Chapter 1

Locating myself as the Inquirer

Introduction

I shall begin with an introduction of myself to give the reader a sense of who I am, my values and how they inform my inquiries and my self development as a researcher. During the course of undertaking this research I have become aware of ways in which my values about education have been shaped by my early childhood experiences. I have witnessed how my educational and work experiences have shaped my political values. Education has been and still is very important to me and I have always seen myself as a political person seeking to bring about change where necessary. During my research I became curious about how as an agent in history the social, cultural and political context in which I lived informed my values and influenced my thoughts and actions. I do not believe that it is by accident that I have chosen to do my research with a group of people who have been given little power in welfare organisations, educational institutions and in society and have actively sought a methodology which allows for some sharing of power.

I have, therefore, inquired into the ways in which I have gained access to prior and present learning and experiences in order to derive insights which have assisted me in coming to terms with my own approach to learning, researching and facilitating change. Consequently, the writings in this chapter are a representation of my personal, biographical explorations. The biographical explorations are about what influenced me as a researcher to make sense of the world in the way that I do; what is behind the theories, explanations, the analysis and the concepts that I use in my research.

In the process of constructing my biography, I recaptured past educational, work and political experiences without too much interpretation and looked for ideas of development and connections with my current intellectual and research interests. I presented a description of current interests and feelings about them. The aim was to illuminate the present and future rather than just events of the past. There I sought to tell my stories about myself, the world I inhabited and show how these were social constructions that have influenced my perspectives and shaped my meanings and values.

There is a strong argument, which says that it is important to acknowledge personal experience, in terms of your location in society, as a lens through which you make sense of the world and reshape existing knowledge. Also, looking at the personal within a wider context reveals some of the strengths and weaknesses, which any individual may bring to negotiations within the research process. I, therefore, asked myself what I was bringing to my research. How did my experiences influence my research interests? Is there a professional power behind which the individual researcher can hide? As I considered my professional power I became interested in the relationship

between knowledge and power, how my knowledge became constructed, what type of knowledge did I value? How do I use my knowledge to empower black people to change? As a black social scientist I am often forced to recognise sociological knowledge to make it work for my experience. For me, it is black peoples' direct experience of the everyday world that is the necessary starting point for developing an alternative knowledge. The same argument could be applied to other oppressed or marginalised groups. So what was my direct experiencing of my everyday world?

I believe that the inclusion of autobiographies in the research text is one way in which the researcher cannot hide and their direct experiences can be revealed, as autobiographical writing offers the researcher an opportunity to write the whole context of her research life. Molloy (1991) notes that autobiography "is always a representation, that is, a retelling, since the life to which it is supposedly refers is already a kind of narrative construct. Life is always, necessarily, a tale" (p.5). The retelling of a life through autobiographical writing is another method of creating field texts that capture "a tension between self and others, of generating a reflection on the fluctuating place of the subject within its community"(p.9). I was, therefore, interested in constructing my autobiography as a way of fleshing out the research and as an aid to understanding the range of experiences, which contribute to my development. My aim is to reveal, describe, and interpret my past experience in order to illuminate the present and make manifest the potentials of the future.

Like many people, especially black people and women, I can't represent my life in a linear way, but more as a mosaic or patchwork of experiences and understandings picked up and added to or picked up and dropped, or picked up later, with certain themes running through. Also, it is possible to make sense of this patchwork in different ways. I can make sense as a black woman, as an activist, as an academic, as a researcher/writer, as a learner, as a member of a particular generation, as a mother. I will use some, not all, of these identities here. One obvious place to begin is with my education. In particular, I asked

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How has my schooling shaped my ideology about teaching, learning, writing, knowledge and education?

I was born in the beautiful, Caribbean Island of Grenada, in a working class family. I lived in Grenada until the age of twelve, going on thirteen, so that all of my primary education and the first year of my secondary education took place there. I went to school at a very early age. From age seven upwards was a significant time in my life. I remember being selected by the headmaster to be tutored and groomed for taking the island scholarship examinations. This was equivalent to the 11+ exam and he started the process early with children like me, whom he considered to be bright enough. As a result I felt privileged, special and fortunate, and those feelings have run through various aspects of my life. I remember, as a child, enjoying the attention and the specialness that being selected brought with it. It also

brought with it high visibility, being in the public view and having a high profile in the school. These certainly have continued to be themes in my life.

