

Chapter 11

Advocating a Critical Educative Approach

Introduction

In this chapter I am advocating an approach for working with black professionals and students which I term a Critical Educative Approach. The knowledge and experience that inform this approach were gained from the co-operative inquiry and from my action inquiry. My experience as a black teacher in a university and my general experience as a community educator and activist also inform the ideas underpinning this approach.

A critical educative approach is informed by assumptions and ongoing analysis of the impact of socio-cultural and socio-political factors on the presenting issues of black professionals and black students. This structuralist perspective is viewed as an integral component of their educative process. It stresses the need for a clear recognition of the social realities of racism and oppression and how they can operate to impact the experiences of black professionals and students. Different forms of oppression need to be understood as component parts of a whole system of domination, thereby incorporating a holistic perspective. This perspective offers a framework for understanding the social and psychological distress black professionals and black students endure as a result of racism and oppression; places an emphasis on identifying and building on the strengths of black professionals and students.

This proposed critical educative approach has the potential to inform and guide those working with black professionals and students, whom I shall refer to in this Chapter as practitioners, (meaning academics), researchers, teachers and other professionals, in bringing cultural and political realities into their work with black professionals and students. It also has the potential to assist black professionals and black students to challenge negative (societal) representations with an increased sense of self-identity and dignity.

I am not advocating the uniqueness of this approach, as it shares many elements of the theoretical models I advocated in Chapter 2. A black perspective and empowerment model together with a coherent critical theoretical framework which adopts both a model

which addresses power and oppression, and a model which views identities in multiple ways are already available in essence in the works of (Friere, 1972; hooks, 1981; Hall, 1992). An integration of these ideas is rooted in a critical educative approach. So the approach I am advocating can be conceptualised as an integrative framework which is not wedded to any specific theoretical or practice model. I have extracted from these, key concepts such as identity, empowerment, structuralist and holistic which I shall go on to discuss.

Identity and empowerment

One of the key goals of a critical, educative approach is to liberate the black professional and student to become the subject of his/her biography rather than a victim or rendered invisible in the “narrative” of others. In this sense, it takes on a perspective of identity and empowerment. Working with the notion of identity it is important to understand that black professionals and students are not uni-dimensional entities. The complexity of modern life requires us to assume different identities which may conflict as identities become diverse and change both in the social contexts in which they are experienced and in the symbolic systems through which we make sense of our positions.

We have ‘multiple identities’ in that not only are we black but also simultaneously male and female, mother and father, manager and worker, lecturer and student, practitioner and client, disabled – non-disabled, lesbian/gay or heterosexual (Derman-sparks, 1994). We bring these multiple identities to our relationships with one another and with the organisation. In our professional lives we may experience tensions between our different identities, when what is required by one may infringe upon the demands of another. In addition, each of us is potentially both oppressor and oppressed in that we may have attributes which carry power and privilege as well as attributes which render us oppressed. For example, black lecturers and black managers are in positions of both the oppressor and oppressed. We are in positions of privilege and power, by virtue of our status in educational institutions and organisations, as well as being discriminated against structurally as black people who are placed on the margins of these organisations and institutions. We are not marginal in the sense of being completely outside of the organisation. We are also inside the structure which makes us ‘beings for others’ (Friere, 1972).

We are at the centre, where power resides, and subject to being oppressors. As a consequence of internalised oppression we sometimes replay the fixed categories, fixed identities of oppressor-oppressed. 'The oppressor within' each of us can be said to be socially conditioned to 'act out' the oppression perpetrated upon us. Having gained some measure of power this can be power to oppress. Individuals inhabiting a space of dominance sometimes construct a sense of self through the denigration of 'others'. This thinking challenges idealistic notions that the experience of oppression automatically bestows insight, transferability of understanding or compassionate empathy with the suffering of others (McDonald and Coleman 1999).

If black professionals and black students are to be liberated to become subjects and to be visible it is important that the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is challenged not only in terms of white oppressor/black victim(s) but also in terms of black oppressor/black victim(s). We need to pay attention to the ways in which we oppress each other in our interactions. One way in which we can make sense of our interactive relationship as black professionals and black students is by working with the notion of *self* and *other*. "Self" in this context could be viewed as the coloniser or oppressor, and the idea of "other" is viewed as the colonised or oppressed.

