

## RELATIONSHIP BASED TEACHING WITH (SOCIAL WORK) STUDENTS AFFECTED BY GLOBALISM AND THE POLITICS OF LOCATION

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### Abstract

*This article aims to discuss my reflexive account as a social work educator in England, a black, female, of migrant parents, applying a relationship based approach to my teaching. A challenging aspect of my role is to create a safe learning environment and to build professional relationships with the students. This has been contested by the diverse student group (dis)connected by historical colonisation, current globalisation and identities navigating different countries and cultures. With the growth of globalisation and internationalism, the phenomenon of cohorts of students from countries connected by historical colonisation yet separated by language, culture and identity, is likely to be experienced by educators from a range of disciplines in multiple countries. I intend to capture how migration and our embodied experiences of learning and teaching can manifest in the classroom, the implications of this and how educators manage the challenges this can present between themselves and the students.*

**Key words:** colonialism, culture, diversity, education, identity, relationship

### 1. INTRODUCTION

For several years, I have been unsure where and how to start the article. Afraid that somehow, somewhere within the words, the sound of racism would be heard. Yet race, I believe, was only one facet of the phenomenon that underpinned what I experienced on my first day as a senior lecturer and have encountered in different guises thereafter. I recall becoming increasingly nervous as the students began to enter the room and take their seats. I was struck by what transpired before me; the white students sat on the left side of the room except two white women, who sat on the right where all the black students were seated. The issue of race sprung to the forefront of my mind with a sense of disquiet; my immediate conclusion was that race was behind this separation. By race, I refer to the concept as a social construction as its meaning changes over time, place and categorisation (Berger and Luckmann; 1963). In this context, for me, race was personified by colour. I began to *feel* my blackness penetrate the room as colour had suddenly become present and foregrounded. I had no idea if I should address what I observed and was unsure how I would do this without being seen to take a position that could alienate either the black students or the white ones. I felt completely ill-equipped as did bell hooks when she describes working with difference, 'When I first entered the multicultural multi ethnic classroom setting I was unprepared. I did not know how to cope effectively with so much 'difference'... I had never before been compelled to work within a truly diverse setting and I lacked the necessary skills. (1994:41). I felt out of my depth with these students; what had spurred them to sit as they had? I needed to understand who these students were. I wanted them to say their name and explain why they had chosen to sit on that particular side of the room. Instead, I asked them to introduce themselves and say what their future hopes were for a career in social work. With fifty students this took time. I was somewhat fearful that one side of the room might not want to hear what the other had to say. Yet, I felt it was important to observe what interest they had in each other as a group. bell hooks notes 'As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one and other voices, in recognising one and others presence' (1994: 8). Before I could contemplate generating excitement, I wanted to co-create a student group who were able to share a space, be interested in each other and want to learn *together*. I felt relationship based teaching was a pedagogical approach that would enable me to bring cohesion to the group.

I will begin this article by summarising my meaning of relationship based teaching. I then discuss post colonialism and suggest myself and the cohort of students are effected by our colonial histories. I

move on to explore how this affects our world view and how we position ourselves in the world; the politics of location. It then deconstructs the experience of migration and its impact on identity myself and the students, and ends by looking at some relationship based techniques that attempts to connect us to enable the cohort to have a positive learning experience.

## **2. RELATIONSHIP BASED TEACHING**

Edwards and Richards (2002) present relational teaching as an approach based on Relational/Cultural Theory (Miller and Stiver, 1977). The theory focuses on the relational aspect of experiences and the potential for future relational growth. The impact of race and culture on such relational experiences is recognised; contextual and sociocultural factors are thought to help or hinder the opportunities for authentic, empowering and empathetic relationships to be developed. Edwards and Richards suggest the goal of relational teaching is to 'provide a learning context that enables students to learn and grow, and incorporates the knowledge that emotions are involved in learning' (2002:36). They emphasise the importance of communication, noting communication influences how emotions are expressed and experienced in the learning environment. The key components of Relational Teaching are mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment, which are created as the educator leads on building relationships with and between the students (Walker 2014, Walker 2015). An underpinning ethos from Relational/Cultural theory notes that relationships will be blotted by periods of disconnect and conflict often arising from unequal power or difference. The recognition of this ethos was crucial in my emergent understanding of the dynamics I observed between my students and learning how our countries of origin historical power relations could be embodied and reflected in how we related to each other.

