five key aims. Firstly, to explore the social backgrounds of access students. Secondly, to explore the education and career decision-making and choices open to students. Thirdly, to investigate whether students' education and career aspirations were influenced by key 'turning points' in their lives. Fourthly, to identify the outcome of students' HE applications. Finally, to elicit course tutors perspectives on students' education and career decision-making and any obstacles to HE entry.

Methodology and Sampling

The study was both exploratory and explanatory and used quantitative and qualitative methods involving questionnaires, initial and follow-up focus groups and individual interviews. Convenience and purposive sampling strategies were used to select the colleges and students. This entailed choosing the nearest and most convenient locations (Robson, 2002), and specifically, but not exclusively, selecting students from BME backgrounds. Fifty-five students completed social background questionnaires. Twenty one students participated in initial focus groups and 13 in follow-up focus groups. Interviews were conducted with 4 students and 3 course tutors. Finally, higher education/choice outcome questionnaires were completed by 12 students at the end of their studies.

Data analysis

Quantitative data analysis methods were used to analyse information supplied on the social background questionnaires and HE choice/outcome questionnaires. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data and included developing initial codes and categories, memo writing and grouping the data in terms of emergent themes and patterns, regularities and irregularities (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The Findings

Key findings are discussed under four main themes emerging from analysis of the data.

Social background factors

The majority (74%) of the cohorts of the three 'Access to Social Work' courses were from 'working class' social backgrounds, and their average age was 32. They were predominately women (78%) and from black minority ethnic backgrounds (78%). Nearly all the students were combining study with low paid/status work within social care. Social work is historically over-represented by women (see inter, alia, Perry & Cree, 2003, GSCC, 2008 & 2009) and the predominance of BME students on the access courses mirrors their growing numbers within social work education (GSCC, 2008 & 2009). The over-representation of students from working class and generally less privileged social backgrounds reflects the widening participation role of access courses (Jones, 2006). However, historically there has been an over-representation of women and BME students progressing to higher education through vocational routes such as access courses (Dearing, 1997).

Prevailing and new forms of social inequalities?

Poverty, time pressures, and initial low confidence in academic ability presented challenges for some students' progression to BA Social Work programmes. Perhaps partially as a result of adverse social circumstances, students were less likely to apply or to be offered places at pre-1992 universities; less than half (30%) applied to pre-1992 universities, and only one student secured a social work place. This might be a reflection of the number and types of universities within the geographical areas where the students lived. Students' choice of university may also have been made on pragmatic grounds based, for example, on family commitments and the commutable distance of respective universities, or as a minority of participants indicated, where they

considered they would best 'fit in'. A sense of 'belonging' is recognised as important when choosing a university (Moriarty et al., 2009). Conversely, this phenomenon may provide further indication of the historical under-representation of students from less privileged backgrounds in pre-1992 universities, and their over-representation in post-1992 universities (the Dearing Report, 1997, DfES, 2003a).

Barriers to social work education were disproportionately evident among BME students, who were less likely than their white/other counterparts to be short-listed, or to secure social work education place after undergoing selection procedures at either pre-1992 or post-1992 universities. A minority of these students failed to secure places on either vocational or non-vocational degree programmes. Explanations for these disparities included perceptions of ethnocentricity and eurocentricity resulting in racial bias during selection, illustrated by one tutor, who considered that the animated communication of BME students within a group context was sometimes misconstrued as aggression. More broadly, the restricted educational opportunities and career choices of BME students were as a result of them having limited economic, social and cultural capital.

Other obstacles reported by the course tutors included deficiencies in key skills in mathematics and/or English. This was particularly the case where English was a second or third language and for those with limited previous academic attainment; for example, students making the leap from NVQ to 'A' level equivalent courses such as the access course. Issues with key skills development was also found among a minority of black African students who already had first degrees awarded overseas. The barriers that these issues presented for entry to social work education were considered by the course tutors to have intensified since the implementation of the DH entry requirements for social work training, and the increased emphasis by government now placed on key skills development and employability (DfWP, 2007). Comments from two course tutors reflect current tensions associated with entry to social work education:

...it's more difficult. I mean we get some universities that won't shortlist candidates – one in particular that I won't name – but we get one, but not just this one, they won't short-list for social work, but then without even seeing them they'll offer them straight psychology or sociology or social policy, but they won't offer interviews for social work (College A Course Tutor – White British male).

Yes definitely [more difficult], due to the competition again. Well for social work more than nursing. Nursing in terms of... they're still getting in, but social work, it's quite difficult to get in (College B Course tutor – African Caribbean female).

Other obstacles revealed by course tutors related to the general impact of social disadvantages over the life course, and the demands of the access course, which proved insurmountable for some students, reflected in high attrition rates among the three access courses. The 'A' level equivalent standards of access course have to be met in generally half the time taken for traditional 'A' levels. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the course proved too much for some students, especially as many were combining study with employment and family commitments. However, those remaining on the courses were frequently striving against 'the odds' to fulfil their education and career ambitions.

Motivations for social work

Wanting to make a difference and a passion for working with people were strong motivating factors for students' choice of career. Several students were employed within social care and wanted additional responsibility and professional power to be able to make more of a difference to service users. This desire led to growing aspirations over time and frustration with current limited career opportunities. Cumulatively, the awareness accrued from previous work experience, and the knowledge and understanding gained from undertaking the access course, translated into students having increased determination and self-confidence to pursue their education and career aspirations.