I agree with Hall (1992) when he states that *self* and *other* are not fixed categories but should be seen as fluid. According to Fine (1994) these categories can be joined by a *hyphen* and we should examine that *hyphen*. If we adapt Fine's idea of '*working the hyphen*' and we examine the hyphen at which *self-other* join in the politics of everyday life, that is the hyphen which both separates and merges personal identities with our inventions of others, we will find blurred boundaries. In the hyphen sit for us many complexities, dilemmas, and contradictions (see appendix1). We need to investigate what is in between. Unearthing the blurred boundaries between is a critical task for us.

By "working the hyphen", I mean to suggest that professionals, practitioners, managers researchers should investigate how they act in relation to students, clients, workers, research participants etc., understanding that we are multiple in these relations and we bring to them multiple identities. We should work the hyphen, both when we interact with one another and when we opt to engage in social struggles with others who have been exploited or are having difficulty in sorting out their identity. The process might reveal far more about our '*selves*', and far more about the structures of '*othering*' and how, for example, we are prevented from truly meeting one another. Eroding the fixedness of

categories, allows each one of us to enter and play with the blurred boundaries that proliferate.

Working the hyphen means creating occasions for professionals to examine what is and is not “happening between”. So for interventions to be successful with black professionals and black students, practitioners should move towards perspectives which emphasise fostering multiple identities, which include a black identity, within a social, historical and black cultural context. Practitioners need to be attentive to fostering self-identity, dignity, and an integrated gender and racial identity when addressing social, psychological and political issues with black professionals and black students. An empowerment perspective and a culturally and oppression-sensitive approach to work with black professionals and students is also suggested. This may require the formation of relationships so that a discourse partnership can be realised and difference celebrated. We will need to take neither our own view nor the view of the other as being specially privileged but will need to enter into a genuine dialogue in which the various standpoints remain intact. This will require understanding of the experiences of black professionals and black students and an appreciation that anti-oppressive work needs to be placed in a broader context than the personal ‘I’.

Structuralist View integrated with a Holistic View

A commitment to diversity, anti-racism and anti-oppression needs to be viewed as part of a larger movement for social change designed to affect societal norms and institutions beyond the individual level. Effective service or intervention would, therefore, need to be about challenging the broader context that people live in, in order to change social structures at a number of levels. This requires us to take a holistic view, which means considering issues from both an interpersonal and structural perspective, whilst emphasising that the two are related. Individuals as well as institutions can perpetuate oppression.

The subtle forms of racism in British society have an accumulative impact on black people. Derman-Sparks (1994) suggests that we grow up in a ‘psychologically toxic environment’ with the result that, by the time we reach university, we have a lot of uncovering to do. So, for example, by the time some black students enter social work training, having lived in a ‘psychologically toxic environment’ there is a considerable amount of uncovering which needs to be done. I am referring here to stages of

psychological development in terms of a black identity that relates to the position of students in relation to the racism-power issue. Those of us who train black students and black professionals may need to work out how to identify what stages people are at and develop different teaching and learning methods as well as adapting different values in order to help black students and black professionals at various stages. This might mean helping people to work at a feeling level as well as a cognitive level. It might also mean assisting black professionals and students to manage inter-group relations and processes.

As discussed in Chapter 7 experiences revealed in the Co-operative Inquiry showed that black professionals and students are concerned about the fact that some of the ways in which they interact produces negative experiences. Fighting amongst ourselves or devaluing one another's identity does not serve us well as black professionals and black students and our actions require attention. Engaging in what hooks (1981), and Richie (1996) describe as 'horizontal hostility' powerfully maintains the status quo. Horizontal hostility feeds the blaming of victims of inequality by victims of other injustices. Similarly, at a structural level, infighting between and amongst groups of people at the margin is in the interests of those at 'the centre', who maintain a 'divide and rule' position (Friere, 1972). At the heart of this dynamic lies supremacist belief in one group's 'natural' rights to privilege. The critical educative approach calls for simultaneous intervention at all levels (micro and macro) which targets affective, cognitive and systematic change.