## **3. POST COLONIALISM IN THE CLASSROOM**

With the recent growth of far right political parties across Europe, race and migration have become intrinsically linked (Mudde, 2013; Polyakova, 2015). However, this linkage fails to acknowledge the historical ties such as colonialism between the countries where people migrate to and from. Although colonisation ceased years ago, Postcolonial Theory reminds us that the ramifications of colonialism can remain inherent in a country in terms of economic stability, culture and national identity and continue to experience the reverberations in the post-colonial age. Hall (1996) posits how Postcolonial Theory provides an understanding of culture and identity as fluid, contested, de-constructed and reconstructed. The theory suggests Postcolonial structures become reproduced in everyday life (Routledge 2016); seemingly reproduced in the seating arrangements of the social work students. I started to theoretically understand how post colonialism, political economy, culture, and identity were a few of the deeply intertwined threads which bound us together and led us to be in the same country, educational institution and classroom at the same time. However, I needed to understand the students perspectives. I held individual tutorials with every student which was time consuming but essential for me to start the engagement process of relationship building and get a sense of their politics of location.

## **4. THE POLITICS OF LOCATION**

Borsa (1990) suggests a politics of location are 'those places and spaces we inherit and occupy, which frame our lives in very specific and concrete ways, which are as much a part of our psyches as they are a physical or geographical placement', (1990:36). Borsa summarises that the notion of structural differences as the 'politics of location'. Structural differences such as race, gender, ethnicity and their intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) will mobilise people to locate themselves in a position that most accurately reflects who they are. For example, as a black female, heterosexual, educator in England, these factors deem me to be different from the white, male, heterosexual educators who generally belong to a privileged group of power holders in society and in education institutions. These differing positions shape the lens through which we see the world, we see ourselves and the worlds we locate ourselves in geographically, politically and theoretically. These positions are not a static; as we

encounter new experiences be it migration, political awareness, social justice, etc. we position a new politics of locations for ourselves. Belonging to an oppressed or marginalised group often means others with more power feel entitled to position us.

## **5. BLACK ZIMBABWEAN STUDENTS & RECONSTRUCTED IDENTITIES**

I learned that most of the black students had migrated from Zimbabwe. Although from a different country to myself, we shared the similarity in that our countries of origin (Zimbabwe and Jamaica respectively) were historically connected to the country of migration through colonialism. After gaining independence in 1980, a number white Zimbabweans migrated to the UK, whereas the majority of black Zimbabweans entered the UK following an economic crisis from 1990-1997 where unemployment reached 70% (Bloch, 2006). Bloch noted that post 1998, more black Zimbabweans migrated to the UK due to political and social unrest, many seeking asylum. However, in 2002 Visa's became a requirement to travel to the UK from Zimbabwe, which reduced free entry and opportunity to enter the UK via the asylum route. What transpired was a plethora of socially constructed status's which assigned Zimbabweans the identities of 'naturalised citizens, refugees, asylum seekers, reunited families, undocumented workers and over-stayers, students, work permit holders and those whose nationality is disputed', (Humphris, 2010).

