

This is not the version of record. The final version of Akhtar, Farrukh (2022) The courage to see and be seen : the emotional labour of decolonising social work curricula for Black educators in the UK. *Social Dialogue*, 26, p. 11. can be found at: https://socialdialogue.online/sd26/11_article.html

Pushing through politically correct rhetoric: the emotional labour of decolonising social work curricula for Black educators in the UK

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The Black Lives Matter movement has acted as a catalyst across the world, on many levels. One of these has been for calls to decolonise higher education (HE) curricula. This includes renewed pressure on academics to review social work curricula in the United Kingdom (UK). A key task in reviewing current curricula involves scrutinising and deconstructing it. This paper identifies and examines some of the complexities involved for Black educators, focusing specifically on the emotional labour involved, and makes recommendations for supporting all staff in what can be a harrowing, but valuable process.

Keywords: decolonising curricula, emotional labour, racism, relationship-based practice, Black educators

Background

I feel a certain amount of trepidation as I begin writing this paper. I am aware of the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement, the calls to 'decolonise the

curriculum' (Alvares and Faruqi, 2011) and the pressures bearing down on UK educators to transform the social work curriculum.

Nevertheless, I think it's important to begin by clarifying definitions and the context of this paper. There is not currently a single, agreed term that can be used to describe the diverse range of experiences of people of colour. The term BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) has been rejected by many for implying an assumption of similarity without recognition of diversity (Dacosta et al, 2021; Ali, 2020). In this paper, I use the term Black, with a capital B, as a collective and political term to include those in the UK who have 'suffered colonialism and enslavement in the past and continue to experience racism and diminished opportunities in today's society' (Unison, 2013). I don't pretend that everyone's experience is the same, but acknowledge the value of a collective voice.

I also use examples from my experiences as an educator to highlight specific terms and concepts. I appreciate that this is a tricky terrain, placing me at risk of making broad stereotypical assumptions. I have come to understand this is a huge risk in any discussion around decolonising the curriculum but one that needs to be taken to enable difficult discussions to begin and for the work to be done meaningfully.

De-colonising refers to 'deconstructing and challenging the ideology of colonisation' (Mathebane, et al, 2018), the process in which colonisers' culture and values have been internalised. How this is done will vary according to the locality, the content of the curricula, the intersectionality of educators and the

meaning the current curricula holds for them. Educators and students may have a rich history of parents and grandparents with origins in the British Commonwealth, and complex narratives imbued with layers of meaning around this.

This paper focuses on the emotional labour of decolonising social work curricula for Black educators. Readers specifically interested in the experience of Black students are directed to Richardson, (2015) and Bunce et al, (2019) for a helpful discussion. The term 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) refers to the process whereby emotions have to be suppressed, instead of being expressed naturally and authentically. Hochschild referred to the commodification of emotions, in the marketized world of flight attendants, learning to suppress their own emotions to meet the needs of their customers. In this paper, the same concept is used to refer to the challenges that Black educators face in working alongside colleagues, to deconstruct and challenge a colonised social work curriculum within the structures of a colonised HE framework.

Emotional labour can mean a sense of overwhelm, a sense of having to disassociate from an essential part of one's being. As Hochschild (1983) noted, it can be experienced as the loss of something vital and sacred.

Statistics show that Black educators currently make up only nine percent of professors in UK HE (Advance HE, 2021) but are often likely to be placed in positions of leading work around decolonising curricula. This presents them with

additional marginalization and possible isolation (Gunaratnam and Lewis, 2001, Doharty et al, 2021, Doku, 2019 and Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020).

At the heart of the work around decolonising the curriculum are concepts of **'sameness and difference'** (Akhtar, 2013). This refers to the process whereby assumptions are made on the basis of assumed similarities or differences in social characteristics between people.

Observing physical differences can be a direct and obvious way doing this. It is easy for students to see the race, gender and age of lecturers and perhaps make assumptions about them, and their approachability. For example, white students starting at a London university for the first time, not used to mixing with a diverse range of people, can take some time to weigh up Black colleagues and educators.