Intervention with a critical educative approach when working with black professionals and black students requires that the following principles should be adopted: -

1. There should be recognition of the systemic and societal context of racism and oppression and that social ideologies are infused with the virulent disease of racism. Such recognition allows practitioners, black professionals and black students to become aware of how their lived experience (or personal narrative) has been impacted by these forces
2. Effective educative intervention should be based on a deliberate effort by both practitioners, black professionals and black students to be aware of how their location or position within the social political order shapes their identities and the content and context of the relevant relationship
3. There should be identification of personal narratives and language that reinforce a sense of empowerment, pejorative classifications of difference, or a truncated sense of self-esteem; identification, for example, of dichotomous or binary thinking, such as

superior/inferior or good /bad as exemplified by white people are good, therefore superior, and black people are bad, therefore inferior.

4. There should be support for black professionals and black students in their work toward social change by challenging anti-black racism and other forms of bias encountered within their environment.
5. There should be support of self-assertion and re-affirmation of both racial and gender identity, as well as development of a more integrated identity as black professionals and black students.

A critical educative approach might be able to offer the practitioner the opportunity to recognise the “multiple voices” and “multiple realities” of the heterogeneous population of black professionals and black students. Each voice is liberated to speak its own reality and is not confined to a metanarrative of the entire population of black people in Britain or of all black professionals and black students.

The proposed critical educative approach facilitates a process in which black professionals and black students become aware of being the “creator” and owner of their own destinies. Once empowered by a sense of selfhood, black professionals and black students can take action to change the debilitating social structures around them.

What methodological approach should be adopted when working with a critical educative approach in order that black professionals and black students should gain a sense of empowerment and be liberated?

Methodology

A key element, in using a critical educative approach with black professionals and black students, is developing a critical consciousness which involves a *dialogical approach* to relationship building and engagement. It requires *critical reflection* as a part of the assessment and intervention process, and promotes *readiness toward action* as part of the intervention planning, (Friere, 1972). The phases of engagement are reflective dialogue, assessment as critical reflection, and intervention as liberating action, which I shall discuss below.

Reflective Dialogue

With a critical educative approach the first step is to engage black professionals and black students, through the medium of trust, in a relationship of reflective dialogue. Here, the practitioner listens to the black professional/students' stories and explores their unique life experiences as they relate to personal problems. The practitioner also inquires about broad ethno-cultural factors, such as race, class, culture and gender and their impact on the persons (self) "narratives" as well as their impact on the problem, issues, and subject.

A working alliance, which includes agreement between all parties on the desired goals and outcomes of the relationship and agreement on the respective tasks to be undertaken by the practitioner and black professional or student so as to accomplish the work of problem solving, is critical. There is a great need to pay attention to the elements that can impact the working alliance. Obvious elements are race and gender. In the broader social context, race and gender have clear power implications and certain members of social groups, on the basis of their race and gender, have more status, privilege, and power than members of other social groups. The working relationship has a potential for replicating these broader social dynamics.

These power and control dynamics may impact negatively on the willingness of black professionals and black students to emotionally invest in the relationship and thus have a negative impact on trust. These factors can become particularly salient in cross-racial and cross-gender relationships. One method suggested in the literature which may help to achieve this sense of trust is to allow the professional or student to express a degree of skepticism without the practitioner overly interpreting it (Franklin, 1992). To overly interpret might place the practitioner in a superior position and the dialogical relationship should involve the practitioner in taking a non-hierarchical position in the relationship. She/he should be more of a "cultural consultant" to the black student and black professional. Efforts should be made to describe the professional or student in language that is mutual, culturally sensitive and oppression-sensitive. For example, in research, working towards becoming co-researchers or participants rather than subjects or objects or, in higher education institutions, working towards all parties becoming educators and learners rather than teachers and students. The person becomes a partner with the practitioner in exploring different and more empowering "ways of being" and "ways of being black". The process of becoming a partner is not a simple one since there are always power issues to wrestle with.