My tutoring was very formal and traditionally english. Knowledge was shared in ways that reinscribed colonialism and domination (hooks, 1994). Like most colonial countries the stress was on what Heron (1992) refers to as "propositional knowledge". Heron describes this as knowing in conceptual terms; we learn to master concepts and knowledge by descriptions of an entity, place, process or thing. This type of knowledge is expressed in statements, theories and formulas. That was the valued form of knowing in my school. As pupils, we were recipients of packaged knowledge, transferred to us by our teachers. The teacher stood at the front of the class with a long stick, pointing to the blackboard whilst he imparted the knowledge. We did not have the economic means to purchase books in abundance so as pupils we had to share. Therefore, there was a heavy reliance on getting the information from the blackboard. This process Freire (1978) argues reduces us to "mere "incidents" of the "educational" action of the educators" (p.43).

Vaill (1996) calls the model of teaching and learning I was subjected to *institutional learning.* I was 'other directed' in the sense that my attention was directed to issues and subjects, which were outside of myself, that were defined by authority figures, particularly the headmaster. I was encouraged to expect that the teacher would provide clear relevance of the material to be learned. This was particularly encouraged among scholarship pupils, as the grooming had to relate to the material needed for passing. In that way, learning was goal orientated (Vaill,1996). There was an assumption that the learner would value the reward, and I did.

I valued the potential of the publicity and, in turn, 'specialness' that attaining an island scholarship brought. Consequently, I wanted to please those in control by working extra hard to possess new knowledge in volume in order to get the right answers. This process Freire (1978) refers to as the "banking system" of education, in which I engaged in an acceleration of the process of learning that was about "transferring " of knowledge because "there was no time to lose". I read books, which presented knowledge which was finished, already concluded. Nearing the time for scholarship examinations the teachers would also accelerate the process and engaged in transferring knowledge as if the school was a market place. They became specialists who sold knowledge to learners who purchased and "consumed" the knowledge (Freire, 1978). They did not engage in the dynamic nature of knowledge and they did not encourage dialogue. Whatever was taught had to be comprehended and processed very quickly. There was little attention paid to lengthy explanations to ensure understanding. There was an assumption that if you were bright then you should be able to grasp information at a fast rate and be able to retrieve it when needed at the same rate.

<u>What did it cost me to learn in those ways?</u>

I found the experience a lonely and painful one. There was a price to pay for wanting to be a high achiever. I became nervous and stressed because my

thinking was dominated by the standards of the system and became fearful and obsessive about my performance in the learning situation. The fear led to feats of intense studying. I suffered a lonely life of learning that was a relatively private process. The loneliness was compounded by the competition that was introduced in the classroom by the headmaster, who instigated competition between another boy and myself. In our normal class, at examination or assessment time, we competed for first or second place. It was on the basis of these results that we would be selected to join the 'special' group which was groomed for their scholarship and what were considered to be common entrance examinations into high schools, the equivalent of grammar schools. My real worth was tested during these highly competitive years.

Vaill argues that institutional learning assumes that competition among learners is good for learning. This produces feelings of inferiority in the learner. I remembered feeling disempowered at times, that I was not bright enough, certainly not as clever as the others were in that scholarship group. Some of us internalised such oppression which resulted in self-depreciation so that we believed we knew nothing, were good for nothing, were incapable of learning and became convinced that we were not good enough. We called ourselves ignorant and said that the teacher was the only one who had the knowledge and to whom we should listen. I found it difficult to stay with knowing that I too "knew things" I had learned in my relationship with the world and with others. I distrusted myself and lacked confidence in my knowing. This particular experience may have some connections with a present theme in my life of feeling 'not good enough' when I write for academic purposes.

As a consequence of these feelings of disempowerment and lack of confidence, I behaved tentatively, and with caution and became more and more dependent on those in authority. I suppressed the here-and-now feelings in anticipation of future successes. Vaill (1996) describes these characteristics as "a person who is not yet an authentic being but is going to try to learn as the means to becoming an authentic being, a real person (p.39). Striving for authenticity has certainly been a theme in my life and I work hard as a teacher to facilitate others to also strive for integrity and authenticity, for authentic representations of their culture. My colonial system of education has contributed to such values.

This colonial system of education could not help but re-produce in children colonial ideology namely that of feeling inferior beings, lacking in all ability and our only solution was to become "white" by learning from "white" books with "white" learning methods and, some of us, becoming "black with white souls". The system was not concerned with authentic representation of the peoples' nationality – our history, culture or language; culture belonged only to the colonisers and this was transmitted through the banking system of education.