## **6. LIVING BETWEEN TWO CULTURES**

Conversely, many of the white British students had grown up and lived in small towns and villages surrounding the university. They talked about their participation on the course as their first experience of being alongside black people and being unsure if 'black' or 'coloured' was the right term. I was shocked that this lack of exposure to diversity was possible in the twenty first century, not so many miles from multi-cultural London. The interesting paradox was they felt able to discuss this with me despite my blackness. I did not know if being Black but born in Britain meant I was perceived differently from someone black and born elsewhere, particularly if that person had a different preferred language, as many of the Zimbabwean students did. However, as one of the first generation of migrant children from the Caribbean to be educated in England, my experience of feeling powerless and surviving between two cultural worlds was similar to what many of the students from Zimbabwe described when living in a country with a history of white privilege over your country of origin. My parents came to England from Jamaica invited under Official Government Recruitments Schemes, to work in the UK to aid post war reconstruction and economic recovery (Layton-Henry 1984). As Jamaica was a former British Colony, my parents were able to travel to England, vote and work freely under the British Nationality Act (1948). However, like the entry restrictions that were introduced to Zimbabweans over time, the 1962 Commonwealth and Immigration Act was introduced to restrict the number of migrants entering the UK (Anwar, 1998). The number of children born to migrants and their subsequent requirement for an education appeared to not have been thought through prior to the need arising. Gillard (2011) suggests that debates about how to educate migrant children did not begin until the 1960's. The discourse centred on if the education approach should be assimilation with an associated loss of language and culture; an absorption into British Society while losing all that was unique to our own culture of origin. This was versus an integrationist approach, where the values of British Society would be adopted whilst retaining the uniqueness of our own culture. Lynch (1986) suggests the assimilationist position was implemented to address the growing resistance from white British people to the presence of black people in the UK. Kelly and Altbach (1984) argue the concept of assimilation is underpinned by colonial education which removes the student away from their learning structures of their own country in order to be absorbed into the metropole of the former colonising country. Indeed, a Department of Education and Science circular 7/65, (quoted in Swann, 1985, 193: 4) stated 'as the proportion of immigrant children in a school or class increases, the problems will become more difficult to solve, and the chances of assimilation more remote'. In accordance with this concern, the Local Government Act 1966, permitted the dispersal of immigrant pupils. As a result, immigrant children were 'bussed' to schools in different areas to ensure there were

no more than one third of immigrant children in a school or in one class. Being part of this generation, my experience was that I attended a school which had a majority of white students. However, assimilation was undermined by my reality of living between two cultures as outside of school I was immersed in the Caribbean culture inherent in my parents' actions, beliefs and values. My education was shaped by policies intended to assimilate me whilst in the backdrop society was constantly defining and redefining me as Coloured, West Indian, Caribbean, Afro-Caribbean, Ethnic Minority, Black and Ethnic Minority, Black British and Black. This was much in the same way that the students from Zimbabwe were living between their culture of origin and British culture with the continuous reconstruction of their status and potential undermining of identity. Bell hooks suggests the need for students to 'believe they can inhabit comfortably two different worlds, but they must make each space one of comfort', (1994:183). From my experience, the comfort that one of these cultural worlds must provide would include a form of protection against these attacks on identity. However, I realised this was also true for the white, British students who were having to step into an educational space shared with people of other cultures and colour and then step back into their 'white' world.

