THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN CREATING CRITICALLY INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Even when universities and institutions of learning have policies on inclusion in place, individual teachers still play a major role in making the classroom experience truly inclusive or otherwise for the student. In this paper, I reflect on my experiences in two different classrooms – one inclusive and the other not inclusive – and highlight the differences in techniques and methods used by the educators to create the different atmospheres.

INTRODUCTION

There is an obvious heightened awareness the world over on issues of equality, equity, diversity, inclusion and anti-racism. In an attempt to advance reforms in their practice, education providers and practitioners have begun to engage in various interventions, some more effective than others, in a bid to 'diversify' their institutions or 'include' more non-traditional students. In the week of writing this paper alone, I have been invited to speak and have indeed spoken at three different panels to discuss matters of inclusion and diversity in education. There has not been a month in the last two years where panels and discussions have not been held in relation to these issues.

While diversity and inclusion are usually understood and executed in the light of assisting historically underrepresented groups to access higher education, (Bolitzer *et al.*, 2016), I will argue that the techniques used within the classroom, after members of the under-represented groups have gained access, can serve to either facilitate inclusion or further deepen the disadvantage and systemic exclusion experienced by non-traditional students.

Critical Race Theory (CRT), a theory that originated in the United States of America in the 1970s but has now gained traction with researchers all over the world, advocates the use of (counter) stories to highlight the experiences of disadvantage, inequality, exclusion and racism endured by marginalised people (Stefancic and Delgado, 2017). It is expected that story-telling will bring the experiences of the marginalised into the consciousness of people whose life experiences differ. Stories serve not just to counter the majoritarian storyline but also to un-silence the voices of people who are not ordinarily heard in the mainstream (Stefancic and Delgado, 2017).

Therefore, in keeping with this tenet of CRT, I will utilise story-telling to reflect on and share my experience as a learner in two different higher education classrooms (classroom A and classroom B). I will then suggest five things that differed in the approaches of the educators and offer concrete suggestions on ways that educators can embrace critical inclusive

practices in their classrooms. To put my stories in perspective, I will begin with a brief description of the unique racial climate of the Republic of Ireland as well as a brief description of my own journey as a migrant from Nigeria.

THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Throughout the 19th century, a combination of famine and bonded servitude resulted in mass movement of Irish people outside of Ireland. Between 1820 and 1930, it is estimated that over 4.5 million Irish people migrated to America (Library of Congress, 2021). This mass outward migration created a large 'Irish diaspora' and it is now projected that there are at least 70 million people all over the world who claim Irish ancestry (Lentin, 2007). In the 1990s, Ireland experienced a period of rapid economic growth and prosperity that was fuelled by foreign direct investment (popularly referred to as the Celtic Tiger). The country previously characterised by mass emigration suddenly became a choice migration destination, with people from all continents of the world, including returning Irish citizens, flocking to take advantage of the booming economy (Lentin & McVeigh, 2006). Ireland suddenly found itself facing a diversity situation, the magnitude of which it had never had to deal with since the inception of the state. By 1997, in addition to other categories of migrants, black communities began to spring up first in Dublin and then in other parts of the country (Fanning, 2002). The Irish who had in the past experienced racialisation and 'othering' by the English and Americans were 'suddenly' racialised as white (Garner, 2004) and were now full circle in a position where they were doing the othering. Even though there had always been an autochthonous anti-traveller racism strand in Ireland, a new strand of anti-black racism became obvious and more visible with the arrival of the black community. A report authored by Lucy Michaels (2015) is one of a few detailed reports that documents the lived experiences of black people living in Ireland. Compared to the rest of the West, Ireland's introduction to in-migration of diverse racial backgrounds is fairly recent. The fabric of the Irish state has changed significantly, especially by the entry and growth of a black population. Ireland is now a heterogenous, multi-racial society and is still in the process of making sense of and dealing with issues of diversity and inclusion.

MY STORY

I am a black Nigerian-Irish woman. I came to reside in Ireland in the summer of 2012. Prior to that, I was fully resident in Nigeria. I did not necessarily come to Ireland because I wanted a better life (I was doing quite well in Nigeria, actually). I came to Ireland because I got married and my husband worked in Ireland. When people refer to me as an economic migrant, I feel uncomfortable. Money was the last thing on my mind when I chose to migrate to Ireland. I was, in fact, leaving independence and financial comfort to come to a system that made me totally financially dependent on my husband. It was a sacrifice I made for family. I was coming with a track record of academic excellence, achievement in the corporate world, and a confidence rooted in the fact that I could replicate my successes anywhere in the world. I was fired up and ready to give my new home a chance. Within a few months of residing in Ireland, I realised that my dreams of continuing to achieve were not going to be fulfilled. I met an impenetrable brick wall. I could not get a job – it didn't matter how many applications I put in, no one called me for an interview or even shortlisted me for any sort of recruitment process. Until then it had never crossed my mind that I would remain unemployed for long. I was sure that with my experience, I would be at least shortlisted for an interview. First month, nothing. Second month, nothing. Third month, not a word. There was not even an acknowledgement of any of the applications I had submitted. Research validates my experience. In a research experiment carried out, McGinnity (2008) made up fictitious CVs, some with African sounding names and others with European and Asian names, but all with similar qualifications and sent them out to recruiters. CVs with 'Irish' names were twice as

likely to be called for interviews than other foreign names. Black women in Ireland have often shared stories of their 'job-seeker' experiences and how changing their names to more Irish sounding names gained them access to interviews (Akinborewa *et al.*, 2020).