Within the banking system of education I was transformed into a 'receiving object', with my thinking and actions controlled and my creativity inhibited. Consequently, until the last five years, I was highly developed in and valued

propositional knowledge, paying little attention to the value of presentational knowledge - imagery, stories and other creative ways of presenting knowledge (Heron, 1992). My power was in my ability to theorise. This has in-built contradictions, given that I grew up in a culture that values presentational ways of knowing; the telling of stories and parables. In my personal experience, stories were told at home while propositional learning was the domain of the school. Here was the evidence of white supremacy prevailing in a colonial education system in which a particularly rigid and traditional version of the British educational system dominated in Caribbean schools. The two different forms of knowing were kept separate.

How did that educational and colonial ideology prevailed in my secondary education and how did I cope?

A significant time in my early education was when I migrated to Britain at the age of twelve to live with two parents and my experiences of racism in the British education system. My first real encounter of racism was at my interview for secondary school. I was given a spelling and mental arithmetic test by the headmistress as a means of allocating me to a stream. I answered all the questions correctly, but was later told that she would try me out in the 'B' stream to see how I coped. I remembered feeling unhappy about it but my parents did not question the decision. I suppose my parents were grateful that I was accepted in a school. Like most Caribbean parents at the time, they were unfamiliar with the education system. They were also coming from an experience in the Caribbean where the teachers were always considered to be right. Teachers, there, were given the greatest amount of respect for their professional status; they were believed and trusted. My parents, like many other Caribbean parents at the time, extended that same unquestionable trust to this headmistress and this system.

I settled in the secondary modern school, after that day of extreme disappointment. There I was, having always been told I was a clever child and having been treated with respect (selected for one of the top schools on the Island), a big fish in a small pond, having to accept that here in Britain I was a small fish in a big pond. I was being told that I was not bright enough for the 'A' stream. I was very hurt. I suppressed my tears that day and began to believe that I was not good enough. I worked hard for two years in the 'B'' stream and did well both in class work and in examinations. My performance and achievement pattern remained the same as before coming to Britain. I worked hard believing that at the end of the second year my abilities would become evident and I would be moved up to the 'A' stream. But that was not to be. Instead, I was subjected to further experiences of racism.

Halfway through the second year, my performance in examinations was outstanding in many of the subjects, so I went to the form mistress and asked whether I was going to move to the higher stream. She told me (and I shall

always remember those words) that I needed to stay in the 'B' stream to set an example and pace for others less able, for others to aspire to and feel motivated by. I was further disappointed. Yet again my true abilities were not acknowledged or recognised.

These experiences were set against a culture in the school which was influenced by the headmistress, who was renowned for being racist and treating black girls less favourably. Black children were not encouraged to take GCE merely the lower level CSE, and were not allocated senior positions in the school such as those of head girl or prefect. Our way of coping and staying motivated in the face of what was a racist regime, was to form informal friendship networks which were based on some similarities and to form a support group in which we asserted our black identity and raised our awareness on black issues. Most of us had similar backgrounds, having come from the Caribbean to join hardworking parents who had a goal, purpose and function. For some their intentions were economic, making money and returning to their country of origin. Some of us had had similar schooling experiences in the Caribbean, where the emphasis was on the ability to store and retrieve information when needed. Others had had primary school experiences in Britain. Nevertheless, we all shared in common the importance of education and schooling and we all wanted to do well and were encouraged in this by our families.

The strategy of forming a black group and asserting our identity was supported by global events, coupled with a change in leadership in the school. Both the head and deputy head changed and these gave us opportunities for learning that we did not experience before including taking ‘O’ and ‘A’ levels. This was all happening during the time of the Civil rights Movement when black people in America and, to some extent, in Britain as well, were asserting their black identity. I remembered the English teacher introducing into her English lesson tape recordings of Malcolm X and speeches by George Jackson and the class having political discussions. A range of books and pamphlets pertaining to oppression was introduced. The teacher exposed us to a new experience, a new way of learning and, more importantly, she acknowledged and valued our experiences as black girls and allowed these experiences to be expressed in the classroom. Our presence was felt and we were engaged in consciousness raising and the development of a self-definition, which encompassed a positive black identity.

