

4 Padare: a meeting around a tree

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Chapter aims

This chapter will consider how group work can offer BME, and in particular black African students, support during their educational journey.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS TO BE ADDRESSED

Social work training is academically and personally challenging. What types of support strategies are effective for students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds?

Introduction

This chapter will look at the benefits and challenges of being a black student on a social work programme, and in particular being an African student. This will be achieved by exploring the student support group at the University of Northampton, Padare, which was formed in 2008 by the black African social work students as their response to a need for support and friendship outside of regular teaching and study. I will examine previous work undertaken by the university with black African students by exploring the background to Padare, its aims and objectives as well as its strengths and challenges. You will be invited to consider group work theory, contemporary issues relating to peer support and mentoring within a higher educational setting. A number of metaphors will be used to illustrate different ways of thinking and to further develop well-known concepts such as collectivism.

Background

Together with two colleagues (Prospera Tadam and Sue Kennedy), we undertook a study to try to understand the educational journey of African social work students (Bartoli *et al.*, 2008). Our collective teaching experience at the time was that it appeared that African social work students were experiencing more difficulties (both academically and whilst on practice learning) compared to other students on the programme. Our black students' experience mirrored that being reported nationally, which strongly indicates that students from Black

and Ethnic Minority groups (BME) take longer to complete their studies (GSCC, 2009; Hussein *et al.*, 2006, 2008, 2009).

We become curious as to *why* this might be the case for our students and what, if anything, we could do differently. In an attempt to learn *from* and *with* the students, a focus group was set up to which all the African social work students studying at the university at the time were invited. The purpose was to enable academics to better understand the students' personal and collective stories, to *learn about black perspectives; and build alliances with black people by agreeing common objectives to create egalitarian partnerships* (Dominelli, 2008, p 33).

The General Social Care Council (GSCC), the former regulatory body for social work, has indicated that since 2007 black African students are the second largest ethnic group enrolling onto social work programmes in England and Wales.

The students involved in the study came from a range of countries within the African continent, including Ghana, Zimbabwe, Cameroon and Nigeria. The study sought to gain a better understanding of the students' experiences and perceptions, which included:

- gaining low grades;
- failing aspects of assessment;
- achieving high grades in familiar assessment strategies (ie law examination);
- struggling in practice learning environments;
- the need for a support group.

The practice learning experience has been explored and written about elsewhere, but will be referred to within this chapter (Bartoli *et al.*, 2008).

Definition of terms

The term *international student* within a higher education (HE) context is defined within a narrow category, which describes a student's fee-paying status. Many of the Padare students are not deemed international students, but *home* students, due to the number of years they have lived in the UK.

To consider all international students as one homogenous group without recognising difference is unhelpful and furthermore it ignores diversity of experience, heritage, culture, language and history (Hyland *et al.*, 2008; Trahar, 2007). It also undermines different approaches to learning (Brown and Joughin, 2007). It is not my intention to somehow categorise all African students as one singular group or suggest that they are *all* the same. However, some similarities in experience have been shared and this will be commented upon, usually in the student's own words. It is important to remember that culture is not merely positioned within a geographical location; instead it weaves within and across cultures – none more so than in a continent as vast as Africa (Welikala and Watkins, 2008).

Defining the word *internationalisation* is complex and parallels can be drawn between defining this term within an educational context and discourses within social work (Bartoli, 2011) in

terms of professional identity (Cree, 2003), and what international social work looks like (Gray and Fook, 2004; Nagy and Faulk, 2000; Razack, 2009). Defining *internationalisation* within higher education is problematic and subject of much debate. The definition is far from precise as it has a number of meanings, approaches and interpretations (Koutsantoni, 2006). This is because the definition largely depends on the individual, political and national context or organisational perspective. Similarly, *social work is always subject to competing claims of definition and practice and cannot be separated from the society in which it is located* (Cree, 2003, p 4). Despite these discrepancies, both the approaches and definitions of the internationalisation of higher education and global social work have been accused of being based upon Western educational and social ideologies, which are then imposed upon others with little regard to diversity or curricula relevance (Gray and Fook, 2004).