As the practitioner assumes this position in the dialogical relationship, he or she should be aware of his or her own social position (i.e. race, gender and class) within the sociocultural and economic milieu. For example, the black teacher would need to look at their status and the power that goes with it in the classroom. The white male manager would need to pay attention to his race, gender and status position in the organisation. The practitioners' social location shapes the social context of these relationships and significantly impacts upon the dynamics of power. The dynamics of power and control are significant in work with black professionals and black students regardless of the race or gender of the practitioner.

Assessment as Critical Reflection

Understanding and assessing the problems and issues which confront black professionals and black students requires a broad conceptual lens which can embrace multiple levels of assessment. In this co-investigation of the personal, social and ethnocultural realities of black professionals and black students both practitioner and professional/student identify these meaningful themes related to socio political and relational constraints in their personal experiences when reflecting on their life experiences (Korin, 1992). What follows this stage is a process in which problems and contradictions in experience are identified and reflected on, with an emphasis on the contextual issues. As examination of and reflection on the contradictions takes place, changes occur. The problems are redefined and an unfolding "restorying" process is initiated, whilst a new liberating perspective is identified (Laird, 1989).

This liberating perspective is not just intrapersonal or interpersonal. It takes on the quality of understanding how the black professional's and black student's social, cultural, political and economic contexts impact on their sense of personal and social power. This process encourages a reconnection with self and culture. It also allows one to be aware of the ability to reconstruct one's own reality. To arrive at this stage requires one to ask critical reflective questions.

Critical Reflection Questions

Ivey (1995, pp68-69) provided some assessment questions which I found helpful and which I have adapted for the inclusion in a critical educative approach. Such critical reflective questions could include:

1. What is common to our stories? What are the patterns (themes)?

2. How do we think about these stories, and how could we think about them differently?
3. What parts of our stories relate to our conception of self, resulting from family, history, and our cultural background? How do the two relate?
4. What parts of us do internal forces and what parts external forces drive? How can we tell the difference?
5. Standing back, what inconsistencies and contradictions can we identify?
6. What does our family, education, work history say about development and operation of oppression?
7. What shall we do? How should we do it together? What is our objective and how can we work together effectively?

All these questions are not gender or race specific, they can be modified and adapted for use with black professionals and students. These questions have experiential and existential import; that is; they connect the issues with the larger socio-political themes which concern black professionals and black students. These questions also allow for a critical inquiry into the specific social context(s) or social location(s) in which the multiple experiences of a black professional or black student are embedded. What is important is that inquiry does not end with single-issue understanding but progresses instead to 'radically reform our intervention paradigm', to 'analyse experience in a way that looks at the interaction of oppression' (Richie 1996). This inquiry allows both the practitioner and the professional or student to identify the unique impact of their experiences of oppression and the inherent contradictions emerging from their position within *multiple* socio-political locations. Equally important, this critical reflection also allows for an understanding of whether the professional or student has internalised narratives that are supportive, liberating and potentiating or narratives which are constructive or destructive. It allows for the creation of alternative narratives which are potentially liberating.

Intervention as Liberating Action

"Liberation is achieved through the capacity to understand the internalisation of oppression through narratives that prescribe behaviours from the oppressor and to say **"No"** to those prescriptions" (Rasheed and Rasheed, 1999, p.58).

Liberating action gives birth to a state of critical consciousness. Liberating action then becomes the basis and goal of intervention with black professionals and black students

as critical reflection and action become the basis for personal, interpersonal and social change. Franz Fanon (1967) gives direction to the need for liberating action; he states:

“When the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an actional person. The goal of his behaviour will be the ‘Other’ (in guise of a White man). For the ‘Other’ alone can give his worth...self esteem”(p.154).

Friere (1972) echoes these sentiments when he states,

“One of the base elements of the relationship between the oppressors and oppressed is prescription. Every prescription represents the imposition of one man’s choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the man transcribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber’s consciousness. Thus, the behaviour of the oppressed is prescribed behaviour, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor. The oppressed having internalised the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to reject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man” (p.31).

