Pathways to Innovation and Development in Education

A Collection Of Invited Essays

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Chapter 5

Constructing identities with young people: making visible cultural norms.

Grace O'Grady

> The breaking of the norms of knowing by 'seeing through' is fundamentally related to breaking the oppressive aspects of human existence…When ideas are not seen through; the reality they spawn is experienced as natural and inevitable. It is the process of seeing through that liberates us to create with ideas, rather than merely be a victim of them. (Watkins, 2005a, p.13)

This paper presents a short introduction to a study I carried out over a three-year period in two Irish secondary schools into identity construction and young people (O' Grady, 2012). I draw on textual material from that work (vignettes of conversation and creative artefacts) and some of my reading and reflections, to underscore the theme of ethnicity and the need to make it visible in the construction of a white identity.

A central aim of the inquiry was to explore with young people (17/18-year-olds) how they constructed their identities through talk and image. In particular, it attempted to assist them in unpicking the social discourses they drew on consciously/unconsciously to construct their individual and collective identities; to make visible cultural norms in an effort to de-essentialize identities, and to hold open a space to find movement out of fixed, limiting identity constructions. These aims are congruent with the emancipatory intent of Narrative Arts-Based Inquiry (Finley, 2005) and what McLaren (2003) and Denzin (2005) respectively call 'Revolutionary Pedagogy' and 'Critical Performative' praxis. Denzin writes that we are at a point in time when performative ethnography must be enacted as critical social practice to "confront race relations and inequalities in the globalised, capitalist, democratic system" (ibid, pg.688).

As part of the research design of this inquiry, I facilitated two Identity Programmes with a group of ten Fifth Year students and eleven Transition Year students (February-May 2008/ February-May 2009). Each programme involved twelve two-hour creative workshops over a semester in two Irish Community Schools. In each case the self-selected students (5 male/5 female in first programme and 5 male/6 female in second programme) were facilitated in an exploration of their identity narratives using arts-based educational activities such as drawing, collage-making and journaling. The young people selected their own media to work with as they creatively constructed and critically analysed portraits of themselves in their world.

Ethnicity became central to this study for two reasons: Firstly, the visibility and invisibility of ethnic difference was evident across both programmes. The story of a girl, whose parents were Ugandan, was creatively constructed in the first research programme but only presented, with her permission, for the first time in the second programme to assist in making visible the white hegemonic identity of the group. Secondly, the 'effects of the western way of construing the world and making meaning were very much in evidence in the talk and images of the young people and became the discursive threads that the participants and I attempted to unpick.

Both strands of this theme were underscored from the very beginning in the selection process of group participants. Having presented the programme to four Transition Year classes, a total of forty students returned for the second meeting and were invited to devise a fair way to select the final ten/eleven. It was suggested unanimously that there would be a gender divide. I then asked what other considerations might be important.

2nd Meeting in first school February 2008

…A Swedish student, Maggie, who told the group that her parents were Ugandan, suggested an ethnic mix. "Identity is about ethnicity and difference", she asserted. The others agreed and so I asked if there were any other international students in the group who would like to be included. When a girl called Susan, was named by some of her classmates, she laughed defensively and declared, "I'm not 'ethnic', I'm English". From her perspective, she was just like the rest of the class. In contrast to Maggie's, the group's ethnicity was invisible. In resisting the category of 'ethnic', the English girl was claiming a position at the centre as white, and in so doing, was constructing Maggie as 'other' than her. Identities situated in a position of hegemony are unmarked and naturalised and constitute themselves by constructing the margins. Kiesling (2006) writes:

> It is by identifying and creating…subordinate categories that the dominant categories become
> invisible and normative; they are erased in a sense, and the speakers can thus naturalise their
> power. This is one of the mechanisms of hegemony (p.285).

A RATIONALE FOR A MULTI-ETHNIC GROUP

Following the incident with Maggie, I began reading some of the post-colonial work of Watkins (2002b), (2002c), (2005a), Fromm (1976) and the feminist writings of Irigaray (2002) and Butler (2004). This reading brought me back to an incident in my youth that reinforced my decision to work with a multi-ethnic group of students.