The birth of Padare

Within the aforementioned study (Bartoli *et al.*, 2008), all of the students and lecturers recognised the benefits of being together and openly discussing both the high and low points of the educational journey. A bond was formed, which, from a student perspective, until this point had been formal. The study, whilst deliberately bringing together a specific group of people, had inadvertently promoted the concept and realisation of the benefits of such a group.

After listening carefully to students, as academics, we concluded that the black African students' experience and journey through the social work programme was diverse and complex (Bartoli *et al.*, 2008). The students' starting point was at a different place to that of their white student peers and therefore it was necessary to create and support a particular space to meet this need within their educational journey. It demanded us to not necessarily do anything *more* but to do something *different* to support the student in adjusting to the transition of higher education (Carroll and Ryan, 2005).

Within the original focus group, a number of strategies were discussed and one was the need for a support group. This was instantly and aptly named *Padare*.

PADARE: Pronounced pa-dar-ay, this is a Zimbabwean (Shona) term for a 'meeting place', where ideas are generated and exchanged. Traditionally, the concept of Padare is one of an open communal discussion, typically gathered around a tree, where people feel safe but are prepared to take risks, gather new ideas and share stories.

A tree

Padare began as a support group run by and for black African social work students. The essence of setting up the Padare group was to initiate a forum to provide encouragement and sharing of information. The outcome of this approach to supporting black African students was hugely embraced by the students. The forum has not only empowered black African students, but also has resulted in the promotion of their academic performances, including verbal contribution in lectures, attaining higher educational grades and progressing successfully in their practice learning.



The icon that has become synonymous with the Padare group at the University of Northampton is that of a tree. This is fitting with both the origins of the meaning of the word (a meeting around a tree) and the elements of the tree. A tree is multi-purposed and can be used for shelter, furniture, paper, transportation (such as boats) and even toys. Padare offers different students different things, including: support, knowledge, structure and a sense of identity. The branches and leaves, known as the *crown*, have the job of making food for the tree. The monthly Padare meeting is the place where students are sustained and nourished. The trunk of a tree is covered in bark, which acts as a protection from danger and exposure to extreme weather. Students often refer to Padare as a safe space where views can be expressed in a non-judgemental environment. The roots of a tree, although unseen, act as an anchor and nourish the tree through water.

Why a group?

Given that people universally connect and operate in and via groups within any society, it is hardly surprising that one of the outcomes for the students was to form a support group (Mayadas *et al.*, 2006). A collective solution to a collective problem does make sense. Collectivism is based upon the principle of ownership by a group as opposed to individuals. However, it would appear that this was more than just a logical response by the black African students. The Padare group members when describing their *home* experiences talk of being part of community, tribe or village. The students use the word *family* to include more than those with whom they share a household or blood-tie. In essence the students' knowledge and familiarity is in living and working within a group. Individualised-based cultures are on the whole associated with *western industrialised and technologically advanced nations* (Mayadas *et al.*, 2006, p 48) where self-improvement is gained at times at the cost of others, usually those with less power and more vulnerabilities (Dominelli, 2008).

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Make a list of all the different types of groups you have been a part of (either formally or informally) throughout your life (this might include nursery, church, hobbies, education, etc.). What does it mean to you to be part of these groups?

Who do you consider to be your *family*? How are these *family* members connected to you?

Group work with principles in shared goals and objectives encompasses what Dominelli refers to as *egalitarian relations* (2008, p 33). In other words, the commonalities felt in belonging within a group can generate a more balanced and fair platform. Thus Padare has become a place and space where individual and group empowerment can be achieved but within a collective gathering.

The Padare group meets regularly every month. A key discussion is academic progress, and achievements are celebrated and peer support is offered to those who experience disappointment with their grades. The goals of most meetings are to articulate possible answers to students' questions and to also establish a common ground for further developments. The forum provides black African students with the opportunity to discuss their experiences and presence at the university. The students also feel that the forum has provided a space for suggesting ways in which they can use their personal resources for their common goal, both as students and at the point of qualification.

