

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Co-operative Inquiry**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I tell the story of the co-operative inquiry that spanned four phases which I have used to structure the material presented. I include notes of general themes that emanated from the work and I also include my story of Cathy's and my collaboration. Although the main focus of this chapter is to explore what we did it is difficult to not include how we did it. Therefore, there is some overlap between content and process and, in outlining the details of how we conducted the inquiry, I offer some reflective comments by way of my own sensemaking of the process. I try to speak in my own voice and not for Cathy, by making a clear distinction between 'I' and 'we' to separate out my thinking and my actions from what Cathy and I did together. Any data used in this chapter is taken from my notes, my journal and from listening to the tape-recording.

#### **Research Participants**

Our experiences as educators and social work practitioners have allowed Cathy and me the opportunity to develop a network of contacts in social welfare agencies, both statutory and voluntary, which consist of black social work practitioners, some of whom are ex-students of WLIHE and are managers in middle and senior positions. Our network also consisted of black lecturers, practice teachers of social work and other educationalists. We used this London based network and invited people to share our ideas. We also invited students who were in the middle of their training as social workers. We chose this select group because we did not want the project to be too big and unwieldy. We also wanted to set boundaries and parameters to enable us to organise and manage the project effectively.

Fifty people came together, from this group of black managers, students, social work practitioners and other professionals in social work education, on a very hot day in July 1994 and we began a process of collaboration about our experiences which continued over a two-year period, using the method of co-operative inquiry. The whole event was tape-recorded.

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#### **Phases of the inquiry**

##### **Phase One**

#### **Germination of Ideas**

At the beginning, through our professional networks we sought the interest of a small group of black professionals whom Cathy and I had known as colleagues and as friends whom we used as critical friends. The group of six consisted of educationalists, management consultants, managers in welfare organizations, educationalists/lecturers, and interested professionals. Having established their interest, we invited them to meet as a small group to explore further our ideas for research design. We used them for support and challenge, to test reactions and responses to our proposed project. In preparation for the first meeting with this group, Cathy and I were aware that we had to pay attention to developing a collaborative relationship in terms of establishing confidence and trust in our ideas and in us as researchers. We drew up a list of what we wanted to explore with the group. We listed the concepts we were working with and themes we were interested in and took them into the meeting. We saw its purpose as:

- Getting to know each other
- Bringing the group members up to date with our journey
- Developing teamwork
- Sharing the basic views of the methodology
- Stressing the principles of collaboration and the importance of negotiating ownership
- Stressing emphasis on storytelling

The group met for four meetings exchanging ideas, telling our own stories of survival and how we had transcended some difficulties, identifying research questions, exploring the notion of a black perspective in research and familiarizing ourselves with the research methodology. Only one member of the group, Carlis, had practical experience of action research methodology. I had experience of being a participant in Carlis's action research but had no experience of conducting an action research project, so we relied heavily on Carlis for support. The group's interest in the research project deepened and there was energy and enthusiasm for it. Group members felt sufficiently involved and we discovered our connectedness; they became fully engaged with us in assisting to set up the inquiry, and together we formed the group which:

- planned our approach to getting others involved
- Identified with and assisted in carrying out, related administrative tasks
- Planned and ran the introductory seminar
- Shared the facilitation role in workshops

The group met once more in that configuration after the first seminar for debriefing, feedback, and further planning. Some of the members of this group continued as participants in the inquiry and engaged in the cycles of inquiry as ordinary participants. Others stayed involved by acting as 'think tanks' for Cathy and me because they were not able to meet the time demanded for the meetings. They assisted with the organisation and planning of meetings.

#### Interested Parties Coming Together (Introductory One Day Seminar)

I was concerned that everyone might be coming to the day with his or her own set of assumptions and expectations as to what the meeting will be like. Ours might differ from theirs. They were likely to have particular and different strengths, in terms of relevant personal experiences and knowledge. Becoming sensitive to and aware of these starting points (including my own) was a crucial task. Unless a group has met only to socialize, there has to be an agenda of some kind, however informal. We agreed on one from the outset, in the sense that we suggested one and they agreed. This included our purpose, aims, objectives, ideas and research questions.

### *Presenting the research Ideas – Morning Session*

The presentation of ideas about the project was done through a presentation of papers from Cathy and me. We outlined the main areas of the research and some of our thinking so far. We also said why we were proposing an Inquiry Group. The research assistant also presented some of the findings and outcomes of the questionnaire conducted with ex-students, sharing the emergent themes, and we declared an intention of wanting to explore these ideas in depth. Carlis, another member of the facilitator's group presented a paper on the methodology, explaining action research methodology and, in particular the co-operative inquiry method in simple terms and explained how we might use this methodological approach.

### *Working in small groups*

As research is not an everyday feature of the lives of the people we were hoping to work with, we thought it was important that people had time to familiarize themselves with the ideas of the research. Loftland and Loftland (1994) suggest that even when people know that they are being studied they probably have only a tenuous idea about what the researcher is doing, what the research is about and why it is being undertaken. It was a time of testing. Would people understand? Would they want to help? In view of these concerns we allocated plenty of time in small groups for people to have an opportunity to react and respond to what they had heard so far about the ideas of the research and the proposed methodology.

With the help of facilitators we explored these ideas and issues and our concerns. The facilitators had some questions which acted as prompts to assist with thinking, such as:

- How is it we do not talk of our success?
- How can we get ourselves out of the blaming, victim role?
- How can we reduce the mistrust and suspicion that sometimes gets in the way of our communicating effectively?
- How can we return to our authentic selves?