In my fourth year in primary school (1969-1970), there was an effort at integration of the children from the local orphanage with the children in the mainstream national school. It was a progressive strategy on the part of the Mercy nuns who ran both the orphanage and the local school. On Wednesday evenings we watched films in the convent refectory. I recall a moment of exchange that took place between a fellow student from the orphanage and myself while watching a 'Cowboys and Indians' movie, The Battle of the Little Big Horn. As General Custer and his army of handsome Americans began to flee the scene because of a reprisal from the Comanche/Sioux Indian population, my friend began shouting with glee. I was startled. Perceiving the Indian as the 'bad guy'/'other'/'enemy'/'stranger' and Custer as 'hero'/'good guy'/'same as self'/'friend', I felt a momentary anger towards her. How could she support the enemy?

From a postcolonial perspective, Watkins (2002b, p.3) reminds us that the colonial self, profiting from the oppression of others, has created a view of others that justifies oppression. The other is inferior, impulsive, underdeveloped, superstitious and needs monitoring. Colonial superiority, disciplined work, logical thought, resourcefulness "elevate the colonial self and justify control of the cake" (ibid, pp.3-6). The presence of my friend from the orphanage, her position in the discourse that was being played out on the screen, viscerally challenged my colonised position and its limited understanding. As an 'orphan', someone who is positioned outside the norm, up-rooted from family, she was able to see the injustice of the reprisal. Being a 'mainstream' kid, I was part of the unquestioning cultural majority.

While we can never completely look in on the culture we are a part of from an outside position, being in dialogue with the viewpoints of another culture is an important way to begin to see more deeply into our own and our discursive construction of self/identity.

Kimmel (1990, cited in Davies, 1993) recounts a similar moment when he listens in on a conversation between a black woman and a white woman:

> 'When you wake up in the morning and look in the mirror, what do you see?' she [the black woman] asked.
>
> 'I see a woman', replied the white woman…
>
> 'That's precisely the problem', replied the black woman. 'I see a black woman. For me race is visible every minute of the day, because it is how I am not privileged in this culture. Race is invisible to you which is why our alliance will always feel false and strained to me.' (p.94)

He concluded: "Marginality is visible and painfully visceral. Privilege is invisible and painlessly pleasant" (ibid). From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, Irigaray (2002) questions a single way of being and knowing, the phallocentric basis of western philosophy – "a Platonic monologic that reduces the other to a pale copy or deficient version of the same" (p.98). She calls for the recognition of two instead of one, the acknowledgement of otherness as a basis for recasting relationships.

OTHERNESS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF SELF

Fromm (1976) argues that the rise of capitalism and industrialism in the west strengthened the colonising 'ego', silencing the voices of those it marginalised thereby constructing 'otherness' as an abject category; that which one has no wish to be (Kristeva, 1986). The young African Swedish girl, Maggie, having initially proposed publicly that there would be an ethnic mix in the group, did not continue to risk further marginalisation: The most visible ethnic identity signature, skin colour, was not evident in her portraits and the story of her Ugandan background was never articulated in her conversation in the group. The only acknowledgement of her African ancestry was privately written into her journal. According to Butler (2004, pp1-5) when a person finds that they are outside of a dominant social norm, at a given point in time, this can be experienced as abjection. In order to avoid this abjection, the desire for recognition is a powerful one and causes people to subject themselves to existing normative frameworks, even where this subjection is hurtful and harmful. If in seeking a reflection of ourselves in another, we find nothing, we are rendered 'other' to ourselves.

The desire to belong and to subject oneself to normative frameworks is underscored in responses to Maggie's narrative below. The rhizomatic narrative strand that tells of the longing to belong and the fear of being rendered 'other' wove its way into much of the talk and images of the young people in this study. According to Watkins, movements of mind that support a colonising 'ego' involve "comparisons between self and other, meticulous monitoring of issues of sufficiency, inferiority/superiority, a heightened judgmental capacity, scrupulous maintenance of power, control, autonomy" (Watkins, 2002b, p.3). This was very evident in the jockeying for power in the research groups. The boys in the study policed each other's talk and actions by sexualising and oppressing anything to do with 'girl'. Their conversations showed that this was a taking up of hegemonic forms of power in the face of other forms of powerlessness – the powerlessness, in these particular groups, of being 'gay', effeminate, physically soft, black. The girls' silence discursively positioned them as powerless initially (the traditional feminine position), in a conversation dominated by sport, football and sexist, misogynist and homophobic language. A central aim of the research programme was to de-essentialize 'otherness' and locate it in its cultural/discursive context.

