

BHM 2021 Presentations

What works to improve inclusivity in social work education? (27 Oct)

Dr Claire Baptiste:

CLAIRE FELIX-BAPTISTE: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you very much for joining me this afternoon. The aim of today is to talk you through my doctoral findings, but also share best practice in relation to what works in supporting Black students. I think I want to start off by saying that Black students can perform equally, if not better than their white counterparts if they are adequately supported. And I think my research demonstrates that quite well.

The objectives, I think we've got an hour and a half. I'm going to tell you a little bit about myself, and I'll tell you a little bit about my doctoral study and the outcomes. I'm going to give you a new definition of academic success, and this relates specifically to social work education.

I'm going to share with you what influences academic success on the social work degree and then share with you not my role at the OU, but in a previous higher education institution. I can share with you what works and best practice in relation to supporting Black students.

OK, let's kick off. A little bit about me. My name's Claire Felix-Baptiste. I am 57 years old. I retired about two years ago. I retired from higher education. I was well semi-retired. I come from a very humble background. I started off as a street trader when I left school in 1982. And I spent 18 years as a social work practitioner.

And my work experience in terms of social work includes working alongside disfranchised youth, domestic violence survivors, and the perpetrators of domestic abuse. I have worked in forensic mental health. And in terms of mental health, I've worked as a national service developer.

So historically my last practice role I was looking at research and then finding the income to develop new service models in relation to mental health. And this was particularly important for the voluntary sector I capacity built the voluntary sector not just in London but across the country.

I still have a number of services which I set up maybe 15 years ago. Hillingdon advocacy project is one, there's an advocacy project in Kneesworth House and at Brampton. So those are some of the services. Oh, and I've got a project in the mosque in Birmingham, a mental health project. So that's my history as a practitioner.

I have been working for the OU since about 2004 and I have taught on modules-- social work modules K113, K215, and K316. I did take a 3 year break away from teaching at the OU once I went away to complete my doctorate. But I subsequently came back in 2020.

In addition to that, the last 12 years I have been-- I was working at a traditional University, London South Bank, and I was the course director there between 2015 and 2019 before I retired. However, whilst there I noticed that my students were not performing as described in the literature. My students were performing well. They were successful and achieving, and I was interested in looking at why.

In terms of my background, my experience mirrored many of the participants that I worked with. As you can see, I started off as a street trader with just five CSEs and today I am a Doctor of Social Work Education and I'm making a contribution to the national workforce. And I think my-- what I say to my students is do not put-- don't put limitations on what you can do. Anything is possible if you're persistent and if you're determined.

Cracking the code was an ethically approved study which included five social work educators and 11 students or former students. These students had all completed the social work degree. They may not have received their award as yet, but they had all completed their degree. All the educators were working for the institution at the time.

Now I chose this group because I knew a lot about them, and I had first-hand experience of teaching, learning, and assessment on the course. The participants as you can see, I had 13 female and three male participants. Now seven of these participants had DDA status. They had some sort of disability.

Now it's quite interesting finding that. And I feel it would be nice to move the research to the next stage and look at that. Why is it that higher levels of students with disabilities are attracted to social work education because this is not a new finding? Section 5, you can see the ethnic make-up of the group, Eight Black African, one African Black, two Black Caribbean, and three Black British. And then I had two who described themselves as white other.

These participants age range from 24 to 53. These are the student participants and the educators 39 to 63. You'll notice that there is an age difference between those groups. And I think that just reflects the educators work experience before they came into education. The

data itself was carried out throughout one-to-one interviews. The data for the interviews for the students and the educators were analysed separately, themed, and then triangulated for reliability.

Now, why did I carry out the study? I carried out the study for lots of reasons. What I was reading in the day, I had an interest in Black students anyway, their performance because I've always worked in London. And I was curious about why my students were not performing as described in the literature.

I was keen to showcase best practice, and these were the results for the three years before I left the University. As you can see, I had on average about 89% of my students left with a good degree, and I've used Kirk AUH 2009's definition of a good degree, which is a 2, 1 or a first-class degree. That doesn't happen very often in London, and it certainly doesn't happen anywhere else in relation to social work-- social work education.

Just to tell you a little bit about the population, sorry. My study aims. The aims of my study were initially I think were to examine the newly qualified social workers epistemological beliefs, actions, and personal constructs on academic success. How did they understand academics success? What actions or behaviours did they attribute to academic success?

So, the objectives were to identify behavioural factors that may or may not have contributed to academic-- to success on the course, to examine any differences between newly qualified social worker understandings and their educator understandings of academic success.