Prior to this, I had applied for a Masters programme in what I had heard was one of Ireland's most prestigious universities. Just before the effect of not getting called for interviews began to impact me, I received admission into that University to study for a Masters in International and European Business Law. I was elated! I finally had something to look forward to - Uni became a refuge to me. I enrolled and attended what I will now refer to as classroom A.

CLASSROOM A

I had just come into the country. I cannot say I had settled. It had been one full year and I was still far from adjusting to food, the weather, accents, life in general. I was still culture shocked. I had no friends. I felt trapped because I was coming from a very active professional life and suddenly everything had stopped. No job. No friends. No networks. I was starting again. And as flippant as I make this sound now, it was a big deal. Had I not had a faith in God, I would probably have caved in. It was a struggle to maintain sound mental health. So, you can imagine my joy when it was time to resume at a prestigious university in Ireland. I was elated. I knew the exposure, the broadening, the sense of fulfilment engaging in academics brought so I was excited. I started the course. Teachers were fantastic. They knew their onions. Course content was good enough, but I was invisible. No one spoke to me and I spoke to no one. Honestly, I was afraid to speak to anyone. Even though I was doing a Masters in 'International and European Law', International was obviously interpreted to mean America and Britain. There was no mention or reference to Africa or anything relatively familiar. I was always the last to be chosen by my peers for group work, and even when I asked to join a group, I was never chosen to speak or present on behalf of the group. I never shared anything in the classroom even when I knew I had things to say that could buttress what the teacher was explaining. I just came to class and went home. I was invisible.

Five years after my experience with classroom A, I enrolled for a Higher Diploma in Education and encountered classroom B[16].

CLASSROOM B

From the first day I stepped into the class, I was drawn into a discussion. Notice my phrasing – drawn in. I wanted to hide. I was not allowed to hide. In the first few days, when groups were formed, myself and the other African in the class were again left to ourselves but within a week of attending, that changed almost miraculously. People actually spoke to me. Teachers knew my name. I was able to tell them things about my life because they wanted to know. They knew when I became an Irish citizen and the class actually took a break to celebrate me! I existed in the minds of these people. We shared biographical stories in the class. People were learning about where I came from and I was learning things about Ireland that I hadn't in the six years I had been in the country. We were doing heavy course work. There was a lot of learning going on, yet it was like a community. Everyone respected me. We were able to have tough discussions about race, class, and gender, and while we argued, we made up afterwards. Once, we were discussing race in one of our sessions. A white male had flippantly mentioned that he didn't think racism existed and that the disadvantage faced by people of colour existed more in their minds than anywhere else. The class went quiet. No one responded. Suddenly, all the years of applying for jobs without even

[16] I admit that a lot could have changed in classroom A in the 5 years that elapsed between the two classrooms (I hope that a lot has changed), but the points I am making are not limited to these two classrooms. I use these classrooms merely as an in-road or an entry point to an important discussion about practices that encourage inclusion in the classroom.

an acknowledgement from the employers flashed through my mind. All the years of knocking frantically on doors that I was qualified to enter but that remained tightly shut because I was black flashed through my mind and I responded. I responded more emotively than I would have liked and by the end of the class I felt drained, low, and tired. As I got home that evening, I remember receiving a call from the class facilitator. She had called to check up on me as she understood the toll the conversation had taken on me. I didn't share how drained I was with anyone, but she knew and ensured she made contact. I mattered. Our class had become our family and I had a place in that family.

Classroom A and B were both within universities that had robust diversity and inclusion policies. I had gained access into both very easily as a result of these diversity and inclusion policies, and yet, my experience in one was starkly different from my experience in the other. In classroom A, I did not engage with the class or the faculty, I was excluded from discussions when they did happen, and I felt anything but included. Classroom B was different. My experience in classroom B did not happen by chance, but rather was a derivative of an intentional choice of a particular pedagogy and ethos. Williams, Berger, and McClendon (2005) highlight four dimensions that organisations need to work on to achieve inclusive practice: (a) access and equity, (b) campus climate, (c) diversity in the curriculum, and (d) student learning and development. When institutions and practitioners focus on some of these but not others, the student does not have access to what is referred to as 'Inclusive excellence' (Williams, Berger, and McClendon, 2005). In my story, classroom A paid attention to the first and second dimension but not the other two. The result was that I got into the school but was excluded in the class. Some of the other issues that gave rise to the difference in the experience in both classrooms are:

Teaching Methods

In classroom A teachers utilised traditional teaching methods which tend to exclude rather than include. Writing on the importance of teaching methods in inclusive practice, Danowizz and Tuit (citation) suggest that