## **7. WHITE BRITISH STUDENTS ENCOUNTER WITH MULTICULTURALISM**

White British students had a taken for granted white existence that became challenged by the presence of the black students, now left with the realisation that other identities were beginning to encroach on their previously protected space. Helms (1995) six stage model of white identity status, was helpful in further understanding the situation the white British students found themselves in. Stage one is "contact" where the normal state is being in a white environment, therefore difference or identity does not need to be considered. This was the stage many of the white students were in prior to starting university and were not in any social space that included black people. Stage two is "disintegration" when there is a sudden exposure to people of colour; racism, difference and privilege may start to be considered from this exposure. This was evidently the point where the white British students attended university and found themselves in an environment where difference, what it meant and how it would be managed, emerged in their lives. Stage three of Helms model is "reintegration" where fear, anger and loss of identity may develop. This seemed to be the stage the white students were in when I met them. Fear of not knowing the social mores of being around people of colour; anger at having their white space challenged and both fear and anger at the possible loss of their white British identity. Stage four is "pseudo-independence" where there is an intellectual understanding of racism and identity. This was what I was hoping to achieve by introducing relationship based approaches to the students that would bring them together. Stage five of Helms (1995) model is "immersion" where questions are asked about ones white identity, e.g. what does it mean to be white? The final stage is achieved when a positive white identity is (consciously) formed. The final two stages were ones that each white British student would need to journey alone and see how far they reached. Although Helms model was helpful in shedding some light on the experience of the White British students, I would suggest that it is unlikely that this process is always experienced in the linear style presented, sequentially moving from one stage to the next until arriving at the end.

## **8. EASTERN EUROPEAN STUDENTS HISTORICAL POLITICAL IDENTITIES**

The tutorials with the Eastern European students who had seated themselves alongside the black students, led me to find out more about their histories of migration. Initially, the recruitment of migrants to reconstruct post war Britain was extended to white Europeans. McDowell (2003) notes the less known recruitment of people from refugee camps in Germany. No longer required to work for the Nazi regime, 'forced workers' from countries including the Ukraine, Poland, Latvia and Lithuania became Displaced Persons or DP's. Some were recruited to the UK under the European Volunteer Workers Scheme. The term 'volunteer' is somewhat misleading when McDowell (2009) states they were obligated to accept allocation to specific employment sectors as a condition of entry. McDowell (2003) discusses the complexity of their identity when known as DP's, migrant workers or alien's as each description was constructed with a different meaning reflecting their rights and entitlements in



the UK. McAdam et al (2001) posits, 'identities are political ...insofar as they involve relationships to government' (2001:134). This is evident by the experience of myself, the Zimbabwean students and Eastern European students. Global economics, conflict and war resulted in our movement and migration to countries which had the power to limit entry and re-define identity.

## **9. DISCONNECT**

Reflecting on the Relational/Cultural assertion that relationships will be blotted by periods of disconnect and conflict arising from unequal power or difference reminds me of what I observed in the classroom. The divide appeared to reflect the historical relationship our countries of origin had with England which was exemplified by the inequality of power, difference in culture and identity; our embodied experience is not separated from the political economy. This embodied experience then manifests in the classroom without the individual being necessarily aware of the historical influences on their behaviour and ways of relating. Bennett et al (2011) notes that 'social work practitioners and students need to investigate the role of colonialism and privilege within themselves, social work and society' (2011:12). This is key in understanding the part one might (unwittingly) play in systemically supporting white privilege, or protecting ones' identity; therefore, educators of any discipline could benefit in this investigation. Stillwaggon (2008) discusses teacher identity and the pedagogical relationship suggesting that personal theories of teacher identity can account for connections between students and teachers. He argues 'Accounting for the teacher's identity, therefore, is closely tied to an account of what role this identity plays in securing students' developing subjectivities within those practices and beliefs upon which their society is founded', (2008: 68). The loss or destabilisation of identity through attempts of assimilation, social reconstruction or traversing between two cultures creates fear and defensiveness that develops boundaries aimed to keep out those who are different. Dillard (2006) states 'Our definitions and identity, however powerful, have been developed against the backdrop of insidious racism, sexism, classism, and other "isms" that, by their very nature are limiting, always about who we are not, versus about who we are.' (2006:53). Dillard adds 'these are not empowering realities' (2006:53); the focus becomes on what you are not. For myself, the Zimbabwean and Eastern European students what we are *not* is White British. The non-White British students, the historically less privileged and less powerful, sat together regardless of race and colour.