This was an important time in my education in terms of confidence in my abilities and my interest in world issues and oppression. It began with my introduction to 'O' level sociology and continued with the 'A' level and, more importantly, with what I was learning about the history of the British Empire. Here, my understanding of colonialism and slavery developed. The history teacher and sociology teachers were women who were deeply interested in what they were teaching as well as being good teachers. They brought the subjects alive in the room and they acknowledged that we were a part of the events and experiences that were being talked about. The subjects were taught from a socio-political standpoint and with passion. I was fully engaged

in this teaching with my mind, body and spirit. I learnt then, in the words of bell hooks, that "no education is politically neutral".

What part did my experiences of higher education play in furthering this ideology?

Unfortunately, during my first-degree studies I was subjected to a traditional form of higher education in which the prevailing pedagogical model was authoritarian and hierarchical. The voice of the lecturers was the transmitter of knowledge. The four years were spent in lectures and seminars and little attention was paid to experiential and holistic learning. Personal experiences were devalued; there was no room for them in seminar discussions. There were strict rules about the inclusion of the "personal" in essay writing. I began then to distance myself from my writing.

My most significant experience was my introduction to a Marxist perspective. I was exposed to some good thinkers and lecturers and to the rich and developing ideas in the early 70's. I was intellectually eager and thirsty for new ideas. I learned about the class struggle and I had to make sense of the debate as part of a world I experienced on that level but not on the level of race. Race linked to class was missing.

These were formative and important years. First of all Marxism was the first theory that I learned in an academic way. I later went on to learn about it in a non-academic way, through my political activities. I learned it not as a set of abstract ideas but as a theory which applied both to history and to the everyday events around me; not only the political events but the social, cultural and creative events too. It seemed to allow me to make sense of so much for which, up till then, I had only discrete and partially absorbed understandings. It also gave me the conceptual tools to evaluate much (though not all) as I came to realise, of life.

Like some of that generation of immigrant children I was the first in my family to experience higher education. I felt I had to be a role model for the others in my family to follow. I was also grateful for the investment that my family had made in my education so far, making huge sacrifices. Looking around me, and witnessing the poverty and oppression black people were subjected to, I decided that education was my way out. I chose to further my knowledge in order to equip myself at a theoretical and academic level to be more effective in bringing about change. I elected to do a part-time Masters degree course in Organisational Behaviour at Birkbeck College. I was the only black person and it was here that I developed, further, my interest in feminism and its relevance to black women. I did this with the support of my tutor who was a white feminist. Practically, personally and politically, feminism reached parts that other theories couldn't. Feminist writings and activities also sharpened my understanding of social welfare issues, social justice, oppression of women and of other marginalised groups in society.

My tutor took an interest in my work and supported me in bringing my voice into a large room full of white, male managers, businessmen and a handful of

white, female personnel officers. In my written work, she encouraged me to integrate my experiences as a black woman of working with the black women. It was also about that time that I developed an interest in becoming a teacher and trainer in my own right.

Reflecting on my experiences of secondary and higher education, I recognised themes that emerged and became developed in my later life. One such theme is valuing black support groups and consciousness raising groups as a useful strategy for coping with racism and valuing my ongoing involvement in them, either as a direct participant or as a group consultant, helping to make them work. My secondary education and higher education have also been of great significance in my later life because of the self-development, which took place then and my abiding interest in teaching and learning across traditional boundaries. Teachers, who had the courage to integrate politics in their teaching, transform their classroom and not confine me to my place in an academic assembly line, have inspired me. These teachers responded to the uniqueness of the students and so affirmed my value as a unique human being and that has contributed to my valuing of other forms of knowledge, subjective knowledge, knowledge that is gained from critical subjectivity. It has informed my interest in the politics of learning, which involves working with experiences, which may emerge as a result of our identity, and position in society.

What other influences shaped my thinking about oppression emanating from racism and sexism?

Here, I turn to some of my work and my experiences as a community/political activist. I took jobs which afforded me the opportunity to develop further my political interest in attempting to change structural inequalities. My first job was with Hackney Council for Racial Equality as a Community Relations Officer, where my campaigning activities and community action programmes began in, what was considered, a highly deprived inner city borough.