MAKING VISIBLE HEGEMONIC IDENTITIES

One of the varied pedagogical strategies I used to make visible the dominant discourses in which the young people were discursively positioning themselves, was to circulate extracts of both Maggie's journal entries and the borderland identity narrative of another male student from the first programme, and invite response from the participants in the second programme. Exposing the young people to the experience of a heterosexual male student

who was positioned as 'gay' and a black female student who positioned herself as 'white' was an attempt to render visible the hegemonic centre and its invisible power and also support and validate other students' struggle to perform multiple subjectivities in the group. For the purpose of this paper, I include Maggie's identity narrative: The hegemony of the white centre is made visible as it appears to highlight the effects on her of subjection to the norm. Students' responses to this narrative created a type of 'between-the-two' activity, in which energy, which was "captured" and "striated" might escape; momentarily moving outside "normative strata" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.15). The narrative extract was introduced into the programme in the fourth workshop after the participants had completed and shared their self-portraits and had already begun to make visible some of the cultural, family and school stories in their creative images (see appendix for method of facilitating the audiencing of images). Below is a narrative performance of Maggie's creative story constructed in her self portraits and journal entries, and the response of the students from the second programme to her narrative.

MAKING VISIBLE THE 'WHITE CENTRE' IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES

Maggie's Self Portrait and extract from Journal (1st Programme/February 4th 2008)

Maggie's 1st Self Portrait

Journal Entry:

> …I was born in Sweden and came to Ireland when I was 9. I drew the Swedish and Irish flag with the music icon over the Swedish flag because I loved music from the beginning. I put the three RIP icons in because they were really sad times in my life when my granddad (Dad's father) and my two aunts (mum's two sisters) died within one year − I was 10. Granddad was a big person in my life, he got me into music, he'd play me songs on the piano and loved percussion. He used to play on an old drum made from goatskin. I tried to draw it but it looked more like an airplane so I put a wing on it because I love travel as well. I coloured them [the headstones] in brown because they were all from Uganda…

Maggie's 2nd Portrait and extract from Journal Entry (First Programme/February 11th)

Maggie's 2nd Self Portrait

Journal Entry:

> In this portrait I feel sad and lost. I'm on a deserted island and I don't know how to get off it. Maybe the mood I'm in today! I am on my own, but normally I'm with lots of friends. Not sure! I want to get home to my house up in the right corner where there is a lot of love in my family, hence the red heart [Maggie excluded this image in her photograph of self-portrait above]. Sometimes maybe when I'm with my friends I feel like this, alone. I am different.

Responses to Maggie's Creative Narrative and snippets of analysis:

Ron: The Swedish flag and Irish flag are big and there is only a tiny thing showing Africa in her first portrait, like you could miss it. She just writes 'African trip'.

Finn: She's from Sweden but her relations are from Uganda. Is she erm black?

Grace: Both her parents are also from Uganda.

Finn: Um…You'd never know that a black girl drew this portrait.

Ron: Yeah she draws herself like any other Irish girl but she must be aware of being black.

Anne: She probably just wants to belong to the group…not to be different.

Eoghan: But she's black so she is different.

Finn: Technically it's brown, she coloured the tombstones brown…

In the above, the boys are eager to find a way of categorising Maggie and are perplexed by the fact that she omitted to indicate her ethnicity in the drawing. They try to find a way to capture, striate, essentialise, territorialise, pin down her subjectivity. Anne tries to read Maggie's motivation and in so doing constructs herself as a person with emotional insight and perhaps as someone who has knowledge of a similar marginalised discursive positioning.

Sandy: Because her people are from Uganda and she says that is why she coloured them in brown.