Padare can be categorised as a support group. Self-help groups can defy categorising in that they can be global, national, regional or local in scope (Kurta, 2006). Support groups can exist independently or be part of another organisation or totally dependent (either financially or morally) on another organisation. Padare can be described as being semi-dependent in that it relies upon lecturers for support and encouragement but the students continue to meet in their absence, such is their enthusiasm. The terms *self-help* and *support groups* are often used interchangeably (Kurta, 2006). Self-help groups tend to have an aim of effecting change and rarely have a facilitator. On the other hand, support groups meet with the purpose of providing support, often in the form of affirmation or information to others in a similar predicament and are often linked to larger organisations. Due to the collective nature of Padare, with its focus on mutuality rather than individualism, *support group* is the preferred term used to categorise and describe it.

Significant similarities can be noted between self-help and support group in that they rely on some form of external support. This is also the case for the Padare group, who rely upon the lecturers as a link to their organisation, in this case, to a university, in terms of booking rooms for meetings, *spreading the word*, circulating information and being a channel of communication between the group and its members.

CASE STUDY

Vimbai was a mature student and her country of origin is Zimbabwe, where she grew up and went to school. She described coming to university:

It was like a dream come true. I could not contain my excitement about coming to university but little did I know that having been away from school for 20 years and educated abroad made such a difference.

However, Vimbai found the academic aspects of her degree course very demanding and failed her first assignment. Not unlike many of her peers returning to formal education after a significant gap, Vimbai was unprepared for the challenges of her new academic voyage. Yet, unlike many of her peers, Vimbai had additional barriers to overcome. English was her third language and her formative education was based in a different system to the one in which she now found herself. By the time Vimbai embarked on her social work degree, the Padare group had been set up. In her own words she describes her first introduction to the group:

As soon as we embarked on our studies we were introduced to Padare, where we met with other social work students who were then in their third and second years. We were given a briefing and then we went into discussions. These discussions ranged from how to approach an assignment, how to organise yourself, time management and many others. Padare became a revelation in my life that I needed others for discussion purposes and people who had similar problems. Then I was realising that I was struggling academically. Our lecturers were there to provide direction but we literally ran the group. Since we met on our own we had a free forum to share openly as students where we were falling short academically. Feedback was then given back to our course leaders to enable them to provide us with help with our studies. Together with the other Padare students we improved academically. We took time to analyse all the tutor comments, which we received when our assignments were returned. We looked at our situation positively.

Not only was Padare a significant source of support for raising Vimbai's confidence in her written expression and academic work, she also grew in personal confidence, which she was able to apply into her practice with service users.

Padare gave me an identity and an opportunity. Knowing who I was and what I wanted to achieve also prepared me for my placements. Taught modules laid the foundation such that when I went on placements I was well equipped. Thanks to Padare, I am now the proud holder of a degree in social work.

CRITICAL QUESTION

Consider yourself in Vimbai's shoes. How do you think that her social work education would have been different without the support of Padare?

Where is Padare now?

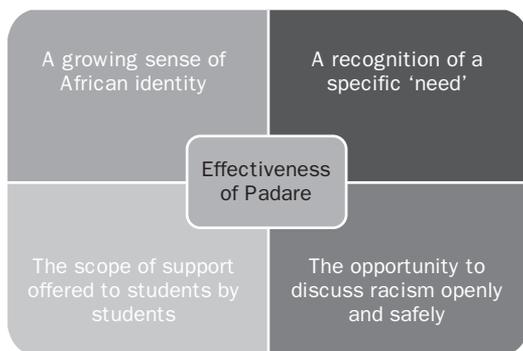
The ethos of the Padare group is a positive approach to learning, one that openly acknowledges and celebrates difference, whilst building upon achievement by focussing on what works as a *liberating force* rather than deficits (Aymer and Bryan, 1996, p 2).

This concentration on the negatives, as has been done so far, and identifying black students as victims could create an 'ain't it all awful' culture. (Aymer and Bryan, 1996, p 2)

With an emphasis on drawing upon the strengths of groups and collectivism, the Padare group is working towards eliminating the notion of black people as victims and under-achievers (Aymer and Bryan, 1996). The tangible outcomes from the inception of Padare have been improved student retention, attainment, significant improvement in National Student Surveys, employability and alumni involvement.