Participants brought back their questions, reactions, responses and concerns to the whole group and shared what had emerged from the small groups in a morning plenary. We structured the feedback, in an effort to manage time and to offer opportunity for each group's voice to be heard, by asking each to

present at least three questions. Some of the questions and comments from the morning session were:

- Individual's psychology versus the political and structural experience. How do we allow ourselves to examine our psychological processes?
- How would we enable ourselves to build new psychological strategies?
- How do we encourage support and difference?
- How responsible are we for the rest of the black community?
- Is the oppressor always white? Sometimes we are our own worst enemies and do a good job on the business ourselves, as black people. Victims sometimes become oppressors.
- Should colleges and universities be responsible for preparing black students to enter the work arena?

From the morning feedback session it became evident that some participants took an active, inquiring, reflective approach and wanted more time in small groups so we returned to working in small groups. This time we structured the small groups so that we worked in 'identity' groups. These were as educationalists, managers, social work students and practitioners. In these groups we explored our experiences and fed back in a large group plenary.

Listening to the feedback it became apparent to me that we struck a vein of enthusiasm and found an echoing chord. It was evident that some people appeared excited by the prospect of the project; they seemed to have enjoyed the process in some of the groups and this was noticeable in their lively discussions. Some people stayed back at the end of the day to talk with us or huddled together in pockets talking. The project meant something to others and as a result the sharing of stories began. An overwhelming generosity of giving of self and experiences was manifest and people present stated their interest both verbally and in writing. We regarded the relationship we had begun to develop as more important than explanation.

*Questions we, as initiators, were left with after the first meeting:*

1. What was the nature of the connection that helped to generate a sense of community at the meeting?

2. Was the connection real, genuine?

1. Were there points of disconnection with each other and or with our ideas?
2. The concept of Community - how can we test this notion in action - is it a romantic idea?
3. The role of facilitators - do we need them?
4. How will people be helped/taught through the notion of an action-reflection cycle?

Questions 1,2,3, and 4 have always been questions for me through out the research and I have continued asking them and inquiring into them. The issue

of connectedness has only been partially explored and I will discuss it further in Chapter 8.

As mentioned earlier, after the meeting the planning group met again to reflect on the event. We agreed that the role of the facilitators was no longer needed because it might set up a hierarchy and get in the way of authentic collaboration. So we decided to disperse the facilitators' group leaving responsibility with Cathy and me for holding the project. We thought that having people in such positions disturbed the balance in the inquiry.

## **Phase Two**

### **People coming together with shared interest to plan**

#### **Contracting**

We wrote to the list of people who had signed up at the end of the first seminar inviting them to another meeting. The aim of the meeting was to develop interest and to engage participants and to decide on procedures and process for action. We also invited people who had expressed interest in the project but had not attended the seminar and ensured that they received a written hand out of the events from the first meeting, especially the principles of the methodology. All those who expressed their interest in participating in the project attended a second meeting for the purpose of negotiation and contracting and so the second phase began in September 1994.

#### **Preparation, planning and negotiating**

Planning for the contracting meeting proved to be crucial. In some ways all the hard work was done then. In co-operative inquiry, planning takes longer because of the need to tap into the experience of so many people before firming up purpose, let alone a plan, and that process involved careful negotiation. Preparing to negotiate our contract provoked questions for Cathy and me relating to our position as initiators of the project. One question which we had to consider was how powerful we were as research initiators. We were aware of our power in the formal and informal setting, our power within the informal network of black social work lecturers and the status of the organisation from which the project emanated, the social work department in Brunel University and what it stood for were a definite plus in negotiation. Some people had a great deal of respect for the Department of Social Work because it employed black lecturers and actively sought to attract black students. It was also known for its ideological position regarding anti-discriminatory practice, which proved attractive for some black people.

I considered other questions, such as, if power exists, how does it change within the context of different relationships? How is this power used? The researcher's position of power, or powerlessness within negotiations is important to consider. One consideration is the role of the other participants and their position in terms of ownership of the project. The fundamental idea of Co-operative Inquiry is that people work together as co-researchers in

exploration in order to bring about some change. In planning for the achievement of that notion we thought it would be best to use the term frequently and to make it explicit from the beginning in order to assist people to understand its meaning and their role fully and to begin the process of accepting ownership of the project.

We wanted to do three things, which were:

1. To make constant reference to the term co-researchers to help people to become familiar with the term.
2. To recap and review the project's development and progress so that everyone would get the opportunity to be at a roughly similar stage.
3. To do an exercise to help people to take their thinking at a deeper level, as a process of clarity and inclusion, and to check out how committed they were to the research. We posed the question, who is the research for? ME, for US, for THEM.(Marshall and Reason 1987) We hoped that, with this exercise, people would begin to explore deeper their involvement in the research and hopefully integration would begin.

One other reason for working with this question was because I did the exercise and found it helpful in assisting me to find out why I was doing this research and what its purpose was. I discovered that the research was very much part of my life. Drawing on my own experiences and that of some other members of that first meeting, I felt it was useful for the group members to begin their process of awareness and identification so that their personal questions about their relationship to the research could begin to emerge.

We also thought about finding ways to make the inquiry manageable and productive by considering ways of enabling full, effective and rewarding participation. Prior to this meeting I was aware that group trust can initially be low (Jaques, 1984) and there is a need to set up a contract about the research agenda with the group (Kent and Maggs, 1992). We therefore planned and structured the first part of this session hierarchically (Heron 1989) and set out a framework for developing the research.

We thought structure was important at this stage and devised a complex structure along the lines of professional identity. We suggested that three long-term inquiry groups be set up, which were composed of managers, practitioners and educationalist/lecturers as these represented the bulk of the participants. We thought about our role and how we would make it explicit to the group, also making explicit how we saw the three groups functioning and their relationship to one another. I was concerned with how much we presented as having a ready-made package and how much space we should allow for new and different suggestions to emerge from the group.