Sandy reads this as Maggie's way of indicating her ethnicity

Anne: Like when you're from here, Irish, you just take for granted that you are white, you don't notice. But like when I was in the States erm… Pennsylvania and I was waiting at a train station for my aunt to collect me. I was the only white person and it felt very weird like it was probably the first time I was aware of my colour.

Anne names the white centre as something that is taken for granted in Ireland, a centre that is discursively constructed and shifts according to geographical location. The hegemonic 'ethnic' centre becomes obvious when one is positioned outside it, as white. Mandy's white Irish identity is no longer a position of privilege in this situation, a position that was invisible to her prior to this.

Grace: Wow that must have been an extraordinary moment…

Sandy: When you're different you are always aware of it. Like Maggie wants to be white but she can't… The tombstones take up most of the room in the picture.

Sandy speaks with authority as though speaking her own story. Maggie's desire to be white is constructed as a lack, acknowledging the gap between lack and desire as understood in psychodynamic thinking.

Grace: When you say that I think it's nearly like she buried a critical part of her own story, her link to her ancestral past.

Sandy: I think that's what people do when they want to be the same…like burying a part of themselves.

Sandy underscores the effects of subjection to the norm. Davies (1993) sees this as an ongoing tension between a person's access to specificity and the right to be different, and one's access to group membership which assumes and achieves sameness].

> Anne: Yeah…and the African drum turned into an airplane when she was drawing it, kind of the same thing.

Anne interprets this activity as a taking flight from her African heritage, which Sandy reads as unconscious.

> Sandy: So all of it could be unconscious, she doesn't know she's doing it.
>
> Ron: You know when people adopt those African and Chinese babies, must be kinda tough on the kids when they grow up in a white country. Like when…
>
> Sandy: Maggie…
>
> Ron: …says that she feels kind of alone, even when she's with her friends.
>
> Finn: Yeah, she drew herself white on the deserted island. Tough one.

AND SO …

The above responses make visible the dialogic movement towards deconstructing the white centre. White as a hegemonic identity is unmarked and naturalised and constitutes itself by constructing a margin. Making visible its discursive thread softens the boundary between black/white and loosens the binary thinking and talking that supports it. It seems to me that patterns of power and powerlessness inherent in dualisms such as male/female, adult/young person, teacher/pupil, heterosexual/homosexual, white person/black person, need to be addressed as old cultural patterns, if we hope to move beyond oppressive forms of human relations. According to Davies et al (2006) all of these - gender, sexuality, ethnicity and age status, are implicit in acts of learning to talk, read, becoming a competent person. Because of their embeddedness in approved dominant discourses their creation and maintenance are invisible and intractable (ibid). As teachers, school counsellors and educators we need to facilitate young people in making visible cultural norms in the construction of their 'personal' identities, and to actively encourage movement out of fixed, limiting identity stories. Aronowitz and Giroux's idea of 'border pedagogy' in Postmodern Education… (1991) fits with what I'm saying:

> Border pedagogy offers the opportunity for students to engage the multiple references that constitute different cultural code, experiences, and languages. This means educating students to read these codes, including the ones they use to construct their own narratives… (p.118-119)

This is revolutionary in that it is counter cultural. A critical performative pedagogy that works towards unveiling oppression and transforming praxis has the potential to implement new visions of dignity, care democracy and other postcolonial ways of being in the world (Finley, 2005, p.689).

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APPENDIX

I began by asking about the physical image; colour, form etc. and later, at times, loosely stitching in questions like the following:

- What do you see? What story is the image telling?
- Where did you hear that story? (raising awareness of cultural/institutional discourses).
- What is it like to be in that image – body, feelings, thoughts? (awareness of effects of discourse).
- How does that story serve you? (encouraging reflexivity/distance).
- How does that image/story limit you? Does it exclude others? (making visible the discursive construction of power).
- What image/s, if any, have been blocked out or erased? (making visible abject categories).
- Why did you choose that image and not another? (raising awareness of audience/context and the fluidity of narrative identity).
- What changes, if any, would you like to make to the image/s? (underscoring non-fixity of identity).