Another outcome of the Padare group, which is less tangible but nevertheless important and real, has been the candid discussions about the perceptions of racism on a personal, institutional and professional level. Whilst necessary to discuss, this is not something that everyone finds comfortable, including students and lecturers from *all* ethnic backgrounds. However, the Padare group offers the opportunity to minimise any suspicion that might surface about the existence of such a group, and provides an honest platform that has the potential to make a difference to both the learning and teaching experience. Padare, as a support group, continues to flourish within the social work programme. Its success, in terms of providing mutual support, has been shared at international, regional and local events. Since its formation, the group membership has grown to include more students from new cohorts and other African countries, for example Uganda, Kenya and the Ivory Coast. On the whole, the Padare group is viewed by the students and the university as a positive contributing factor in enhancing the student experience. The only negative comments about the group are associated with frustration at the infrequency of meetings; this is due to a lack of time when students are on placements rather than lack of commitment. During these times students tend to remain connected through telephone and e-mail correspondence.

Through discussion, informal evaluations and observation, some themes have emerged in terms of the effectiveness of the group, which have included:



African identity

The overwhelming message that students give is of the contribution that belonging to the Padare group has made to their sense of confidence and self-esteem. Many of the students talk of the group contributing to their African and/or black identity, which is steeped in pride as well as difference. In the words of one of the students:

The Padare group has given me the confidence to identify myself as an African student.

It is well documented that group work brings with it the benefits of members experiencing a common bond and sense of togetherness (Brown, 1994; Coulshed and Orme, 2006; Doel and Sawdon, 1999; Doel, 2006). The Padare group is no exception. As one member put it:

Padare has given me a celebration and acknowledgement of African identity. I am no longer alone. I have an identity. (Former Padare student)

The above quote reflects how the Padare group has created a community where isolation is being eradicated and in its place a growing identity has formed. Yet the group has gone beyond a uniqueness merely formed by racial and cultural identity. They are not merely a group of black Africans within an academic setting. Their additional connectivity is that they are soon to be part of a professional group with a protected title – social workers.

Recognition of ‘our need’

The variation in educational attainment both at school and at university level dependent on ethnicity has been a persistent and growing concern (Singh, 2011). This wide variation of completion of degree rates is commonplace within the higher education sector of the UK (Singh, 2011) and is considered problematic within social work educational programmes (Bartoli *et al.*, 2008; Bernard *et al.*, 2011; McGregor, 2011; Stevenson, 2012). This is not a new phenomenon; previous studies have highlighted similar problems within the former Diploma of Social Work (Hussein *et al.*, 2006, 2008) and it has been reported in other professional programmes such as nursing (Stevenson, 2012). A recent study reports that the number of UK domicile BME students studying in higher education is statistically higher than that of white students (Stevenson, 2012).

The *mismatch* between student and university expectation is not an uncommon experience for a number of students. For international students or those who have lived and been educated outside of the UK, the experience is exacerbated due to the unfamiliarity of assessment strategies and academic expectations in higher education. Our approach to learning is imbedded in our formative experiences and is largely culture specific (Carroll and Ryan, 2005; Brown and Joughin, 2007). The majority of Padare students are considered *domicile* or *home* students, in terms of their fee-paying status, as many have lived in the UK for more than two years. However, their experience of the UK system is new, with university being the starting point, and everything can feel *foreign*, bewildering and different. Padare students have described feeling that they are disadvantaged due to their unfamiliarity of UK academic expectations and this has been confirmed in other research (Bernard *et al.*, 2011; Bartoli, 2010; Singh, 2011). The Padare students consider the recognition of their

educational experience as being different, and so requiring a support group, as a positive contribution to their learning and development.

The scope of support

One would expect a support group to do just that – offer support. It is the scope of the support offered and gained by the Padare group members that is worthy of comment. Each Padare student has learnt a significant amount from previous students or those in other cohorts, which ensures that former graduates or those nearing the end of their studies can pass on advice, strategies, resources and reading recommendations to those at the beginning of their studies.