I was keen to gain an understanding of what academic success meant to students. To some students, some students just want to pass. They just want to get that 40% and get through whilst other students you give them 74 and they come back and say, oh, what else do I need to do to get me-- to get a higher mark? So, I was looking to say, well, what's the difference between those students, what made a difference?

I was keen to identify any support structures that the students drew on whilst they were undertaking the course. And we know that social work students are not likely to use the support mechanisms within the institution. I was looking to draw conclusions that may support curriculum development opportunities and influence social work education in relation to policy and pedagogy.

What do we know about the student population? Well, what I can say to you is that what we know, and we know this from the work of Parker, Binod, TVEM 2014, and we could even go back as far as Monroe and Hussein, Dylan, Richardson, Colleen, and this is only going back

the last 20 years. This is research that's been done on Black students who are studying the social work degree.

We know that Black students do not perform as well as their white counterparts. That's very clear from our outcome statements. Black students are less likely to obtain a good degree. They are more likely to obtain a third class or an unclassified degree. In terms of social work education, they are more likely to withdraw, be withdrawn or experience delays in terms of their progression.

We know that Black students are least likely to get a job six months after completing their degree. They're paid up to 25% less than their white peers in relation to social work. Black students disproportionately experience imposter syndrome whilst they're studying. We also know that the impact of social forces contribute to the lower levels of self-esteem and self- and self-worth on Black students, and that in turn has an impact on their achievement.

We know that in recent years that research that has been done mainly by institutions has blamed the students for their deficiencies as opposed to looking at what the institution can do. Educational providers continue to ignore and trivialize student differential outcomes in fact in favour of blissful normativity. It's not normal. And I think that we all have a role as educators, a moral role to look at the differences in relation to the attainment gap.

The very first thing I did, I did interviews. I did face to face interviews and online interviews. So, these are some of the responses in relation to I asked the students, what did you-- what do you understand by academic success and what does it mean to you? So, this was a response from a participant. That was a participant five.

This is an educator understanding. You can see that they have very, very different understandings or constructs of academic success. Academic success in the literature is generally measured by prior academic performance pre-entry ability, and then final grades, but you can see that it's very different-- it was very different for the participants.

This is a synthesis of the findings. This is what the students and the educators said about their understanding of academic success. First of all, what they had in common was that they talked about attendance at in an academic environment. They talked about recognition and encouragement. They wanted to be recognized in school and encouraged to do well.

They said that academic success was about achieving personal goals. It was about determination and persistence. It was linked to progression, retention, institutional support and encouragement. And the students themselves asked to be believed. Despite the British societal racial undertones, they wanted people to believe that they could do well as a starting

point. Can I say that the last four, determination, progression, and institutional support were linked to attendance.

On the other side, other findings in terms of the synthesis were that having a degree was linked to a rite of passage. There was a cultural expectation for some particularly the West African students and the East Africa that you must get a degree. It was no different from getting married, being christened, making your first communion. They saw that it was something that they had to do to succeed within their own communities.

Academic success was about personal achievement. And for many students, there were careerist motivations. They wanted to be a professional. They wanted to join a professional body and have a career. And then finally, students were just keen to obtain a social work degree. They just wanted that degree whilst others were keen to seek newly qualified social work status.

Once you passed the social work degree, students do not automatically get the right to register. They have to do a year of being assessed whilst in practice. It's almost like passing your driving test and you've got to drive around with the green L plates to let everybody know that you are newly qualified, beware.

From the synthesis, I was able to create a new definition of academic success. And what I found that the key components were, one, the attendance at an educational institution where one was encouraged to make personal gains in return for recognition and personal rewards, so that's my new definition of academic success. I have sent my paper off to the social work educational journal and I'm hoping for a response. So hopefully in the future, you'll be able to quote me.

I just really want to just think-- quickly think about what students brought. What did they bring? And that's useful to us as educators. Well, very, very quickly students brought capital to the course when they join, but different types of capital. The very first was economic. Some students were self-financing whilst others their families were paying from abroad for them to undertake the course.

So, they brought in economic. And an economic capital it's about resources, it's about property rights, it's about inheritance and those students were able to trade those capitals for other forms of capital. Capital is institutional. In fact, they also brought in cultural capital. And this was institutionalized, for example, educational qualifications.

They had resources which were objectified, they run their own cars, they run their own homes. Some of them even had studies at home within their own home, and these were things that helped them succeed on the coast, having access to these things.

Thinking more about cultural capital, an example of that may be qualification. A number of our students who we take it South Bank, who we took at South Bank already had educational privileges. A number of them already had degrees. However, those degrees were undertaken overseas, and the students insisted on returning to education and returning to level 4 to build their-- to build their confidence.