I continued to work with the Community Relations Council, as it was about the only organisation that was actively campaigning against the atrocities against black people. It was also seen to be trying to meet our needs and make a change. I wanted to continue to contribute to bring about some change and I took a job in Lambeth, a densely populated inner city borough, with a large black population. This job provided me with knowledge and experience of women's' issues and, in particular, black women's issues. It was then that my interest in feminism deepened and I initiated, set up and ran a project for black, single parents. This exposed to me the lack of public provision to meet the needs of black, single parents who were my main clients. I found, as well, that the poverty, isolation and poor housing conditions that some of their children were subjected to was shocking, intolerable and affecting their mental health. They were seeing themselves as victims and in some ways they were victims.

I wanted to help them to see themselves as agents in their lives and not victims. So, together, we mounted campaigns against the then Department of

Health and Social Security and the Housing Department. This resulted in the Health Department and Housing Department injecting resources into a housing project, which I set up for young, single parents and teenage, pregnant girls as a semi-independent home and support service.

Political Activist: Campaigning

During that time and for most of the1980's, I, along with many other black women, was involved in revolutionary politics. Our lives were a seamless web of intensely dedicated activities and duties for 'the cause'- the fight against racism. Our work, our politics, our leisure all overlapped to become scarcely distinguishable from each other. The routines of working late, preparing radical pamphlets and leaflets on race issues - education, housing, immigration laws - for distribution on council estates, giving seminars, running workshops, organising rallies and protest marches all merged into one. We were driven by certainty that we were contributing towards socially transforming history. We may not have been the central agents of this, for these were the organised black groups, but we were prepared to put all our intellectual and organisational skills (which were considerable) to, as we believed, their benefit.

My involvement in feminist and black politics helped me to help black women to transform their lives. I became aware not only of the centrality of welfare provision in black women's lives but also of how we needed to take seriously peoples' experiences of the way the state and welfare agencies treated us as black women.

Feminist analysis and anti-racist campaigns threw new light on how I understood the welfare state because they revealed some of the sexist and racist underpinnings of provisions. They also exposed the hidden contribution women and black people were making to the welfare state through caring and caring work.

There were also significant differences in the way women experienced their oppression and I was part of the challenge to the so-called 'false universalism' of sisterhood. It was clear that the nature of the contradictions of welfare were different for different groups of women and these needed spelling out.

I was also one of the radical thinkers, who took the essentialist standpoint in terms of black or ethnic or cultural arguments about separate education and welfare provisions. One of the intellectual responses to this has been to develop social construction theories; this applies to other areas like age, disability and sexual orientation. The danger here is that you can end up actually failing to acknowledge biological/physical/cultural differences when they do have significance. Later, my position shifted from essentialism; I felt it was important not to deny differences but rather to emphasise that their significance is conditional upon the social and material conditions in which they exist. Also, once you begin to explore questions of 'race' and racism in relation to welfare development, you get into a different analytical ball-game,

because you need to understand welfare in terms of the changing nature of imperialism and the international movement of migrant labour.

Building Alternative Structures:

Another important influence on me in the 1980's was my involvement in a training centre (Charlton Training Centre) where I was a Training Manager. This was a centre with a difference, which made a difference. This large skill centre was set up to provide manual and other skills training for groups who were experiencing structural oppression. We brought under one umbrella, groups representing black people, women, the disabled, older people and gay and lesbian people. We were a mixed group of both black and white people. This was a fascinating experience which increased my desire to contribute towards political change.

In the course of trying to get new forms of provision established, I became more committed to the idea that relationships between users and providers or working structures did not have to be hierarchical and bureaucratic. I, therefore, set about the search for alternative structures of working that would allow for more equal opportunities. I designed a quasi-co-operative structure. Being part of the voluntary sector I was afforded the flexibility to experiment. This was definitely the biggest challenge of my work life, because here I really understood the complexities of how power operated. We were challenging all the 'isms', and that came with its problems.

Thompson (1993) looks at three different levels when analysing power and oppression: the 'P' level, which stands for personal, the 'C' for cultural and the 'S' for structural. At the Centre, we took on the responsibility of being aware of inequality, discrimination and oppression at all three levels. On the personal level, we paid attention to the potential for prejudice; on the cultural level, we had to be aware of shared ways of seeing, thinking and doing, and of the differences between these; on the structural level we had to become aware of the impact of broader social forces and policies on oppression. This was a tough responsibility and resulted in problems, at times, which centred on naming and managing differences.