As Friere points out, this sense of autonomy may not easily be achieved; it requires inner struggle that leads to outside action. Such action might begin with reauthoring ones narrative. Wimberly (1997) articulates the nature of this struggle as he describes the process of reauthoring one’s narrative. Life narratives (Worldviews) emerge from the lived experiences of the narrator and are given meaning through the process of social interaction. They are often fixed and have a sense of ontological authenticity. Significant life transitions and crises however can challenge these narratives. Such crises can shatter the existing narrative and thus precipitate a restorying process which enables a person to meet new challenges or to explain a current situation that has great emotional significance. Re-authoring, re-storying, or re-editing one’s narrative can open up new possibilities that otherwise might be hidden and not allowed to come forth. White and Epston (1990), describe this process as discovering hidden possibilities or “historically unique outcomes” (p.56).

As black professionals and students our movement towards liberating action would, therefore, involve narrative and cognitive methods that can help us cope with anger, frustration and stress. We can achieve this by challenging limiting narratives that habitually cause rage or stress reactions and develop more effective ways of coping with stress and anger through reauthored narratives and new behaviours. In this way some

negative experiences can be re-edited or re-authored to produce more positive experiences.

We have to be extremely careful, however, not to believe or convey the belief that the problems facing black professionals and students can always be eradicated quickly, solely through a change of cognition or perceptions. Nevertheless, this approach does have empowering implications in its ability to enhance coping by countering negative internalised narratives or self talk. Of equal importance is that this approach can enhance self worth and move black professionals and students towards creating more empowering (personal) narratives and a heightened sense of social and political consciousness and activity.

Our re-authored narratives could result in a capacity to see the world through the eyes of white professionals and white students and of white communities. This could increase our empathy with white professionals and students as well as enable us to challenge them. The outcome could be a challenge to an internalised, eurocentric perspective in favour of a more communal, egalitarian position which is more representative of a black perspective frame of reference. Such narratives can support the effort to understand of male/female relationships, black/black relationships and black/white relationships in new and more potentiating ways. It should promote a greater sense of connectedness to our history and struggles.

Another more crucial step in the process of developing interventions to support liberating action is mobilising black professionals and student's to change their context. Here, black academics and practitioners can help by facilitating the movement of black professionals and students towards transforming their lives and challenging limiting situations or personal and social problems which constrain or marginalise their potential. I shall go on in chapter 13 to expand on the role of the black academics in this regard. I shall now offer a summary of this chapter and a conclusion.

Summary

The emphasis, in this Chapter, has been on how critical social theory, critical consciousness, and a black perspective are important elements within the total gestalt of the critical educative approach. These theories help to contextualise the (individualised) meaning of the lived experiences of black professionals and students by locating our

experiences within a specific historical, economic, political, and socio-cultural context. This is an important feature considering that black professionals' and black students' experiences are largely and objectively negative, oppressive, non-affirming and depotentiating. Hence, the need for interventions with black professionals and black students which are driven by a critical educative perspective which has to integrate the "deconstructionist" quality inherent the critical consciousness perspectives. Practitioners would need, therefore, to empower black professionals and students to become agents of their own choices by first encouraging them to tell their individual stories and then by helping them to deconstruct immobilizing and marginalising narratives and later reconstruct these stories in a way which empowers them. These re-storying processes should also be directed at macro and micro levels of intervention in order that practitioners do not become co-authors of denial and "gatekeepers" of the status quo in their work with black professionals and black students. In the following two chapters I shall explore, in more detail, the application of this approach with black students and black professionals and the role of teachers and black academics in education for liberation. But in the meantime I shall conclude the following: -

Conclusion

Liberation in the context of the critical educative approach for black professionals and black students is not just a movement towards self-transformation, developing a sense of hyper-individuality, or achieving (ego) autonomy from the social order. Liberating action also involves the professional or student and practitioner in jointly developing strategies for the professional or student's connection to a communal perspective. The goal of intervention is to facilitate a connection with a black perspective worldview and with the existing latent and potential strength that resides within black communities.