The support offered within the Padare group to one another is multi-faceted. As mentioned, a number of the Padare students, whilst not deemed *international* students, are fairly new to the UK and hence have little lived experience of the history of local politics. For some black students it can feel uncomfortable to ask questions within a large cohort for fear of appearing ill-informed or unaware. Padare meetings offer a safe place to express such knowledge gaps:

When I started my social work training, I did not know much about legislations and policies in England and their related historical and political background. However, due to the Padare group's harmony and supporting attitude, I was supported immensely and was signposted to relevant learning materials to increase my knowledge in order to enhance my learning. (Former Padare student)

A significant amount of learning occurs within the Padare group monthly meetings; this enhances the lectures and other student discussions in a non-judgemental manner. As one student eloquently stated:

Padare is a place where I can share my learning deficits, talk about my fears and get the confirmation that my feelings are normal without being judged. (Former Padare student)

The scope of support is at an academic and personal level in an environment where commonality, both in terms of being black students and on a professionally qualifying programme, is the key to the effectiveness and attraction of the Padare group.

I believe that people who have been through or are experiencing a similar circumstance can relate to, sympathise with and support each other very well. Therefore, Padare is a community that understands me as a black student on a social work training course in supporting me to achieve my full potential. (Former Padare student)

The emotional rapport offered through Padare is a feature of the group that students regularly comment upon. Through the work of the original study it transpired that all of the black African students on the social work programme had experienced at least one bereavement during their studies (Bartoli *et al.*, 2008). This is often complicated by the time and financial burden of having to either send money (for medical treatment) or return to countries of origin (for funerals). Needless to say, this has an impact on the students' emotional well-being. Padare offers a place to share these painful experiences with others who need little explanation and offer much understanding.

Discussing racism openly and safely

The development and continuation of Padare has created an openness to discuss and analyse racism, both on an individual and an institutional level for *all* students and the academics. International students within universities are often viewed as *difficult*, stereotyped as being plagiarists, rote learners and time consuming for educators (Carroll and Ryan, 2005). In my experience this is not confined to international students, but also to students whose formative education has been outside of the UK but within the educational system are categorised as *home* students due to their residency in the UK. In the original study the Padare students talked candidly of their perceptions of being treated differently by some students, academics and Practice Educators. Whilst on placement some Padare students were supervised more and assessors appeared to have lower expectations of them (Bartoli *et al.*, 2008). Often the Padare students have been reluctant to suggest that this might be due to racism, and often do not use the word *racism*.

Through the development of the Padare group, the academics involved have entered into open and at times painful dialogues about overt and covert racism. An illustration of this as narrated by the members of the Padare group is the division that often occurs in the teaching environment. They talk of white students having a *special* place to sit within classrooms or lecture theatres and the black students sitting at the other end of the room. This observation is also noted in the Bernard *et al.* study (2011, p 47) where student participants *described a form of 'segregation' taking place in the classroom; whereby students tended to occupy the physical space in the classroom around racial lines.*

Some of the factors identified by the Bartoli *et al.* (2008) study and supported by Bernard *et al.*'s later study (2011) have contributed to the academic performance amongst black social work students, including:

- gender;
- overseas family commitments;
- financial responsibilities in UK and at 'home';
- part-time employment.

A number of the Padare students have expressed concerns that if they do not achieve well academically this would confirm the negative stereotype about their intellectual ability as a racial group. This promotes a major source of additional stress to black students, which Padare can alleviate through mutual support and understanding.

CRITICAL QUESTION

Where do you sit within a social work lecture/teaching environment? Are you aware of any apparent divisions within the student group? If you are, what could you do to change this?

Challenges faced

Kurta (2006) identifies a significant growth of the self-help and support group movement over the past three decades. However financial support is decreasing due to central government cuts. It could be argued that face-to-face groups may decrease or even cease on occasions and more *virtual* support is available, made increasingly more possible by the growing popularity of social media networking sites such as Facebook.