On the other hand, if two people share social characteristics, there can be a tendency for assumptions to be made on the basis of those commonalities. For example, I have seen some Black students warm towards me and discuss very personal issues, such as difficult family situations and circumstances of extreme poverty. My sense has been that this relates to a connection of perceived similarity as us both being Black.

At the heart of these encounters is the search for **assumed commonality** - the assumption that the other person has a shared knowledge and value base and that they can understand us on the basis of this. There can also be a process of working out if somebody is in or outside of one's group. Those who are seen as outside of one's group can be in danger of being 'othered', falling prey to

unconscious stereotypes, biases and assumptions.

All educators learn how they can make themselves more or less approachable to students, and may also have a sense of the impact they have on students with different characteristics to their own. But I have found it is powerful to become aware, and to find a way of acknowledging sameness and difference in the early stages of relationship building with students. It shows them that you have *seen* them and provides a language to articulate hard to name feelings. I usually do this by focusing on social work values and relationship-based practice as part of students' induction. The message is clear: everyone is welcome.

This is the start of the work. As it gets underway, educators need to be mindful of how intersectionality, and the concepts of sameness and difference (Akhtar, 2016) can show up can in classroom discussions and also in written assignments. The addition of diverse case materials in teaching and assessment is long overdue, but brings with it, its own complexities and emotional load. At times, it has been excruciating for me, as a Black educator, to read assignments where students of all races have made stereotypical and often racist assumptions about case studies based on religion, culture or ethnicity.

Of course, I have had to manage these emotions; manage what feels like a double betrayal because I thought we had spent so much time in class trying to discuss the complexity of intersectionality, only to find that I had made assumptions about students' ability to do this. I have found Fook's work (2000)

on the development of social work identity hugely helpful here. She points out that students can be 'self-centric' and focussed on technical proficiency (getting the maximum marks possible from an assignment) rather than focused on having an attitude of open and curious inquiry. I have been left feeling concerned about Black students making racist assumptions in their work – concerned about their understanding of technical proficiency, and how much of themselves they feel they need to discard to do well academically and the long-term consequences of this. (Readers may find Dall'Alba and Barnacle's (2015) discussion around 'discordant professional practice' useful).

There is the constant question of how more space can be created within the curriculum to explore assumptions that underpin our judgements. Taylor and White (2000) refer to this as epistemic reflexivity. I have been wracked with concern around my vision of the ideal curricula which is decolonised, where somehow, I have found a magic formula that gives Black students 'permission' to fully acknowledge and be themselves, and white students' permission to name and 'own' experiences of 'white fragility' (Di Angelo, 2011).

Thankfully, I have been reminded by wise colleagues (to whom I am grateful) of the complexity of recognising, naming and transforming the 'hidden curriculum' and 'hidden cultures' in HE (Fook, 2017). For me, this involves having the courage to have difficult discussions with colleagues. This work can feel intensely isolating, and again, I am grateful to the fragile spaces in which my colleagues and I have been able to express ourselves. (Readers may find Doku's (2019) and Doharty et al's (2021) papers helpful in exploring the isolation of Black educators further).

A key point here is that the emotional impact of decolonising the curriculum is different for Black and white educators. At times, it may be that Black educators feel they have to bypass the part of them that feels desecrated or dishonoured to present a more rational self (Gunaratnam and Lewis, 2001). The emotional labour involved in doing this may lead to them feeling that there is no space for their authentic selves in the academy.

Crenshaw's term 'mutual elision' (cited in Leavitt and Harris, 2020) is useful here. They describe this as a 'psychical force operating at the interface between individual and social-unconscious.' The emotional pain of acknowledging oppression is so great that both oppressor and the oppressed deny that oppression is happening.

For Black educators working in predominantly white organisations, the 'mutual elision' refers to the process in which they are 'othered' by being constantly placed in an untenable position, at a micro and macro level. However, the work around decolonising the curriculum cannot happen without creating an environment which challenges and questions the status quo. The journey towards more level playing field for all students comes with a heavy price (Cane, 2021).

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