> *Even in cases where the curriculum is diverse (Banks, 1991), faculty members often use traditional modes of instruction, which serve to exclude rather than include students (Tuitt, 2003b). Thus, faculty members must not only concern themselves with what they teach; they must also be concerned with how they teach. (p. 43)*

Freire (1972) describes this form of teaching as a banking approach to education where the educator's principal function is to transfer certain fixed ideas into the minds of the passive learner in a way that often re-enforces rather than disrupts the status quo. Freire described the educator who uses this kind of method as suffering from narration sickness, as only the educator's voice is heard, filling the passive student's brain with information. In classroom A, teachers primarily utilised this method of teaching. They came to class, delivered their PowerPoint presentations and left. There was very little room for interaction or dialogue. In Classroom B, on the other hand, the teachers created a democratic and safe space where educators took on the role of facilitators and co-learners (Freire, 1972; hooks, 2009). Students were encouraged to think and question taken for granted assumptions. Classes started with students reflecting on their own experiences and sharing these reflections. Classes were characterised by debates, discussions, and reflection and very little 'lecturing'. The methods used were intentionally designed to include in an organic and seamless way.

Community in the Classroom

bell hooks (2009) writes about the power of building community as a teacher. Describing her own practice, she writes

> *Knowing all that I know now after more than thirty years in classrooms, I do not begin to teach in any setting without first laying the foundation for building community in the classroom. To do this it is essential that teacher and students take time to get to know one another. That process can begin by simply hearing each person's voice as they state their name. (p.20)*

The teachers in classroom B built a community within the classroom. Community building involves the educators, making the class a safe and supportive environment for sharing, debates and peer-learning (Brookfield, 2018). Classrooms do not become communities automatically. Instead, educators must intentionally build trust and engender collaboration amongst students as well as between teachers and students. Whereas I could come into classroom B and share things that were happening in my private life, like the news about becoming an Irish citizen, no such avenue was presented in classroom A. Classroom A was not a community – it was impersonal, rigid and very traditional. Classroom B, on the other hand, became almost like a family and relationships I formed in that class have stayed with me until today.

Attention to Cultural Differences

Williams, Berger, & McClendon (2005) opine that one of the key drivers of inclusion within the classroom is paying attention to the cultural differences diverse learners bring to the educational experience and how those cultural differences enhance the teaching and learning environment. In classroom A, even though there was ample opportunity for the educators to leverage my knowledge as the only black African in the group, this was never utilised. As it was a course in law, a simple question asking about how the laws in my jurisdiction differed from Irish laws could have easily ticked this box and included me in the activities. In classroom B, on the other hand, even with the use of pre-planned activities and exercises, there were adjustments and re-adjustments of learning outcomes and teaching methods to accommodate the differences in the group. The educators in classroom B also took advantage of the knowledge in the group and we were often called on to share perspectives from our own cultural paradigms.

Colour-blind Ideology

It is possible that the teachers in Classroom A did not do more to include me because they were working from a colour-blind standpoint. Educators who work from this standpoint claim they 'do not see colour' and therefore treat all their students the same. What taking this stance does is that rather than eliminate racism, it further deepens racial inequality by erasing the past experiences of people of colour and assuming a meritocratic perspective by putting them on a level playing field with others who have not been marginalised (Hearn, 2009). It is possible that the educators in classroom A expected that I would participate in the class and behave the same way as other (White) students if I wanted to and did not see the need to intervene or at least question my silence. The educators in classroom B, on the other hand, acknowledged my 'difference'. They allowed themselves to see my 'colour' and the challenges that came with being a person of colour in a predominantly white country. They were flexible enough to ensure that I was included in classroom activities, and every time this inclusion did not happen organically, were able to steer the class through the use of activities and exercises to ensure that everyone was included.

A Pedagogy of Love

The last difference I will highlight between the two classrooms is the presence of what I like to call a 'pedagogy of love' in one of the classrooms. Paolo Freire once wrote that education is an act of love and courage. Not love as an emotion, but love as a verb. bell hooks (2000) defines love as an extension of oneself for the purposes of nurturing another's wellbeing. The

educators in classroom B understood their privileges as white people, the dominant cultural norms that played out in Irish society, and went above and beyond to use their privilege to advance my wellbeing. Beyond the curriculum, the educators positioned themselves as humans who could be touched by the feelings of the 'other'. The phone call made by the educator in classroom B was a seemingly small gesture but it did more to foster my inclusion than the well-written diversity policy that adorned the offices of classroom A. The educators in classroom B embraced a critical inclusive pedagogic approach (Bolitzer, et al., 2016).

CONCLUSION

Even though the rise in awareness and advocacy for inclusion in education is laudable, unless educators go beyond access and curriculum change and pay attention to their teaching methods and practices, inclusion and diversity interventions will continue to be tick box exercises with very little effect on the lives of marginalised students. When teachers create counter-hegemonic and dialogic spaces, understand and harness the cultural difference in their classrooms, as well as teach with consideration for the different categories of learners, their classrooms become truly transformative and inclusive spaces where marginalised students are empowered to thrive.

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