For some, it was difficult to name differences in their identity groups. On an inter-group level they were able to be aware of differences but on an intra-group level it proved more difficult. What makes it difficult to name differences? The tendency for people to search for commonalties is very strong and there is a desire to feel connected. But this desire can have adverse consequences if it leads to a 'colour blind' approach, where differences are ignored. In these circumstances, people who are seen as members of an out–group are assimilated, but the cost of such assimilation is dear and includes the loss of social identities. It is, therefore, important that differences are named and that the power differentials are recognised.

Placing emphasis on oppression is not without its dangers. Perhaps the most significant of these is the risk of heightening weaknesses at the expense of

strengths. This, in itself, can be oppressive and feel patronizing. We needed to guard against naming and valuing differences in a sentimental way.

During our struggles, we also became inward looking and became engaged in what I would describe as hierarchies of oppression. Each identity group had personal and social biographies that were unique to them. Yet there were characteristics of their biographies that made them feel similar to some people and different from others. There were characteristics, which were relatively visible, and ones which were invisible. Some people felt that the groups with the more visible characteristics were the more powerful ones. Members of that group felt they were most oppressed, and it became a competitive game of "which is the most oppressed, the straight black man or the gay white woman? the older white woman or the young black youth?" Some groups felt that their needs were greater than those of other groups, and at times of scarce resources, competition and anger reigned. In our attempts to provide a safe space for groups who experience multiple oppression we inadvertently created an unsafe space.

Other issues centred on needs, rights and availability of scarce resources. As more and more of these groups gained their voice, developed their skills and confidence, the more they demanded. Some of the demands were unrealistic, others were outside the realm of the project. They felt they had the right to make their demands and they were right. Here was a project that was offering them something they had not had before, something precious "their voice", and they used it. We had to help them to channel that voice into the community. I left thinking you could be, indeed was important to be, an ‘ist’ with all your heart and soul, but you shouldn’t let ‘ism’ rule you. It might provide the guidelines but it should not rule you.

Coming out of the cold

Towards the mid 80’s I came in from the margins, in from the cold, and into mainstream. Mainstream, in this context, meant going into the social fabric of the organisation of society itself and risking being assimilated. I took a job as a Training Officer in a large social services department in an inner city borough, whose population consisted of a fair number of black communities. This local authority was taking initiatives to give black people equal opportunities in their organisation and had a positive action progamme in operation. I ran the programme for secondment into professional training, which was part of the positive action initiative. I gave opportunities to mature, unqualified social workers, who were mainly women, and to black staff to get professional training as social workers. I had opportunities, with this work, to interact with universities and colleges of higher education.

These experiences, as it turned out, were my passport to my present job. Armed with training, and teaching skills and knowledge gained from direct practice as a trainer, manager and community social worker and an academic background in Organisations and Management I went deeper into mainstream in 1987 moving into the social fabric of higher education. I began my life as a social work lecturer with West London Institute of Higher Education - WLIHE

(now called Brunel University College). This resulted in me struggling with an assimilative process and I am still engaged with the struggle twelve years later.

I chose WLIHE because it was seen to be making efforts to challenge racism. It had an 'access' course, which gave opportunities to black people who were previously disadvantaged by the education system, to develop educational skills to gain entry to our social work course. I liked its ideology, which supported and gave opportunities to mature, women and black students. That complemented my ideology and I felt it would give me an opportunity to further my work as a political change agent. It was no accident that I chose to teach on a social work course with a large black student population, and my political commitment to challenging oppression and discrimination, to bringing about opportunities for change on that course continues.

What sense can I make of my experiences of education and work and political activities in relation to my personal and professional identity and my research?

On reflection, I can see that I have chosen jobs which have been diverse and have involved me in progressive politics. I stayed close to the margin by concentrating on work with people whom society kept in the margin. I realized the limitations and constraints of being in the margin and the jobs in Lambeth Social Services and WLIHE brought me into mainstream. They also offered opportunities for experiencing working with diversity in mainstream settings.

I have always been a change agent engaged in political change at all levels. I sought to empower at the level of activity, concentrating on structural, political action. In my later years, and presently, I am engaged in teaching and learning that views the personal as political - the integration of self, consciousness raising/self-knowledge/self-definition as well as change at the macro level. This, integration is evident from the fact that I have since trained as a psychotherapist. This in some ways, is a change in direction, but complementary to the skills and experience I already possess to enable the integration of the inner and outer world. My research interest, in exploring the experiences of black students and professionals in welfare organisations, also seeks to do so. My own sense of my personal power has come via these routes and I believe that it is essential that change occur at all levels for true empowerment.