## **10. IMPLEMENTING RELATIONSHIP BASED TEACHING**

In order to build a safe learning environment in light of issues of privilege, difference and post colonialism, I needed to implement relationship based approaches and Relational/Cultural principles to my teaching. Jordan (1995) suggests there is growth in relationships, particularly when there is a need to understand difference in the process of building the relationship. She notes 'The movement toward the other's differentness is actually central to growth in relationships and also can provide a powerful sense of validation for both self and other. Growth occurs because as I stretch to match or understand your experience, something new is acknowledged or grows in me'. (1995: 57). For my next lecture, I hoped to provide an opportunity for the students to begin to understand each other's experiences. I prepared a single power point slide with an image of a can of worms. With that I brought some rolls of toilet paper and lots of courage with me to the class. As each student entered the room I asked them to take some toilet paper. When everyone was seated, I finally gathered the courage to state I had observed the divide. For me it took courage as I didn't know what reactions the students would have to this. I acknowledged that I might have been opening a can of worms - checking that everyone understood the metaphor of opening a can of worms was to potentially unleash difficulties that I might be unable to gain control of - however in social work we needed to have the courage to have difficult conversations and manage difficult situations. I went through the Social GRRRAACCEESS (Burnham 2011) of gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, culture, class, ethnicity, education, employment, spirituality and sexuality; explaining that some were seen, while others were unseen and only known about over time. I asked the students to reflect on these aspects of their own characteristics, which were of most importance to them and why. I then paired them with another

student who I guessed they might never have spoken to before. For each square of toilet paper they had taken, they needed to discuss with their peer an aspect of the Social Graces related to themselves. Once they completed this exercise, they then had to discuss the similarities and differences of their Social Graces with each other. The idea behind the exercises was to create a 'connection' between the students, defined in Relational/Cultural terms as 'the experience of a relationship characterized by mutual empathy and mutual empowerment. This involves emotional accessibility' (JBMTI, 2014). Jordan and Hartling (2002) suggest connecting can be an uncomfortable experience where fear, anger or shame can emerge, particularly if the person is not being met with an empathetic response from the other. Therefore, I was taking a risk that the students would respond to each other in an empathic way. Even if not always empathetic, no-one was disrespectful, therefore this was a good enough start. Many of the Zimbabwean students had disclosed in their tutorial with me that they had made a decision not to speak in class after some white students rolled their eyes when they spoke; ridiculed because of their accent. I took further risks by opening debates about the subject being taught and invited all students to contribute. Whereas this should be the norm for students, I was unsure if the students from Zimbabwe would engage for fear of being exposed. However, bell hooks argues 'to engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing and a host of other differences' (1994: 130). After a few sessions where lively debates had taken place, a student of colour emailed me to say he felt his learning had improved as he had begun to feel safe to ask questions and contribute to discussions. However, Béres, et al (2008) suggests 'this type of space that encourages critical thinking may not always feel 'safe' due to its unsettling nature'. Yet, in the social work profession, we teach students about safe/unsafe, certainty/uncertainty (Mason, 1993). Thus, as educators, we should ourselves be able to contain a degree of unsafe uncertainty within the classroom. It would be easy albeit unpleasant to have ignored the divide between and continued with the status quo. However, Mason suggests 'we all understandably get caught up at times in wanting certainty and yet I believe that it can indeed, contribute... to a state of paralysis' (1993: 190). Far from paralysis, there was a shift the group by the end of the first semester. This was further helped by my inclusion of group exercises and a group based project where I continuously rotated the group membership to ensure that every student eventually had an opportunity to work with the others.

## 11. CONCLUSION

In times of increased levels of migration, globalism and internationalism, the potential for highly diverse student cohorts is likely. There may be historical relationships between the country of origin and migration including colonialism, which can manifest in the dynamics between the students in ways that on the surface may present simplistically, such as in the seating arrangements. However, this may disguise the complex, multifaceted intersectionality of colour, race, difference, sameness and post colonialism, that could be acting as a barrier to learning. As educators we need to find the courage to reveal what is behind the disguise in order to facilitate the most effective learning experiences for our students.

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