It is further suggested that there are a number of challenges in support groups in terms of the potential for dispensing inaccurate information, inability to contain emotions and being offputting and intimidating to newcomers (Kurta, 2006; Garvin et al., 2006). This, to date, has not been the experience of the Padare group; in fact, the evaluation of the first 12 months of its existence would suggest the opposite.

As mentioned, there is a frustration expressed by the Padare group members that meetings have not occurred as regularly as planned due to the structure of the degree programme where different cohorts are taught on different days or students are off campus and on placements. A way of dealing with this has been to set up a page on the university interactive website as a means of encouraging participation that is not reliant on geographical location for communication, information and a sense of connectivity.

CRITICAL QUESTION

Do you belong to any form of support group? What are the advantages/disadvantages of a 'real' (face-to-face) group as compared to a 'virtual' one?

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Bernard, C., Fairlough, A., Fletcher, J. and Ahmet, A. (2011) *Diversity and Progression among Social Work Students in England*. London: Goldsmiths University of London.

This is first national qualitative study undertaken to consider the diversity and progression on social work programmes in England. The report considers black and ethnic minority, disabled and lesbian, gay and bisexual students. The research methods used included:

- focus groups with black, disabled, and lesbian and gay students;
- semi-structured interviews with black, disabled and lesbian and gay and bisexual students;
- semi-structured interviews with academic staff, practice learning co-ordinators, and learning support staff, such as disability officers/co-ordinators, mental health co-ordinators, and senior members of staff responsible for diversity and widening participation initiatives within the higher education institution (HEI) sites.

The analysis of the data was influenced by techniques adapted from grounded theory. This *analytical approach to data analysis offers a set of procedures and techniques for developing categories, organising the data, and identifying themes* (Bernard et al. 2011,

p 23). The software package NVivo was used as a tool to code and group the data into themes and emerging patterns.

For the purposes of this chapter, issues relating to black and ethnic minority students will be considered, of which 66 participated in the study. However, it is important to note that the study emphasises the particular vulnerability of students *negotiating multiple intersecting disadvantage*, for example black students with dyslexia (Bernard *et al.*, 2011, p 42). Congruent with other qualitative research (Hussein *et al.*, 2006, 2008, 2009; Singh, 2011) and smaller studies (Bartoli *et al.*, 2008) this study confirms that there are variations of progression rates for black and ethnic minority students on social work programmes.

This research has been specifically selected as it confirms some of the findings of our smaller scale study here at the University of Northampton. In particular the two studies correlate in the following areas:

- reluctance amongst BME students to directly discuss race issues;
- physical divisions within the classroom environment;
- BME staff offering positive role models and inspiration;
- preference for smaller group discussion;
- BME students face particular challenges in placement settings;
- programme level initiatives (such as support groups) improve outcomes for BME students;
- students with intersecting disadvantage (such as race, gender, additional caring responsibilities) were vulnerable to poor academic progression rates;
- disadvantaged educational backgrounds;
- growing up in poor communities and family backgrounds;
- experiencing adversity was a motivating factor to study social work;
- high expectations from family members;
- additional financial pressures experienced by international students;
- BME students' determination to succeed despite adversity;
- experiences of racism whilst on placement;
- BME students' accent seen as a difficulty by themselves and placement providers.

A full copy of this report is available at: www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/kpi/scwru/dhinitiative/projects/bernardetal2011diversityfinalreport.pdf.

Spreading the word

The formation of Padare at the University of Northampton has generated a number debates, which have been articulated in journal articles (for example Bartoli *et al.*, 2008 in relation

to practice learning; Bartoli *et al.*, 2009 in enhancing the student experience within a higher educational setting; Bartoli, 2011 in the assessment of international students), and also presented at regional and national conferences. This has often included Padare students and it has provoked discussions about support groups for black and/or BME students within higher education. As put by one Practice Educator:

As a white practitioner it enabled further consideration of the educational process, diversity and difference. I have been able to share the paper [Bartoli et al., 2008] with a number of social work and practice educator colleagues to help and enable further learning and also as a point for debate.

