

Abstract

The thesis is a study of black professionals' and black students' experiences in white welfare organisations and higher education institutions. The focus of the research is on the interaction between macro and micro problems, with a stress on the micro issues and an approach that fits well within a person-in-environment perspective.

Drawing on action research methods it explores the following questions:

1. *How do we as black professionals and black students construct our experiences as we interact with and in white welfare agencies and academia?*
2. *As black professionals and black students what are some of the ways in which our experiences contribute to our perception and interaction with each other?*
3. *As a black lecturer what contributions do I make to black students' experiences? Is my practice experienced as empowering?*

The underlying principle running through the research and the writing in this thesis is that it was not a study done *on* or *about* black people but research that was done *with* black people, writing stories that emanated *from* our experiences. It was important that the research methodology chosen challenged oppression rather than perpetuated it and, within this frame, there were a few inquiry cycles used to obtain information and a variety of ways in which the information was generated; I

- Inquired into my personal history and work experience to show how my values as an educator and a change agent had been constructed.
- Collaborated with black professionals and black students using co-operative inquiry to generate stories of our experiences in welfare agencies and higher education.
- Tested information gathered from the co-operative inquiry with a group of co-researchers, who participated in that inquiry, and generated dialogues about issues from the research and about issues of validity.
- Used action inquiry into my practice as a social work lecturer. I explored whether I live out my values of empowerment in practice with black students and discovered ways in which I could improve my practice.
- Inquired into my experiences of writing for the academic world and held dialogues with students about their experiences of writing academic assignments.

The theoretical basis of the literature chosen for making sense of the material gathered supported the values of equality, anti-oppression, empowerment, wholeness, transformation and social change. I drew, therefore, on theories of liberation, particularly critical theory, black feminist perspectives and a black perspective framework; theories on personal development and change; Gestalt theory and systemic thinking.

Black professionals' and black students' voices have been absent from mainstream debate. I have, therefore, included in the thesis some voices of black professionals and black students, which are represented in stories of personal and professional experiences. The societal and organisational realities of racism provide the life experiences of black professionals and black students that results in us having multiple external and internal stressors which create complex interactions and sometimes fragile relationships. Some of the stories in the thesis provide details of such interactions and relationships.

Revealed in the thesis are areas of black experience, which involved other participants and myself in a process of "self-disclosure" and self-reflection. This led to disclosures and reflections upon the place of the self in the development of ideas and to setting up and doing research, which included the building of research relationships, the process of sensemaking and writing of the research text. It also offers ideas for a liberated pedagogy for black students.