

Researching Inclusion in HE: A Narrative of Initial Enquiry.

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Abstract.

This rapid response considers the topic of inclusion in Higher Education and takes the form of a braided essay, which aims to illustrate the dialogic nature of teaching, learning and research. Sandra is pursuing an MA by Research in Education which intends to investigate whether access and attainment for migrant students and studies of migrants can be improved through inclusive pedagogies. This is a reflection on a preliminary research stage of Sandra's journey, and the larger study has been granted ethical approval. As White women working and learning in Irish Higher Education, we are aware of the need to reflect on, and deconstruct our own positionality in this journey, in order to become 'race allies' in a meaningful way. Following a macro-level introduction to inclusivity in HE and the need for empirical enquiry, a narrative of the first meeting between a graduate student researching inclusivity and undergraduate students from a minority¹ group provides a micro level enquiry into lived experiences. In this way, two strands, theoretical and narrative weave together to illustrate how the value of lived experience, conversations, creating a sense of belonging and understanding for all learners can bring a richness and depth to the research journey. We believe that inclusive education begins and ends with personal experience and that the lives of our learners should be paramount in the design of our teaching practice. The interaction between supervisor (Susan), researcher (Sandra), and learners Beatrice and Gabriella is interwoven to illustrate the research journey. We are aware that Sandra's initial steps as a researcher must be to engage in critical reflexivity to gain a deep understanding of her own positionality, and a comprehensive understanding about the experiences of minority students. Tillman (2002) highlighted that while one does not need to belong to a group in order to research it, it is important that "*the researcher has the cultural knowledge to accurately interpret and validate the experiences*" of others in a study.

Keywords: Clubs and Societies, Diversity, Equality, Inclusion.

¹ We define minority as a culturally distinct group of people whose practices, race, religion, ethnicity, or other characteristics are fewer in numbers than the main groups of those classifications. In sociological terms, minority group refers to a category of people who experience relative disadvantage as compared to members of a dominant social group.

1. Theory.

1.1 Inclusion in HE.

Susan: This rapid response attempts to highlight the critical importance of inclusion at every stage of the researcher's journey, "*making research subjects part of the research*" (Joseph, 2020). It has been established that "*whiteness and white identity operate as a form of privilege in society*" (Bhopal, 2018:47) and therefore, often "*teachers are not fully equipped to understand the experiences of Black and minority ethnic pupils in the classroom*" (Bhopal, 2018:76). As a result, teachers need to examine their own racial positioning (Solomona et al, 2005:50) to be effective and inclusive teachers.

Taking an Equality Studies approach means trying to develop a concept of the alternative rather than simply accepting the given; focussing on potentiality as well as on actuality (Lynch, 1999:43). The academy itself, and academic knowledge, is often deeply implicated in the reproduction of Whiteness, as what counts as 'legitimate' knowledge is biased, and therefore social patterns are reproduced in HE as "*racial inequalities outside education impact on students' experiences within it*" (Lynch, 2019:302).

In an earlier paper, Lynch outlines the necessity of approaching research in the social sciences from an emancipatory standpoint. By observing the limitations of traditional positivist methodologies an argument is made for a more inclusive method that involves 'partnership between the researcher and the research subject' whereby the 'subject is co-creator of the knowledge' (1999:49). Rather than the biased top-down research resulting from empirical methods, which Lynch suggests operates as a form of colonisation, qualitative research here inverts roles so that the researcher becomes the instrument and the subjects become participants. (1999:48). The partnership and co-created research processes used in this initial research is a useful participative method; we acknowledge that the HE systems and modes may need disruption, so we use disruptive methodologies, which unsettle traditional patterns and modes of research.

As White people in academia, we benefit from the privilege of normative identity- our position is the default, which allows us the comfort and security of being the 'norm'. To research the topic of inclusion, we must listen to and prioritise experiences which are beyond our own, to counteract what Joseph (2020) terms 'racial complacency'. Various social movements have used the term 'nothing about us without us', and it is an integral aspect of any research into

inclusivity. How people feel has a direct impact on their success and engagement with study, work, social and personal life. Therefore the first step for Sandra must be to talk to learners and get their perspectives on inclusion in education.

2. Narrative.

Sandra: As a graduate researcher working in the area of inclusion, I know that the decision to embark on a journey into the world of Higher Education is a brave one for many students. There are undoubtedly positives associated with this type of journey; career prospects are opened up, personal growth occurs, new spheres of knowledge and ways of understanding the world and your place in it are afforded. But it's not just as simple as accepting the offer of a place on a course of study. While furthering your education can be exciting and positive, it can also be daunting. Far from the safety net of familiar relationships formed in secondary school, institutes of Higher Education can present a great expanse of uncertainty and isolation as students leave behind old environments for new horizons. Entering into the world of academia, for whatever reason, necessitates a spirit of adventure and a large degree of independence for those that decide to follow this path. A sense of inclusion is important for everyone at every stage of life, but it is becoming clear that this is especially important for academic success.