Our suggestions for the functions of the groups were:

### **Manager's group:**

- Offer data on the interactions between black managers and black workers
- Examine how managers develop an identity as black managers – what impact does this have on black workers
- Name what do they see in the workplace vis-à-vis the interactions between black workers? Are there similarities and/or differences between what happens at college and in the workplace?

### **Practitioners i.e. social workers Group**

- This group is seen as the core/nucleus for the community of inquiry
- It should generate rich material in terms of testing – negative and positive experiences of being a student and/or practitioner – public and private voices – black on black interactions.
- It should provide data on successes – help with career trajectories

### **Educationalist/Lecturers Group**

- Discovery of how we are seen by: black students, white students, black colleagues, white colleagues, the educational institutions
- Contextualising, analysing the state of social work education from a black perspective
- Telling the black lecturers stories

### **Process of contracting**

The issue of inclusion was very important for us, at this early stage of forming and our concern was about integrating new people into the process so there was a need to reiterate the methodology. We did this in two ways. First, I gave a verbal recap of the main ideas and perspectives in the project and stated our purpose and proposed method of inquiry. I also fed back the themes arising from the first meeting and outlined our plans for this current meeting. We spent some time engaging in a question and answer process. We allowed space between recapping on methodology and time for peoples' comments and questions, but I was left feeling that the participants had not sufficiently integrated what it meant to be able to comment from an informed position, or to ask challenging questions. Secondly, we all did the exercise research FOR ME, US, THEM. We did it individually, then shared in small groups of three with Cathy and myself participating in the exercise.

The sense I made of the feedback was that people tended to focus more on the 'US' and began to make general statements about our experiences as black people. I sensed that they wanted to get on with the telling of their stories and to begin to explore the pressing issues for black people. My thought then was that people were so keen to engage in something positive, to find another way of constructing their experiences and to seek emotional sustenance that they just wanted to immerse themselves in the process. I also sensed that they were experiencing the forum as safe and were open in their expression. I was interested in the way people were sharing so openly and

willingly. I wondered if it was because they were hearing something new and wanted to engage with that newness.

There were one or two concerns expressed about the length of time the research would take and less concern with the idea of sharing and inquiring together. It may have been that people were experiencing themselves as another group of black people coming together just to talk about experiences of living in a racist society. It was not possible to say, at this point, that we were all professionals because some people were experiencing difficulties in defining themselves as a 'professional'. This is an issue which I have noted is of wider concern in the black community. Nor was it possible to refer to us as co-researchers at this stage. What then are the qualities that would make this a community of inquirers?

### *Groups Forming:*

Some people readily accepted the idea of researching collaboratively. They also accepted our ideas for having three groups' -Lecturer/Educationalist, Managers, and Practitioners, but not so readily. Participants were invited to self-select, according to their defined professional identity, for allocation to groups. Some people wanted to meet with more than one group. Some had defined themselves as practitioner and manager, practitioner and educationalist, manager and educationalist, others defined themselves as all three - practitioner, manager and educationalist and were faced with the challenge of where to place themselves and how much time they had to commit. Some difficulties were encountered because of the narrow definitions of the groups as named.

The title of the groups presumed that you could only define yourself as one thing or the other. In reality, a practitioner could also be a manager and indeed some people wanted to find a way of representing this. My concern was that we, as initiators of the research, had defined the group and had done so narrowly. I was concerned that some people found the choices limiting. Yet some people welcomed it because the definition meant that they could economise on time and use their resources in a more focused and effective way. We resolved the problem by allowing space for the group to explore their issues and concerns and to challenge our decision for structured groups. After a lengthy discussion, people made their choices based on self-definition in terms of professional identity and time commitment. They then physically moved towards forming themselves into inquiry groups. At this point we met in those groups to organise and plan for future meetings

### *Groups Organising:*

In our thinking, Cathy and I saw the Practitioners Group as consisting mainly of WLIHE ex-students /present students and questioned what we were implying by this. Were we really viewing the ex-students as practitioners or were we still seeing them as students and, more importantly, 'our students'? What was significant was that all those people who had attended, or were attending, WLIHE chose to be together in a group despite the fact that some

were managers. They chose to become the practitioner Group. I do not think that the title of the group meant a great deal to them; what was more important was that they were together. In some ways they were already a defined group and had some degree of cohesion because they had some similarities and a common bond - WLIHE. This was evident in the way they behaved in the process of group formation and the selection of venues for future meetings. They gravitated towards each other, around Cathy, with great speed and decided they would meet at WLIHE. They took control of their own situation and determined where they would meet. I imagined that they saw WLIHE as a place of safety, a past home.

A great deal of time was spent working through an understanding on how the action-reflection cycle would be carried out and considering how we would deal with some of the potentially sensitive issues. We also spent some time alleviating fear and suspicions provoked about taking action in organisations, and what it would mean for us and the organisations.

In our planning, Cathy and I decided that, between us, we would attend all the group meetings, but for this initial coming together to form groups it was only possible for us to attend one group each. I chose to work with the Managers' Group because of my interest and my experience of having been a manager. I also felt closer to that group. I shared similar values about management. I could have chosen to work with any one of the groups because of my experiences as a trainer and as a teacher/educationalist, but I made assumptions about educationalists group facilitating skills, as some of the members of that group were teachers. So Cathy chose to go with the Practitioners' group and I went with the Managers' Group.

The educationalist/Lecturers Group was left to work on its own. We arranged this because that group had in it one person who had been part of the original planning group and had acted as facilitator in the July seminar, so that we felt confident that the group would get the help it needed. On reflection, I saw that we gave that person more power in the educationalists group. This action went against the notion of equity and did not assist with group members finding a similar starting point. There might have been a hidden message about power and control on our part, a message which said 'make sure you keep them focused', although on the surface we displayed a trust in that group to 'get on with the business'.