Students also came with social capital in that they used people who were around them who could help them succeed in their course. That might have been their tutors, it might have been their practice educators, it may have been the friends or peers around them.

The capitals that I've referred to refer directly to Bordeaux's capitals because that was the framework that I used for my research in terms of organizing my findings. I also took a feminine logical approach to the research because I was interested in the raw experiences of the students and their educators.

One of the things that came up in terms of students what they reported because these are their voices, these are their own words is that they found year one-- they were overwhelmed with the information that was given in year one, and part of that was the induction, the first four or six weeks that student struggled with that. We know that's difficult for students because that's often when we see up to a 5% dropout rate following the induction.

However, in year one students talked about embracing support, but then being able to manage their time. They were shocked by the diversity of the participants, and they found year one challenging. However, they use self-determination to push them through.

Things that help them were reading. Some students talked about procrastinating in year one whilst other students, many students talked about the value of group work, and we're going to back to that. Some students felt neglected or unprepared for university life. So that says to us that there is some work for us to do in that first six weeks to make sure students understand what's expected of them, time on task, and where to go for support.

We also heard about skills development that students went both internally to South Bank but also externally to short courses where they could develop their academic and professional skills. Students talked about the university environment being alien to them and not having-- not feeling a sense of belonging. However, the same group of students talked about going the

extra mile, doing additional courses both during university time but also outside in their own time. And that's quite an investment I think in terms of social work.

Year two. This is what students said about year two. And as you can see, the students again talked about going the extra mile. They talked about their time, managing their time because they were-- in the second-year students are on placement for four days a week and they have one day of study, and they found that quite a challenge. Most students said it was a challenge for them.

Students felt neglected because they only had one day's teaching and four days in placement. They didn't have a lot of time with their personal tutor. A number of students reported feeling neglected. Students even that year two said that they were unfamiliar with the academic standards. Again, that's an area that we need to focus on.

Students took on online-- additional online activities. They manage their time better. They didn't have a choice. If they wanted to succeed, they had to manage their times. They express self-determination. External skills development. Again, some students did procrastinate, and they also talked about tutor engagement. Sorry. They talked about tutor engagement.

In fact, in year two, 70% of the students talked about the benefits of reading and how that contributed. And that doesn't surprise us. They talked about group work and self-directed groups and communities of learning. They talked about cultural expectations that they had to get the degree and how important it was not just to them, but to their families, their siblings, their church communities.

These are the findings from year three, about year three. Now, you can see that in year three there was stronger tutor and student engagement. Students again even up to year three was still doing internal skills development courses, but also, they were going outside to other courses. They talked about procrastination. They talked about reading.

At this stage of the course, the students talked about burnout. A number of students talked about almost feeling burnt out, and that may have had to do with the model that we use to deliver the program with one day at uni and then the placement, 100 days in placement. Student talked about the importance of practice placement and put in some of the theories that they've learned into practice.

Overall, my student reported-- most students reported a positive experience. In addition to that, a number of students reported that they experienced low self-esteem. They still in the

third year had problems, found time and time management a challenge. Cultural values, they talked a lot about in the third year and engaging in online activities to help them succeed.

They just talked about firming, tutor engagement, self-determination, still going the extra mile and group work. Now across those three years there were some very clear common themes, reading as a factor. Students talked about core readers and what they wanted from core readers.

They talked about second readers, using peers that you read this chapter and I'll read it by this person and then we'll come together and let's critique. Let's look at the differences. What do you bring to this article that I can't bring? They talked about reading for a purpose, having questions in advance before they picked up the book.

They talked about developing skills in speed reading, reading widely, skim reading, using glossaries and indices and on average reading for eight hours a week. Now, listen they're doing a bloody degree. It's expected that you've got to read. If you don't read, you can't accumulate the knowledge that you need to pass the assessments. So that wasn't a shock to me; however, what was is that I found that as the student went along, they read more intelligently.

And what they asked for was that they wanted their core readers-- reading to be more specific. Give me the page numbers, the chapter, and the writing. Can I have a link so I can get to the article immediately electronically, so I have it on my desktop. And they ask them for those to be more accessible very similar to what we do at the OU.

But remember I was at a traditional university where immediate access is not-- yes, all student they had access to the library, but not immediate access to the articles that we were suggesting that they read. So, we improved accessibility. We were more specific in the selection of articles or core readers that we gave them, and the students were reading more intelligently.