Similar to Hodkinson et al. (1996), students' education and career decision-making was influenced by 'structural', 'self-initiated' or 'forced' *turning points*. Structural inequalities linked to poverty, and compounded by the interplay of ethnicity, gender and class, formed the catalyst in the 'self-initiated' education and careers decisions of the majority of the students; demonstrated by efforts students made to improve their material conditions, and in a desire to make a difference to those experiencing similar or other adverse socio-economic circumstances. It was evident that earlier 'forced' inhibitory factors such as lack of qualifications and adverse social circumstances had prevented an earlier prioritisation of the self or a focus on self-development. Whilst 'primary' *turning points*, such as time spent in care during childhood were significant, it was often the more cumulative effects of what the author terms 'secondary' *turning points*

occurring at later points in the life cycle that had the most impact on shaping self-identity, dispositions and students trajectories. Students who had, for example, been refugees and experienced racism on arrival to the UK were particularly sensitive to personal suffering and social problems in society and were strongly motivated to support and alleviate suffering in others, as the following quote illustrates:

Initially I was just hoping to get a degree of any discipline. Em, but the fact is that I focused back on my...where I come from, the problems of my families, friends and I faced. I thought oh social work is the best programme I should do. Em and yes, once I qualify to be a social worker, I think I would help not just myself but many other people (Alanda – Black African male student).

These findings suggest that career decision-making is a highly reflexive process and that students' trajectories are influenced by a multitude of factors relating to key experiences occurring over the life course. However, it is these very experiences that one of the course tutors considered make these students a valuable future asset to the social work profession because of insights accrued, and the more advanced empathy skills likely to be demonstrated when working with service users, carers, and communities.

Counterbalances to social inequalities

Supportive learning cultures were important in counteracting social disadvantages experienced by the students. In addition to academic and pastoral support, one tutor in particular played a significant role in raising the career aspirations of black African students who had come to the UK with limited understanding of the distinctions between social care and social work. Two of the tutors coming from BME backgrounds themselves also provide an indication of the importance of having teachers from a range of different backgrounds. Such teachers may have an enhanced understanding of what the issues are for students from similar social backgrounds, and may also provide important role models (Cropper, 2000). Informal support structures formed among the student body were also an important source of emotional and academic support, particularly when students were struggling academically and during times of personal crisis. The value of this kind of support is recognised as important for students (see Jones, 2006; Moriarty et al., 2009), but especially for those from less privileged backgrounds.

Discussion

The study has illustrated the multifaceted trajectories of BME students and social inequalities that translated into structural and situational barriers to HE entry. Hence, in this context, "...black achievement [can be seen as] a triumph over the odds, a victory over struggle" (Edwards & Polite, 1992, p. 3). In terms of students motivation for social work, whilst these are consistent with those reported in the literature, the value of unique experiences and the particular insights and understandings gained from these over the life course are perhaps less fully appreciated. However, when linking these unique experiences to social work education's fundamental gate-keeping role, the key challenge is deciphering and determining which personal experiences and qualities provide evidence of suitability or, conversely, unsuitability for social work.

Suggestions for assessing personal suitability for social work were made in an earlier paper (Dillon, 2007), including the development of admissions criteria drawing upon research evidence on what qualities and skills service users and carers deem most important in social workers (e.g. honesty and 'warmth') and written suitability guidance for social work programmes. The General Social Care Council (GSCC), the regulatory body for social work, has since developed and issued such guidance to all English social work programmes (GSCC, 2007). Interview techniques involving probing techniques were also recommended and would permit an in-depth exploration of candidates' social context through specific questioning about their social backgrounds, related experiences, how they have made sense of these, and what has been learnt from these experiences. Interviewers from a range of different social backgrounds including service users, carers and practice assessors would also minimise the potential for ethnocentricity, eurocentricity and racial bias; in addition to reducing the risk of "selecting and rewarding in one's own image", referred to within psychology as the "similarity-attraction effect" (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). Furthermore, the GSCC should consider introducing an additional reference to the one stipulated by UCAS. This practice reference, would require someone who knows the candidate in a professional capacity to provide evidence of their personal suitability for social work; that is, 'softer skills' (e.g. patience, sensitivity, honesty and tolerance), and professional conduct indicators such as, punctuality, reliability and "coherence of communication and the

ability to engage purposefully and respectfully with others” (Curren, 2009, p. 1488). Whilst research illustrates that non-academic skills are the best indicator of whether or not a student will make a good social worker (Ryan et al., 2006), it is recognised, that such qualities have to be balanced with the academic requirements for social work. However, as the study has illustrated, social work educators need to be mindful that not all students operate within an unequal social and economic playing field and that they develop at different rates over the life course. Thus, on the basis of equity, to counter issues of credentialism and to prevent widening participation from being compromised – especially in a context of high demand for places – the UCAS tariff system, used for allocating points to qualifications for entry to HE, should be abolished for social work programmes. A more equitable system would be to simply require applicants to have 2 ‘A’ levels at grade ‘C’, or above, or ‘A’ level equivalent qualifications, and to also assess current competency in mathematics and English through examination, whilst also giving equal consideration to the assessment of non-academic qualities. This would also address the academic/vocational divide reported in the literature because courses such as access courses would have equal merit to ‘A’ levels.

Conclusion

Social work educators have to ensure as far as possible that the students they train are academically and professionally competent by the time the doors to the academy close behind them. They are also at liberty, in line with principles of social justice, not to further disadvantage applicants that are already disadvantaged. An understanding and respect for the unique and individual social context of individuals, and key life course developments considerations, are central to this commitment. A holistic assessment of applicants’ potential, not just at the point of entry, but over the duration of the qualifying degree would help in this endeavour, as would reference to Winnicott’s concept of “good enough” (Winnicott, 1953) when assessing academic potential at the pre-entry stage. Reflexivity among social work educators is also an essential criterion when making selection decisions. Finally, and most importantly, service users, carers and communities benefit from having social workers with an understanding of their *also* unique social contexts.

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