I was interested to note that the feedback from some members of Educationalist/Lecturer group to me was that they wished that one of us had attended their group because they felt that they lost sight of their purpose. They also wanted the functions of the groups made more explicit by Cathy and myself in writing. We deliberately chose not to do give out a piece of paper with the functions in print, as if in tablets of stone, at such early stage but offered it at the end of the contracting phase. We wanted the groups to consider purpose and function in more depth so that they could own the process and define how they wanted to work. What was also evident was that when Educationalist/Lecturer group returned to the large group plenary theirs was the only group which felt that it could not meet without one of us present,

yet made dates without reference to Cathy and myself. I thought that a conflicting and ambivalent message was being communicated "we need you but we don't want you". This I found difficult to hear and, when Cathy and I discussed this afterwards, we both felt uncomfortable about this group meeting without one of us present. This group was testing the boundaries around dependence and independence but more importantly, challenged our power as facilitators.

I experienced the Managers' Group on the other hand, as feeling comfortable with the process of negotiation. The members quickly dealt with the practical things and moved on to begin discussions and suggestions for items for the first meeting. I noted that they treated the process in a very business-like manner, organising dates and forming an agenda. One of the things they wanted to explore was new ways of 'being' with other black staff, particularly staff whom they supervised. They agreed to explore this issue at their next meeting.

The three groups devised plans for future meetings - dates, venues, time and a cycle of meetings were planned. Finding dates took a long time and provided an opportunity for individuals to think through their commitments, whether they wanted to come again, and when they would manage to do so. Each group planned to meet at least four times initially, and most agreed to meeting six times, paying attention to the length of time between each meeting so that people could engage in action before the next meeting. At the end of the contracting process we set the boundary for when we would next meet as a whole community. We decided on six months. We thought that this was long enough for the groups to engage in the reflection-action process. I also had some concerns that these groups would become independent subgroups with lives of their own and lose sight of the wider community. Would they really feel part of a wider group if they were left to work independently for too long? I thought that Cathy and I would be vital in keeping the link by constantly reminding each group of the existence of the others, by making connections and identifying shared themes, and by ensuring that what was personal to the individual group stayed personal, whilst the themes were shared.

We took responsibility for the initial administration of the inquiry sub-groups and agreed to send out dates, times and venues to each participant, ensuring that each person knew when their group was meeting. We ensured that each person had the dates for all the meetings so that anyone wishing to attend the meetings of any of the other groups could do so. We had not envisaged the groups as being fixed or closed, but we were concerned that we may have given that message. I was aware that we may have closed the boundaries in the sub-groups inquiries and I was concerned that the groups opened their boundaries during the inquiries to include interaction amongst ourselves, as part of the action phase, as well as interaction with the outside world (Heron, 1996).

Cathy and I also agreed to put in writing our ideas for the functions of the sub-groups. We were concerned to ensure that the sub-groups experienced

themselves as mini communities with a uniqueness of their own, but feeding into the whole community (all three groups). We suggested that they use our suggestions for functioning as broad headings for focusing their discussions. We stressed that it was not our intention to restrict them but that they might find the suggestions useful for making their meetings more effective. We also wrote reminding them of the importance of the action reflection cycle.

Reflecting on the contracting meeting, I noticed that I experienced tensions between myself, as initiator, and some of the participants with regard to their expectations. It was evident that people brought different expectations. One obvious tension was between those people who wanted more direction and those who wanted to stay with the flow of the process; between those who wanted me and Cathy to take lead roles, others who were listening but with some suspicion, and others who challenged our power. I was concerned that some people might have wanted to participate in the research because of their relationship with us and might be less committed to the methodology.

At the end of the contracting meeting I was left with major questions about my facilitation and some notes on the tension I experienced as a co-researcher. My questions were, did I have the skills to work in genuine collaboration on such complex issues with a group of very skilled, powerful, competent black people? Would I be able to manage the anxieties that it would bring?

### **Phase Three**

#### **Engagement in action**

##### **Working as co-researchers, creating and maintaining collaboration**

Phase three consisted of the groups meeting to engage fully with each other and deepen their experience. The three groups met for six months in total; they met for no less than two to three hours each time. Every meeting was tape-recorded. I attended meetings of all three groups and Cathy attended the Practitioners' and Educationalist/lecturer groups. I acted as a bridge, a link and carrier transporting themes and questions to and from groups. When I observed groups expressing similar and/or different themes or issues, I introduced content from other groups as a means of keeping the groups connected.

##### ***What Happened In the Groups?***

During the meetings people were encouraged to tell stories of their experiences as practitioners, managers, tutors and educationalists, men and women. The main activity was the sharing of experiences and reflections on those experiences. Sharing cannot happen quickly and relaxed group meetings seemed the best format, so it was important to create a friendly, relaxed environment in which ideas could be shared and inquiry questions could emerge.

Our experiences were not just what we communicated verbally but, also, what we did and where we chose to hold the meetings, for example, which represented a recognition that different ways of approaching such a task will encourage and or discourage possibilities of experience and action. We held meetings in various venues, some representing our identity as students and social work professionals. Some meetings were held at the University and these were primarily the Practitioners' Group meetings; the Managers Group rotated their venues and met in each others agencies and in their homes; the Lecturers/Educationalist Group met at the Headquarters of CCETSW, the Central Council for Education and Training of Social workers.

We were interested in finding ways and means of enabling each other to talk freely, and openly, about our experiences. In particular, I was interested in our narrative accounts of our experiences in white institutions and how we related to these experiences and to each other. I wanted to explore this 'from below'. There was a very real dilemma, however, about how to work together in the group to explore these experiences.