As a researcher and a secondary school teacher I am all too aware of the need for students to feel included in their learning environments if they are going to engage fully. Creating optimal learning opportunities requires creating spaces to develop relationships between students and their teachers. In a secondary school environment this can be achieved through in-class discussion, debate and interactive teaching methodologies such as active learning. Extracurricular activities can also be a way to achieve a positive, inclusive relationship between teachers and students. In Higher Education however, where students are adults and have many responsibilities and demands on their time and energy, how can they be encouraged and supported to find a place in their new world, to feel included? This question is especially pertinent for students who identify as part of minority groups as they can be challenged in a greater way than the general student population by virtue of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds or identities. Having become familiar with some of the pertinent literatures on inclusion I realise that my first step is to listen to the lived experiences of students in HE, particularly those who may be in a minority. My theoretical framework merges Equality Studies and Critical Race Theory. I believe that I need to critically examine the social structures and institutions in our

country which contribute to the construction of race and racism. I need to put the experiences of minority students to the forefront of my research from the outset. Therefore one of my first actions was to contact one of the student societies which has a large number of minority students.

2.1 Learning through listening.

I arranged a meeting with representatives of the Afro-Caribbean Society at IT Carlow, Beatrice Olayiwola - the President, and Gabriella Onyinye Ogwude - the Secretary, who generously gave the time to talk to me about the society and its student members. The conversation made it clear to me that social communities such as these are integral to creating a sense of identity and belonging for students in HE. What the discussion also made clear was that academic success is made all the more achievable if students can afford of opportunities to create meaningful relationships in and through society membership.

The discussion was structured so that I could get a broad sense of what it means to be a member of the Afro-Caribbean Society. As a research fellow in IT Carlow's eduCORE research centre, working to understand how students belonging to minority groups experience college life, I am aware of certain privileges I have as a White, middle class Irish woman. My research aim is to educate myself so that I can educate my students and indeed, educate other educators. To be a 'race ally' (Joseph, 2020) I need to familiarise myself with the experiences and backgrounds of the student body.

Not all students that attend the society identify as migrants. About 40% are migrants but the rest are Irish born and raised and have lived here their entire lives. Most refer to themselves as Nigerian-Irish or Irish-Nigerian depending on the person. For example, Beatrice refers to herself as Irish, as it is her nationality, but explains her ethnic background if asked.

To begin, I asked why they joined the society and was given a clear indication of the great need for a sense of belonging. For its members this society provides a hub of acceptance, of cultural celebration, of community. Membership here gives students a sense of inclusion in an otherwise exclusionary environment where culture is concerned. The most interesting insight I was offered in this regard was that when they come together to socialise, members can speak freely in their own varied African accents, without feeling worried about not being understood. Ireland is country with a relatively large variety of accents and dialects given its size, but I for one have never felt the need to alter my accent in order to be understood. This advantage of society

membership was therefore both novel and intriguing to me.

When questioned about the benefits associated with membership there was no mention of free food, drinks promotions, exclusive access to venues or any of the typical attractions one might associate with clubs and societies in college. Instead was a more wholesome and holistic response that captured me. The benefits of membership in this society include a growth in confidence and a greater sense of self, largely because of the community of acceptance that membership affords. Solidarity amongst peers is a clear element here. Promoting confidence through acceptance is an important part of what the Afro-Caribbean society does for its members. This in turn has helped members to achieve a level of inclusion otherwise denied in their academic careers.

Next I enquired if or how their college experience has been affected as a result of their involvement with the society. The response was an overwhelmingly positive one; being part of the Afro-Caribbean Society has not just improved the academic experience for members, it has also sustained it. In and through the support network that this society provides, the context of learning is positively associated with membership. Having a place to come together, having a platform to speak freely without fear of exclusion or ridicule, and having a clear sense of community, has created a space where members are confident in their abilities to succeed academically at third level. Involved in this is the notion of peer mentoring. The establishment of inclusion in a social context has percolated into the learning environment for members. Notwithstanding the personal growth of members in and through their involvement with this society, their growth and development as academics is positively correlated with the level of inclusion achieved through peer mentoring.

Our discussion ended with an overview of negatives associated with membership which can be concisely captured with the word 'stereotype'. As with many other areas of their lives outside academia, members of the Afro-Caribbean society experience negative reactions from non-members when they come together for meetings. This element warrants further research and discussion, but what was abundantly clear is that these students feel a general lack of acceptance both on and off campus. The one positive that was expressed to me in this regard is that things are changing due to a shift in terms of cultural awareness.

3. CONCLUSION.

Sandra: Continuing your education beyond second level is a significant challenge for many reasons. All students are faced with barriers and institutes of Higher Education are moving to support their students in a number of ways. As this conversation outlines however, support comes in many forms, and a pivotal aspect is inclusion. How to support inclusion in education is an important question, and perhaps one of the fundamental starting points is to consider just how necessary inclusive entities like clubs and societies are to the overall well-being of students in Higher Education. However, this is just once small aspect of inclusion. While my own research journey stretches out ahead, I already see that I have a lot to learn from my research participants and that understanding through listening and asking questions is imperative if I am to understand the meaning of inclusion.

Susan: Dialogic inquiry employs collaborative action research, which allows research students to develop a greater understanding when they have opportunities to engage in dialogue. As White women, Sandra and I have reflected at length on the limitations of this study and tried to map a research journey that will be at all times porous, and thoughtful of the experiences of students.

We know that a deep-seated inequality underpins formal education, where 'equal opportunity' presumes that every student can compete equally for advantages. The experiences of our minority students confirm that not all students enjoy the supports and comforts of 'fitting in' and therefore are denied some of the basic privileges and 'cultural capital' that are a given for others. Through Sandra's MA in Education she has the potential to enact meaningful empirical and dialogical research by highlighting the varied experiences of our students. This initial narrative is a step on that journey.

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