They were also reading more thoughtfully and actively. They were critiquing what they were reading, and they were reading reflectively with insight. And I suppose going back, they used regressive reading. They were going back to check their understanding. Reading was a core factor that influenced the success on the social work degree. And I think that goes without saying. These are the spoken words in terms of participant.

I'm going to just switch over to the next slide just in terms of group work. Do students found great value in group work and in fact, what they did was they self-selected peers for group

work, they actively looked for students who were motivated, highly motivated or as motivated as they were, and they formed peer groups. They formed communities of learners.

In fact, they created a fixed learning identity with their self-directed groups. Students negotiated their surroundings. I had students who met on a Sunday in their car for an hour after church. I had other students, and I remember that these are Black students who formed plaiting groups or hair groups where they met on a Sunday where these women themselves had young girls and we know as Black families that we have to plait the hair once a week for them to go to school. And the students got together, and they plait each other's hair while they were discussing the themes that they'd heard in the lectures in the week.

What they said was that group work allowed them to set authentic tasks. They saw group work as a third modality for learning. They made better use of the University social space with group work and some students formed study buddies. What they said was that group work gave them the opportunity to share ideas, interact with peers to brainstorm, collaborate, discuss, and form a learning community.

So, in summary, academic success is driven by participation, that's the students who were equipped who were engaged in programs of activity outside of the university or their academic obligations gained greater exposure to the curriculum. Those who put themselves forward to be reps, those who attended course boards, those who stood up as ambassadors for the University, they have a better understanding of the University landscape, and therefore did better in relation to the assessments.

Students use the learning environment like a conduit to develop an understanding of the degrees, culture, and human interchange. They the space for intellectual talk, which is what universities should be. Bear in mind that my study was done just before COVID, yeah, just before COVID came in.

Students participated by getting to know the learning environment, understood what the University-- the additional services that the University that offered. Other students said that they felt alien to the University while others said that they felt-- a few said that they felt comfortable within the University.

Participation helped self-informed and involvement with the University for student representation, communities, and ambassadors. So, these are the roles that students' tickets. I think students need to do more than just come into that two-hour lecture or that four hours teaching and then go home. We need to be encouraging students to make better use of the universe-- the liberal University space, because that's what it was created for. The diversity of

the course made a difference. This is what one of the participants said about the diversity of the course.

Just to say on that what was evident through the data that I analysed was that Black academics were singled out as being particularly aspirational to the students and that they had a better understanding of the individual student and their personal situations. So, there are some benefits in relation to diversity.

Students also were pleased with the choice because where we offered students a choice of assessment. You don't have to write an essay. Not everybody's good at essays. We looked at how else can we meet those learning outcomes by giving students an alternative assessment method.

Impact of ethnicity. Now this wasn't so positive, but I don't think there's anything there that we don't know. Students were concerned about language. Some of the students who had accents were concerned about speaking up in class. They felt that they were ignored by tutors, and that they were the back of the jokes in the classroom barely because of their accents. Some students talked about experiencing microaggressions from other students in the group.

I would argue that some of the students because of language and microaggressions, these same students were not able to come out and voice their concerns in the classroom. So, some of the problems that Black students experienced may be self-imposed.

Some students said that they lacked a sense of belonging in the school. Others reported the curriculum alien to them. It just didn't make any sense. They just couldn't see themselves in it. Others had high aspirations of the course. They were in universities, they must have high aspirations; however, they had very low expectations of their tutor, and I think that's an area for further development, for further research.

Our Black students came into school with the perception that white students had it easier, that white students did better. And I'm sure that was a result of the messages that the social influences, the messages that they get from society that as a Black student you're not going to do well, you're not going to do a job, you're not going to get-- you're not going to get a good job. And even if you do get a job, you're going to be earning less than your white counterparts. And I think that impacted on their expectations and their aspirations to do well.

So, in summary, the keys to academic success are the course-- the diversity, the level of diversity in the course, individual motivations, navigated capitals, collaborative relationships, and of course institutional factors.

I want you just to have a look at this just for five minutes. Where do you see yourself? Unbecoming? Anti-racist? Where would you put yourself? Are you in zone-- the fear zone? Are you in the learning zone? And are you in the growth zone?

Once you've identified where you are, I want you to do a list, an action list, what can you do to move from one zone to the other? And if you are already in the growth zone, what can you do to bring your peers and your colleagues into this zone? It will take five minutes to do that and then I've got a final slide for you.

Now, I've told you about my research and I made it sound like it was on me. It definitely wasn't all me because what works-- what we know what works leadership is, strong leadership. I had to influence my whole team to say, well, let's look at our student module evaluation reports. What are the outcomes? What are the disparities? Are there disparities?