I noticed that the structures of the venues impacted on the way some of us behaved and what we chose to speak about in the telling of our stories. In the informal setting of the home we told stories about our families and of a personal nature. In addition we met out of work time and the meetings appeared less structured and controlled and went on for longer. Less negative issues were discussed with more open inquiry questions emerging. The meetings in work settings focused on work issues, for example, on complaints, and on the struggles, dilemmas and contradictions of being a black manager. Meetings at CCETSW appeared more constraining; they were formally organised, focused and goal oriented with more questioning both about what we were doing in and with the research and about global concerns. Meetings at the University appeared to have taken some people back into the experience of being a student and they focused on their experiences of teaching and learning, engaging with ideas but attended by lots of complaints and focus on the negatives, wanting solutions and actions. This was also balanced with lots of laughter and fun. We were telling of life in different settings as we sat in those settings. We were telling stories of how we coped in and with those settings which made demands and, at the same time, offered some possibilities.

### *Telling our stories*

Participants narrated their stories in a form not recognised in the social sciences. People had interesting stories to tell which seemed tangential, at times, and unexpected contributions seemed to form part of the negotiation over what we really might be talking about. Somehow, in the end, the way we told our stories played a key part in helping the group to develop a sense of identity. We began with general discussions that were at times loose and unfocused but later developed ideas and strategies for change. As we spoke to, and of, what was real to us we told stories and fragments of stories. We were concerned with listening to and probing the stories we told. We paid attention to the person telling the story and to the coherence of personal

statements even when s/he went off on a tangent or changed the subject. Questioning and probing into the meaning and messages that made up the stories was important in order to open our story and show its hidden complexities, blind spots, contradictions and alternative meanings. We were articulating our experiences in ways that were not easy, and this perspective was a challenge to many of us who did not have such a probing style. Another challenge was that at times in some groups, the sharing process took over from the purpose of the group and developed its own impetus, becoming like an end in itself.

Our words did not carry impassive and neutral meanings; some words, however, were substantial and powerful. Sometimes the words told their own tales and created realities of their own. They carried a variety of different meanings to the listener and teller depending on the values the teller and listeners held, the context in which the listening was taking place and what might have been projected from personal experiences into the listening. Our words were created in relationship, which led some people into places they would not otherwise have gone. In that way our acts of telling were at times, acts of inquiry.

An awareness of the interpersonal dynamic of the inquiry situation including the recognition that this was an 'emotionally charged' situation for some participants (Patai, 1991) was therefore very important. I was aware this in that process of inquiry it was possible that some people would engage all too readily in a process of disclosure and, in the course of it, carry baggage from other places. They might get in touch with past memories and thereby release long-hidden feelings of frustration and anger, and then what? So my agenda, at times, was to stop some people in an attempt to protect them from painful memories. I did it because I was concerned that we would run out of time and people would be left raw. After all, this was not a therapeutic group. I found it a difficult balancing act trying not to disturb the process of 'telling' out and at the same time feeling the need to 'take care'. I was uncertain about setting limits on the sharing as a way of keeping to purpose. I was also aware that researching with such an inquiry approach can incorporate not only the therapeutic effects of remembering but also opportunities to reflect on a personal past, and that this can lead to a stronger sense of self in the present (Thompson, 1988). So I was continually being challenged to stay open to the process and work with the present.

I was thrown into confusion, uncertainty and chaos and I spent much of my time feeling completely bewildered with slippery, messy boundaries. At times I felt swamped by the enormity of the task and I was scared that I would not be able to make sense of it all. I tried desperately to take action to stay with the process. I had doubts about what was happening and whether I was doing anything useful or even sensible. I resorted frequently to the comforting thought that letting go of control involves risk and uncertainty, and feelings of confusion must therefore be expected. I was then able to allow more things to emerge. Part of what I let emerge was to share my story of my experience in the 'here and now', and so I also told my story of my own involvement in this research process. How people saw me and how I presented myself, were

important factors in determining how we related to one another; it was, therefore important to include that story. As initiator, I was already framing little stories about how we would want things to go and what we would want to see happen. I saw how, as I told my story, it began to link with others' stories of their involvement and these links created another story out of which other sets of anticipation occurred and alternatives were played with. Together, we were constructing a new story of the research so, as I was telling my stories, I was in the process of living out a new story by rethinking and by rewriting the story of how I wanted to see the inquiry undertaken by raising new questions.

We did not stay close to the rigid conventions that co-operative inquiry suggested we should in terms of the action-reflection cycle. We told personal biographies, stories that represented the world of personhood; we listened, questioned and told stories that made or broke us, stories that sustained us in times of trouble and encouraged us towards ends we would not otherwise managed. Some stories were about activism, and fighting back. Some of our questions directed us towards telling of our ways of creating and sustaining our world, of ways of functioning in racist organisations and society rather than the given research topic or given ways of research inquiry. We were engaged in narratives that recognised that we were in the midst of telling and listening, assisting and asking, confirming and disconfirming. We were engaged in conversations and our stories emerged from those conversations.

### *The nature of our collaborative conversations*

The open-ended and complex verbal analyses that made up the collaborative conversations were focused on experiences of each other as black people, our experiences of being valued and devalued by each other and the effects of racism on that experience. We told each other brief stories of practice and about our identity as professionals, our achievements and non-achievements, and our lack of validation by organisations. Some of these will be related in Chapter7

Our conversations were more than inter-exchange discourse or talk because they had certain characteristics. Conversations occurred between and among us in the form of dialogue that consisted of connected remarks, speaking, listening, reflecting and speaking again. It was a co-operative venture in that it was a joint activity, pursuing relevant contributions. The content of our conversation was related to something other than itself. There was a direction to our conversations and new understanding arose through our conversation (Feldman, 1999). In that sense, our conversation could have been seen as a dialectical process as we shared knowledge, views, understanding and feelings, while relating to the context of our personal and political histories; it ranged over many subjects and included a variety of voices; it also led in directions not thought of, left unanswered questions and answered questions not asked.