My hope is to share my ways of coping, knowing, thriving and surviving with those black students and professionals I come in contact with. It is evident to me, from my biography and experiences of teaching black students, that there are some similarities in experiences between a number of black students and myself in terms of our relationship to education. I, too, look for safety, look for my presence to be acknowledged, have issues about being told I am not good enough. Nevertheless, I have gone on to take up opportunities where they existed, to recognise support from a variety of quarters when it was offered, and to transform some of my negative experiences into positives. Part of that

transformation came about as a consequence of personal work on an intrapsychic level to help heal the damage done to my psyche (hooks 1994).

As an intellectual, I operate from a political base of struggle gained through my experiences of schooling in Britain and my political activity in the black community, work with black single parents, the black elderly, black students and professionals in welfare organisations. The range of experiences have sought to inform my relationship, according to bell hooks "to those black people who have not had access to ways of knowing shared in locations of privilege" (hooks 1994).

My relationship to my research has been informed by these experiences. My position, in epistemological terms, reveals that my early education valued 'facts' and 'proofs' and was laced with positivist views of life and the world. I emerged into adulthood with an element of naïve certainty, arising from a combination of youthful enthusiasm and some political learning, gained at secondary school. As I began working and relating as an adult, immutable, context-free absolutes and notions of 'truth' looked increasingly suspect. The positivism that underpinned much of my early life experience no longer explained how I subsequently perceived things to be.

Disavowing empiricism in favour of socially constructed, relative realities was given further impetus as a direct result of my work experience, which only served to demonstrate the complex and political contextuality of people's lives. In terms of paradigm, the constructivist/critical theorists' and feminists' position more closely matches my current view of how the world might be. The emphasis those positions place on values and ethics in the research process felt especially appropriate to researching work with black people, about our lives.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) exhort novice inquirers who intend rooting their work in this paradigm to "understand the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender history and structure that serve as the surround for their inquiries, and to incorporate the values of altruism and empowerment in their work" (p115)

This advice points to the structural inequalities extant in our society which result in oppression and discrimination and presents the researcher with a challenge to acknowledge and deal with the power issues that inevitably arise in the research process. It seemed to me, then, that the research approach I wished to take was not one of searching for objective, immutable truth. But rather an approach that seeks some understanding of human experience in a manner that acknowledges my part in that process and that recognises the relative and constructed nature of reality.

In the last five years, since I have been engaged with my research, I have realised how conscious I have become of the ways in which I use my power as a teacher and facilitator. I have also developed personally, as a black woman, in relation to my ownership and use of power. Working with the inquiry groups in my research has brought into sharp focus my struggle to give up power. I have asked questions, which has resulted in inquiries into my

practice in the classroom and a summary of the result is revealed in Chapter 11 of this thesis.

Conclusion

So what does all this information tell us? As I stand back and look at it, the basic material is that of a black woman doing a Ph.D., who was married and is now a single parent with one teenage daughter; a practitioner, who acquired new skills and expertise and developed some confidence, goes from working on the margins as a political activist into the mainstream as a lecturer in a university. What power does this researcher have, this person who, on the whole, is very powerful? While I may not feel powerful at times, I do recognise that power is relative and that in different situations I am perceived in different ways.

At a personal level, those aspects of diversity with which I am familiar, age, sex, class, race and ethnicity and education, all have a part to play, especially when it comes to the relationship between status, skills and expertise. For my own part, as it has been my education, my political activities as a change agent, the importance attached to working in a university and the development of expertise which have been powerful tools.

Remembering this past, I am struck by my passionate commitment to a vision of social transformation, rooted in a fundamental belief in social justice. My notion of social change was not fancy. There was no post-modern, political theory shaping my actions. I was trying to assist people to change their everyday lives so that their values and habits of being would reflect a commitment to freedom. My major concerns then and now is ending racism and sexism.

In retrospect, I see that in the last few years I have been committed to freedom and justice for all, even though the way I lived out some of my values may have maintained the culture of domination. Therefore I had to re-examine my values and try to promote a vision of freedom. I also had to look at ways in which I use my strength to dominate rather than to empower and to see strength in vulnerability. I had to broaden my perspective in order to live differently and assist others to live differently.

The broadening of my perspective now includes theoretical ideas that have informed my worldview, my practice and my research. In the next chapter I shall present some of the ideas that shaped my thinking in the research.