We also looked at the National Student Survey, at the qualitative data what students said about the course, and we developed action plans. We also all had as a team all had unconscious bias training so that we could understand what was happening with the data that we were getting.

The institution introduced blind marking. We also increased tutor and student contact. In fact, we asked students to form a tutorial contract with their tutors so that they would meet them the minimum of twice a semester, that's 6 times over the period of the course.

We introduced diagnostic formative assessments for all assessments, for all modules so we could test where students are and then give them feedback. We reviewed the course curriculum and we have plans to change it for validation. But it was very clear there were some changes that we could do now and make immediately. There were some changes that we couldn't do until the following semester, the next academic year and then they were long term. The validation plans were in the long-term plans.

The other thing that we did which students said it was useful was we brought in an ethnically diverse range of guest speakers from the industry and from other professions and educators. We get students to critically reflect on their identities and how that might impact on their learning.

All students have a-- gets to understand, gets to do a learning style questionnaire in year one and they work through their continued professional development plans annually, and they do that with their personal tutor. So, this was a new. The other thing that we did, we brought in academic development props.

At the end of level 4, we gave students two sessions so that they could understand what was required at level 5. And then at the end of level 5, again, we gave them another prop so that they would understand what was required at level 6. If you bear in mind Bloom's taxonomy, year 1 level 4 students should be able to describe and explain, level 2 they should be able to evaluate what they're reading and their understandings of core themes.

By the third year, they should be critically analysing what they're reading and the themes that they've chosen. But very few students understood the differences in terms of what was expected between the years. So, it's very clear that we need a very clear communication strategy not just at the beginning of the course, but at the end of each program as students move from Level 4 to 5 and then 5 to 6.

Again, I said we took a team approach in terms of we looked at all our assessments and ensured that students were offered a range of different assessment methods that met the same outcome. So, choose students where possible can choose the assessments, their assessment method.

We also introduced exemplar modelling so every single module will have a first-class essay available for students to review so they can see the standard that they're expected to reach. And then we introduced placement surgery, so advice-- academic advice surgeries for students so that they can pop in for one day a week. So, it wasn't just my work in terms of cracking the code. All these things in terms of what works also need to be considered if we are going to improve outcomes for Black students or reduce the attainment gap.

Now, a bit of exercise. I want you to think about yourself just to take five minutes and do a reflection. You can see my results here. These are the results that I managed to achieve. What can you do to reduce the attainment gap? I want you spend 10 minutes and just write in freestyle what things can you take back to your team for possible action immediately, intermediately medium term for the next academic year, and then long term for the next 12 to 18 months.

Whatever you choose it's got to be specific, it's got to be measurable, and it's got to be achievable, realistic and time bound. I'm going to take you back to my slide. These are the things that is there anything on there that you could introduce to your module immediately that's going to help reduce that attainment gap? Thank you.

I'm going to leave you doing that and I'm going to move to the chat box so I can see if there are any questions in the chat box. Fideo, we've set up a group as part of the EU in order to get students working and they don't work that well. However, when students go forward, they sometimes collide into other groups. Lovely, thank you very much. Great work.

Again, there is something about Black people and being in communities that we function better. We are products of communities. We talk about ability to raise a child. I mean you can't do it on your own. You've got to do it with others. Role models. Lovely, it can play a role, definitely if students can mirror themselves against the educators, they will have higher expectations. There's lots of research to tell you that same ways education works.

Prior extension placement. Yes, it does, lovely. It is part of the student's cultural capital. The other thing is that we know that in social work some students come in with A-levels, free A-levels. I have students come in with an access course that causes a divide, an attainment divides in terms of students because students who can do A-levels can think analytically. Yes, we've been doing it for two years, very different from those who come in via an access course.

Any other questions at all? Being in groups will motivate your peers. Lovely. Had to be the setup to teachers in lecturers. Thank you. What my student said is that they wanted to choose their own groups. They self-selected peers that had high levels of motivation. Lovely.

Intelligent reading. Lovely. But they can only read intelligently if we give them the page numbers and the chapters, and we make it accessible for them. Most books now are available on E. Talk to your libraries about changing the hard copies to e copies. That would be my advice.

I hope that's been useful to you all and that you've all got some ideas of how you can take the attainment back. But you can do some work. I think the key thing is to talk to your teams, look at your module data, see what areas that you need to improve on because there is always, always an opportunity to improve. Thank you all very much. I hope you found it interesting. If you want to know more, don't hesitate. You can find me in the OU. It's Claire Felix-Baptiste.

You will find me in the contact box.