### *Generating Knowledge*

We became aware of a range of perspectives that informed our experiences and was able to contextualise our behaviour. This process led to some valuing of our lived experiences and emotions as knowledge and understanding were being generated. In the appropriation of such knowledge, something else occurred, some participants came to understand or construct meanings. We were engaged in acts of making meaning in situations through a dialogic and dialectic process (Feldman, 1999). Dialogic because, in response to the spoken words, understanding arose for some participants as was evident in their answers. And it was a dialectic process because, through the discourse that occurred in the conversation, the new understanding that arose transcended what was said and felt before.

We were engaged in what Hollingsworth (1994) calls "relational knowing", knowing in relationship to each other and to the relationship between personal and professional. Knowing about our personal and professional experiences grew and was shared in conversations. Connelly and Clandinin (1994) argue that a mutual construction of stories arises from collaborative inquiry which provides possibilities for change in practice and in the way we live out our stories. Some participants took issues, questions and experiments into their practice and engaged in practical knowing (Heron 1993). For one participant the suggestion was that she would inquire into her behaviour as she approached groups of black students, in formal and informal situations like the canteen; it was suggested that she notice how she felt, monitor her internal processes, and the choices she made about joining or not joining them. For another participant the action was about her noticing her behaviour in respect of her successes and achievements. She was soon to attend a graduation ceremony and she decided to pay attention to her behaviour in terms of actions and interactions with her family, in particular, and how she accepted praise or not. These participants then returned to the group and told new stories and experiences about how these ideas were enacted. As individuals fed back on actions they had taken and their outcomes, I noted how confident some members became about inquiring.

Some of us were not always conscious that we were engaging in creating knowledge or experienced our acts of 'telling' as being liberating. For others, the stories had a liberating effect which produced positive action. This came about as a result of some engagement in reflective learning. Reflection is in itself a complex process as can be seen from Boyd and Fales's (1983) statement; it is "The process of creating and clarifying the meaning of experience (present and past) in terms of self (self in relation to self and self in relation to the world). The outcome of the process is changed conceptual perspective. The experience that is explored and examined to create meaning focuses around or embodies a concern of central importance to self"(p...)

When viewed in this way the concept of reflection, as a process leading to changed perceptual perspective, echoes the process of personal change, leading to reinterpretation of personal, social and occupational roles (Brookfield, 1986). Brookfield argues that a significant aspect of reflective learning is the ability to question one's self-image and that this is linked to the notion of self-concept. This is something which participants spoke about as happening to them. As individuals, they 'reinterpreted their current and past behaviours from a new perspective' something Mezirow (1990) calls

'perspective transformation'. Our collaborative conversations went beyond pleasant and informative chats to become a place for research in which transformative processes occurred.

Looking back over the meetings, important aspects of the forum we created together seemed to include things like time, trust, comfort, enjoyment, and tolerance of uncertainties. The emphasis had been on enhancing the informality of the contact, for example, through getting to know people outside the research project or adopting a naturalistic approach and spending time relaxing with participants socially.

At the end of Phase 3, we did not come away with hard conclusions but the experience of being in a group dialoging, debating, having conversations and breaking silences. This was the first opportunity for many of us to engage in this way in research, so there had to be an 'emptying out' of the negatives, relating the bad experiences. Consequently, at times, there was more focus on the negative experiences than on the positive ones. If the inquiry had continued for longer we would perhaps have arrived at a place where more of the positives would have been shared.

## **Phase Four**

### **Feedback and evaluation – co-researchers re-assemble**

In the fourth phase the whole community came together, in April 1995, and explored recurring themes. This was also an exercise in accountability, validity and feedback. The group was coming to an end and communication about the research project as a whole was an important priority for Cathy and me. So, at this meeting, participants who had taken part in the interviews and the questionnaire conducted by the research assistant were also invited to attend. This was a way of reminding the Inquiry Group that there was a wider community and that the research project went beyond the inquiry groups.

Listening to the tape recordings from the inquiry sub-groups, and reading notes from the sub-group meetings and jottings from flipcharts, Cathy and I tried to make sense of some of our stories. We focused on themes; some of the themes were: 'how we offer support and receive support', 'our successes and achievements' 'the role of the black community' 'our expectations of each other'.

I have included text, in the form of notes taken from flipcharts and plenary feedback, from the inquiry groups and from the first large seminar, which was held to launch the research project. I have included this so that the reader might be exposed to the breadth of issues and the kind of inquiry questions we were faced with. I have chosen to present themes arising out of the meeting at the start of the research project and some inquiry questions within each theme from sub-groups to show how some of the particular questions have continued to feature throughout the group meetings.

### **General Themes**

1. The theme of **SUCCESS** was paramount, because, as initiators, we introduced it into the discussions. It appeared in each group's verbal feedback and flip chart notes, either in the form of questions or of issues for further exploration. The following are some of the questions and issues which were highlighted under this heading: -
  - How do we measure our success?
  - Is the measuring tool standard, is it defined by the black community or society generally?
  - What is a success story and what are our success stories?
  - Can we use our own perspective to tell our success stories? - it is important to tell that story in our own voices;
  - Can we afford to talk about our successes given the level of resentment we endure? Being successful can act as a constraint given that successful people often feel responsible; what responsibility do we have as successful people to enable, empower and support people to navigate their way to success?