The membership of the Padare group is ever changing as students graduate and new students enrol. Academics promote the group to new students within the first few days of induction within the academic year. However, it would be fair to say that the academics who proactively *champion* the group are the three who were instigators of the original study. In September 2011, a former student was employed to act as a co-ordinator for the group, which has given the Padare students a point of reference within the teaching staff. The Padare group has also extended to other students within the Social Work Division at the university who, whilst not studying social work but social and community development, share similar issues. Hence now the Padare meets as a larger group, encompassing *all* the BME students across the two programmes, but also separately to address more professional issues such as black social work identity.

A journey with a pit stop

In our original study and subsequent journal article, we used the metaphor of a road to describe the social work educational journey for Padare students (Bartoli *et al.*, 2008). The destination of this journey is similar for *all* students regardless of their ethnic origin, age, gender or ability – a social work degree and qualification. The road travelled however is different and unique for each learner. No one single path is the same, or better or inferior than the other. For already disadvantaged students who might be manoeuvring between *multiple intersecting disadvantages*, the educational journey can be unfamiliar and bumpy at times and they might need assistance and support along the way (Bernard *et al.*, 2011, p 42). These intersections of disadvantage might be, for example, being a black student with a disability (Bernard *et al.*, 2011).

I would like to extend this metaphor and invite you to consider the route taken in motor racing where pit stops are commonly used. This is where a car stops in the pits during a race for refuelling, change of tyres, mechanical repairs or any combination of these things. During these pit stops the driver is surrounded by a team who provide assistance immediately. Pit stops are essential for drivers to complete races safely and as competently as possible. They are not haphazard or incidental, but strategic in nature and planned. As students, you will develop your own learning strategies dependent on your learning style and needs. At times you may need additional or different types of support or pit stops. A student support group, like Padare, offers a unique pit stop where students can be surrounded by people in similar situations to assist.

Within motor racing every member of a pit stop crew has a specific task and role. Due to being a male-dominated sport and activity, many of the roles are gender-specific in title. The main roles include:

Comparison between pit stop crew members and the Padare group	
'Lollipop' (man) Person	Padare Co-ordinator
The main mechanic who guides the incoming car into the pit	The academic staff member who co-ordinates and supports Padare activities
Wheel (men) Persons	Year Rep
Crew members assigned to each wheel	Each cohort has a nominated year representative
Refueller	Padare meetings
Attaches nozzle to the car for the refuelling process	Serve as a safe place to gain support and knowledge
Support (man) Person	Personal Academic Tutors
Holds the refuelling hose within the car	Available for support
Extras	Padare members
Extra crew members available to remove debris and prevent blockages	Offering mutual support at key points within the educational journey
Fire (man) Person	Head of Division
Standing by with breathing system and fire extinguishers	Playing a peripheral but vital role in terms of supporting and promoting the group

Similarly within motor racing there are specific parts of the car that are considered essential to *winning the race*. Below is a table of essential requirements for a car and for the effective running of a mutual support group such as Padare.

	In order to start a race, a motor car is an essential requirement. However, there are a number of different types and models of cars. Padare offers students from all BME backgrounds a starting point in their educational journey.
	Like good high performance tyres, Padare can enhance students' overall academic performance and sense of well-being.
	Padare students experience many pressures due to having ongoing commitments to family members overseas. The group can alleviate such pressure, which like a car needs to be just the right amount in order to operate effectively and smoothly.
	Being part of Padare has provided students with tools and resources that have enhanced their classroom learning.

	Like motor racing, <i>all</i> students can feel like they are 'racing against the clock'. Padare offers student a protected time and space to share successes and concerns.
	Refuelling is an essential aspect of a pit stop. Without fuel the car would not be able to race or win. Padare has been described by students as a place to <i>refuel</i> and <i>recharge</i> their batteries in a reflective and safe space.
	The finishing line for students is graduation. Students at each graduation ceremony explicitly cite the support and friendship of Padare as being the main motivating factor in their educational journey.
	The finishing block is the main prize for students and for social work students it is an opportunity to enter a profession with a protected title. Since the formation of Padare the retention and progression of BME students has been enhanced.

CRITICAL QUESTION

If you had to enter a 'pit stop', what support would you find helpful? What strategies can you put into place to ensure that you have the support you need to fulfil your academic potential?

