

Struggling for the good and the beautiful: mature refugee students in higher education

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Proposal type: Paper

Corning and Myers (2002: 704) present a broad definition of activism as “an individual’s developed, relatively stable, yet changeable orientation to engage in various collective, social-political, problem-solving behaviors spanning a range from low- risk, passive, and institutionalized acts to high-risk, active, and unconventional behaviors.” Research can therefore also be interpreted as contributing to social action, particularly when its aim, not necessarily achieved, is to be transformative. The education of refugee students provides the potential for transformative research as almost 50% of the 2.6 million people applied for international protection in the European Union during 2015- 2016 were aged between 18-34 years. People in this age group may hope to enter higher education or further their studies, yet the most recent literature focuses on policy or on the measures instigated by HEIs so that there is an emerging gap in relation to the lived experience of these new entrants to higher education in Europe. Additionally, Refugee Background Mature Students are misrecognised in higher education (Mangan and Winter 2017). Misrecognition, conceptualised from a social justice perspective, relates to individuals who are granted less social status than other groups due to social class, age, ethnicity or other aspect of identity so that they are not equal partners in social interactions. Consequently, while such students aimed to transform themselves as in a return to education, they are positioned as having an inferior status and misrecognised by peers, lecturers and institutional systems.

This paper focuses on the everyday experiences of Refugee Background Mature Refugee students in higher education in Ireland from a Critical Race theoretical perspective (Delgado, and Stefancic 2017). Included is my white researcher self, informed by my experience and identity as a former child refugee. Critical Race Theory examines racial microaggressions, apparently slight but regular daily occurrences of actions which remind a person of colour that in their everyday life they are judged differently to their White counterparts. As expressions of racism, microaggressions may not be overt, may be difficult to identify but, nevertheless, remain offensive. Findings reveal the one-dimensional label of asylum-seeker or refugee does not address the nuances of individual autobiography, the experiencing of microaggressions on campus and in the classroom, the existential challenges of unstitching what was meant or implied in encounters as well as the overcoming of feelings of

intimidation, not belonging or not worthy of being on a university campus. These negatives are accompanied by the positive actions of the people who help students to persevere and finish their studies. Such individuals express the good and the beautiful through their actions. However, completion of studies and obtaining a degree does not always lead to achieving the good and the beautiful for Refugee Background Mature Students.

Question: Are academics just avoiding taking an activist stance?

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, microaggressions, refugee background mature students, good, lifelong learning

References:

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