The issue of responsibility has been a crucial point throughout the groups' discussions. I am reminded here of the words of Edwards and Polite in 'Children of a Dream':

"Among successful blacks, taking responsibility is so reflexive, so much a part of their lives, that it rarely occurs to them to articulate it, it is an essential ingredient that has been key to their achievements - it just is"(Edwards and Polite, 1992).

2. Another theme which, as research initiators, we took into the discussion was **ACCENTUATING THE POSITIVES**: Some of these questions emanated from the discussions
  - How do we ground ourselves in the positives? To arrive at this point a process of deconstruction and reconstruction is necessary.
  - What is the difference between the students who feed into the victimology syndrome, by focusing on the negatives and failures, and the students who talk about their negative experiences and learn from them?
  - What are the negative experiences black students' face both generally and in black on black interaction.
  - How does the negative experiences students' face on social work courses get transported into the workplace? In this regard, universities should take some responsibility for preparing black students for the outside world.
  - How is it that black people are excluded from other professions? The journey and the mission of white welfare organisations seemed to have been to allow us entry in a big way to social work as a profession but not to include us in the full operation of the organisation. Nevertheless, we need not perpetuate ourselves as minorities. We need not become judgmental of all black people.

1. A third general theme was ***CHOOSING OUR OWN VOICES, HAVING OUR OWN PERSPECTIVES AND TELLING OUR OWN STORIES.***

Under this heading some of the following statements were made:

It is important to hear all the voices - internal, external, self, community, individual, us, the profession. It is important to tell our stories in our own voices. It is important to work from our strengths. We need to set our own agenda rather than having the agenda set for us and there is a fear of opening up the debate, fear that we won't get to the heart of the issue.

In this regard there were some concerns expressed about the appropriateness of co-operative inquiry as a method for voicing our stories, and the methodology was questioned. For example:

- Is research the right way to build up our body of knowledge?
  - Is this methodology the right way?
1. ***DIFFERENCES/COMMONALITIES/FAMILIARITIES*** was another theme. The statement was made, that we needed to celebrate our commonalities and differences and that lead to a number of inquiry questions, for example:
- What are the issues around difference?
  - What do we do to accommodate difference?
  - What do we do to prevent us from coming together? Trust is a big issue.
  - What criteria do we use to judge whether we can trust each other or not? We need to be explicit about the criteria.
  - Is there a difference between people coming into the welfare profession now from ten years ago? Is there a difference between black people who were born in England, and those born in the Caribbean, in Africa, and the Indian sub-continent in their attitude towards education and their relationship to racism and resistance? Are people starting from a point of familiarity as black people? If so, what is that familiarity? We need to look at the relationship between 'me' and 'us', need to put back the 'me' in the discourse.
1. ***NOTION OF A COMMUNITY:*** Who are and where is the black community? What are the messages it gives? The notion of the black community should be at the heart of the research.
2. ***OUR NEEDS AS BLACK PROFESSIONALS*** was another big theme.
- Where do we get our support?
  - Who do we, as a people, look to for that support?
  - Should we be complacent that the issue of race that it is being dealt with because we see black practitioners/professionals and managers?

This list gives a flavour of the sorts of issues and questions we were confronted with as researchers. I do not intend to address all these issues or

questions, but I have tried to address some of these questions in the analysis that follows in chapters 7 and 8, some explicitly and others implicitly.

Cathy and I chose an overarching theme of 'success' to write up and present, at the final phase, as it was a theme that we set out to explore at the outset of the project. It was also in keeping with our idea of accentuating the positives in our experiences. However, I was left with a concern that the ideas Cathy and I chose to present might have appeared more important than the ideas other group members generated and become too focused a reference point. Another concern was that we did not circulate our write up before hand. On reflection I regret this, because it was not helpful for some participants as it placed them at an unfair disadvantage. This act was not in the spirit of collaboration and indeed, some participants confirmed that it would have been helpful if they had the paper ahead of the meeting in their feedback at the end of the meeting. I agreed to send my paper on after the meeting. I also sent all the other papers I wrote from the data for this thesis to some group members. I received feedback in writing and from a small group of participant who came together and explored the contents of these papers (see Chapter 9).

At the final meeting, although Cathy and I made a formal presentation, other group members were invited to make informal presentations and some did in the course of the discussion. The presentation stimulated a rich discussion and the group raised more questions. We were continuing to explore and develop the issues we had identified. Opportunities for review and strategies for ways forward were also explored. My main regret was that the group ran out of time at what I thought was an important breakthrough in our thinking about the successes of black professionals.

### **Closing the Inquiry**

How this process is completed when researchers find the inquiry personally, politically and emotionally significant is no doubt complicated. How does one's rapport with people lessen once it is established? How did the participants react to Cathy and me saying it was our end? Some reactions were totally unexpected. It was a very emotional ending with heartfelt gestures of gratitude. Participants fed back on their personal experiences and offered accounts of what changes they made in their personal and professional practice. Some of this feedback was given to me privately rather than in the large forum. Some of the participants in the inquiry had different responses but there was an overwhelming need to continue; if it were not possible to continue the question asked was "where do we go next?"

At such times I imagine research initiators may feel compelled to promise future contacts, to establish friendships and so on, as I did. Naturally, I felt obligated to reciprocate to the participants the valuable material gained and, ultimately, the personal goals I had met. I had to deal with the reality of conducting research that asks for so much and gives relatively little in return.

It is possible to rationalise and intellectualise these feelings by convincing ourselves that our work contributes to the political struggles of our community

and takes issue with ideologies of the academy, yet there is an emotional aspect to the research that is difficult to accept on an intellectual level. Consequently, as with entry into the community of inquirers, departure must be honest and ethical. We did have a closure of the inquiry groups and we ended the present contract.