Listening to students

Padare has now been running since 2008 and over the years, as educators, we have had the privilege to deepen our understanding of the educational and personal journey for BME students on a social work programme. My understanding is that Padare offers a safe environment to:

- develop critical thinking skills;
- offer and be offered support that is non-judgemental;
- promote, deepen and transfer learning;
- be student focussed;
- be involved and participate actively in learning;
- enhance networking skills;
- develop a personal and professional racial identity;
- make long-lasting friendships;
- allow quieter students the safety to voice their concerns and fears;
- celebrate successes;
- listen to alternative ideas and perspectives;

- share resources, tips and strategies;
- practice essential social work skills such as listening, decision-making, problem solving, negotiation, networking and team working.

Developing a support group such as Padare has been a successful venture for students at the University of Northampton. Rich and, at times, painful stories have been shared and lessons learnt. There are implications for *all* students and educators if we are to be truly inclusive and supportive of BME students.

Implications for educators

- It is incumbent upon educators to be aware of the dynamics within the 'classroom' in terms of sitting arrangements and when offering smaller group activities.
- Set up and encourage small group discussions that are respectful and inclusive.
- Consider, together with students, the potential benefits of setting up a Padare type support group within your establishment. What will your role as educator be?
- Encourage *all* students to recommend texts written by authors who reflect global perspectives of social work issues and concerns.
- Make no assumptions about *any* student – ask about their formative educational experiences.
- What role do you play within the journey and pit stops of your students?

Implications for students

- Does your university offer a support group for BME students?
- Consider, together with the support of your tutors, setting up a Padare group.
- White students can support BME students by understanding the need for a separate 'space' such as Padare offers for minority groups.
- BME students can support white students in their understanding by having open discussions.
- Ask former students, or students in other cohorts, for tips, strategies and advice.

***Ubuntu* as a conclusion**

Concerns about the academic under-achievement of BME students have long been documented in both children and adults within the educational system (DfES, 2003; Connor *et al.*, 2004). Arguably the gap between the academic performance of white and BME students can be attributed to the portrayal of black people as under-achievers (Tomlin and Olusola, 2006). However, Stevenson (2012) argues that under-achievement amongst BME students is more connected with a lack of preparedness for higher education (such as lack of experience, poverty, class and prior educational opportunities) rather than racism, ethnicity or culture. This disproportionate and unhelpful focus on black under-achievement

in the literature not only distorts the image of the BME community but it also creates and perpetuates a lower set of expectations for black students. Whilst much has been debated about the issues, this chapter serves to offer a contribution towards a solution in the form of a support group by and for black students.

The value of and continued need for a black student support group should not be overlooked or considered passé. Most black African students within the Padare group have been at the receiving end of negative stereotypes and daily racism. Remember that racism does to have to be intentional for it to exist and *feel* real (hooks, 2010). Appropriate support groups, rather than segregation, serve as primary venues for black students' engagement in their studies. Without such groups, some of the students may not have found a place for the expression and development of their black identities and academic achievements. Padare offers a platform through which to address black perspectives and initiate dialogue with academics devoid of fear or recriminations.

Lastly, when I asked the Padare students to describe their experiences of Padare in one word, they concluded with *Ubuntu*. This is an African proverb and ideology that means *I am, because you are*.

As individuals we are reliant upon one another. In other words, *Ubuntu* signifies humanity. Padare has pioneered a sense of community within our university as signified by the term *Ubuntu*.

In the words of a former student, support groups can create a

sense of belonging. It made us more confident and, as such, we became more able to challenge and think analytically.

Taking it further

Websites

Equality Challenge Unit – works to support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education: www.ecu.ac.uk.

Chapters in books

Brown, S. and Gordon, J. (2007) Assessment and International Students – Helping Clarify Puzzling Processes, in Jones, E. and Brown, S. (eds) *Internationalising Higher Education*. London: Routledge, pp 57–72.

Books

hooks, b. (2010) *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*. London: Routledge.

Ryde, J. (2009) *Being White in the Helping Professions: Developing Effective Intercultural Awareness*. London: Jessica Kingsley.