However, we did not have a final cut off as some of our relationships are still continuing in different ways, for example, seminars for black professionals and discussions about the possibility of a centre for black professional studies which Cathy and I have initiated. It is, evident that one relationship that has continued, throughout the research inquiry and beyond, is the relationship of Cathy and me as friends and as researchers. The quality of Cathy's and my contact and collaboration was an important aspect, in terms of the contribution our relationship made to the space we created and that which we continue to create. Our story of our collaboration is worth commenting on here.

### **Cathy and Agnes story of collaborating**

Among the stories was Cathy and my story, our story of co-operation and collaboration. I agree with Witherell and Noddings, (1991) when they say that "the stories we hear and the stories we tell shape the meaning and texture of our lives at every stage and juncture"(p1). Cathy's and my story did shape the meaning and texture of the inquiry and in capturing the story of our relationship and collaboration on paper I was faced with a number of inquiry questions. For example, how do I capture in written word the identity we formed, our collaborative identity, our partnership, and our relationship? How do I capture in the written word the process of sitting together and writing? In the writing of the inquiry story how and when do I use 'we', 'I' or both? In what follows I shall not necessarily answer these questions but during the process of the telling I shall pay attention to our identity and our process of working and of writing together. I have paid attention to the 'I', 'we' or both in terms of ownership of my own process using 'I' and only including in this story what Cathy has agreed.

Our story was constructed around our coming together with a commitment to understand issues related to education, teaching and learning and students and social workers experiences for social work education. Our partnership would not have happened without our individual commitment to collaboration. I recognised that our sense of inquiry was stimulated through the action research in which we had engaged. We questioned, listened and shared viewpoints and we also respected each other's academic credentials, professional identity and experiences as black women. But our success as collaborators depended on more than that. It was based on trust. Through our stories and conversations we developed the trust and understanding that were vital to us in working together. Through our conversations we questioned who we were. This was not asked explicitly or consciously but in our stories and conversations, which became our vehicles of communication, there were answers to this question.

The university had provided us with the opportunities for collaboration but we created the bonds that could make it happen. Our jointly written papers

represent one form of our interaction, but words were written in these published documents which were not shared until our relationship had reached the level of trust and mutual understanding which could only be developed collaboratively over time. Although we did not consciously structure our time to get to know each other, in retrospect, I realised that we deliberately did make time for each other. Although we were colleagues and friends working in the same institution our friendship only deepened through our collaboration around the research.

The sharing of our stories emerged as threads, which became women connecting. Our first attempt to develop our joint connection was through the writing of the paper that led to the initiation of this research project. We spent many hours in conversation, discussions, dialogues and discourse in preparation for the writing of that paper. We were both excited about the idea of researching and writing together, but did not really know each other. There were questions that I asked at the beginning such as: Could we take risks and be honest? Would we be too critical of one another? Could we relate to each other as black women? Would we have problems with competition? What were some of our differences and would we feel comfortable with each other's differences? Would we be able to speak of them?

These questions were based on the need to develop a deeper level of trust than that which had existed prior to our collaborative work. According to Darling-Hammond (1994), "development of trust, identification of individual interests and objective – can become the basis for common goals and mutual interest, creation of ways of talking and ways of working together that bridge cultural and communication differences" (p21). Establishing trust is just one of the many obstacle which needs to be negotiated in the development of a collaborative relationship.

Many of these questions I believe were negotiated through the sharing of our professional and personal stories. I believe that our thoughts and actions were part of a strong desire to build a collaborative identity. I also believe that the strongest connection between us was established through emotional experiences of jointly touring the Caribbean islands, each taking responsibility for getting to know one or other and preparing ourselves for embarking on our research journey. The more time we spent together the more stories we told. Through these stories we gave birth to the research project and, over the course of the seven years of our partnership, we also shared narratives of life events, events that were both common and uncommon to the two of us. Events such as the frustration and joys of leaving the Caribbean as children and migrating to a strange land, of the differences we experienced in the school system and our experiences of being schooled in Britain.

Our stories were a conduit for developing trust because they promoted understanding and extended parameters between us in a non-threatening manner. It was wonderful to have someone to talk to about my students, our students, my practice, personal concerns, someone who acted as a critical friend. At the time I experienced feelings of sisterhood.

Throughout the years, our separate identities remained intact, but by creating stories through collaboration and by developing trust through our stories, a composite identity formed that better enabled us to work together in more substantive and meaningful ways. We were developing an intuitive way of knowing. It took time, energy and commitment to build the kind of relationship, which was necessary to recognise and bring to fruition our journey into the collaborative research.

Through our discussions with each other we questioned the way we were acting in the research, our facilitation of the inquiry groups and how we were transferring what we had been learning from our own experiences of collaboration – the value of trust. We discussed how we would write up the work and what aspects we would choose to focus on for presentation to the whole community of inquirers. We also discussed what aspects of the work we would personally focus on in the writing of our individual theses. Even when our paths on the research journey diverted and I began to focus on inquiring into my practice as a teacher, our partnership and commitment to each other remained intact, with Cathy participating in my inquiry in the role of critical friend and observer of my practice. We continued to collaborate on ideas about teaching black students in the process of her feeding back on my practice.

Our years of collaboration in this research project resulted in practical outcomes, which have meant our continued relationship and collaboration. Cathy and I in addition to other participants from the research project, have been developing ways of making our experiences public and have ideas for setting up a centre for black professional practice. However, since the co-operative inquiry has ended, Cathy and I have collaborated over another action research project, this time with both black and white social work students from our Department and with Dutch social work students, exploring issues of intercultural communication. Another outcome has been the staging of seminars and a conference for black students and professionals at which the knowledge gained from the research was shared.

## **Conclusion**

In the chapter that follows I shall evaluate the inquiry in terms of its validity and outcomes.

