

Identity Integration as a Pedagogical Implication in E. R. Braithwaite's *To Sir with Love*

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Abstract

Educators' perspectives, facilitation methods, time constraints, topics of discussion as well as students' identity vulnerability contribute to academic atmosphere inside class where educators find it challenging to foster mutual understanding and identity integration for effective teaching learning. It can be a turbulent and emotionally stressful experience for educators to understand themselves in relation to their students. In this light, this paper, using Mark Bracher's notion of radical pedagogy, focuses on the need to explore students' identity needs in order to enhance their academic capacity and learning. Specifically, we argue that in order to boost students' academic growth, school educators must explore their own identity through self-analysis along with the identity vulnerabilities of students and integrate their students' identity needs to enhance classroom dynamics as well as to maintain social justice for better pedagogical implications.

Keywords: identity, identity needs, identity integration, motivation, pedagogy, self-analysis,

Introduction

For several decades now, educators have been striving to make education as lively as possible for students to continually spark and emit flames of enlightenment in and out of the classroom by providing them the best educational opportunities. But few of them are successful in giving life to education for it demands a fundamental shift in teaching. Such educators must maintain their own identity contents paying attention to the students' identity needs to create more stimulating and successful teaching-learning atmosphere in their classrooms.

It is challenging for educators to create conducive learning environment in classrooms especially when students are undisciplined and unmotivated to learn. On one hand, it is incumbent on them to maintain the regular academic activities inside the classroom. On the other hand, it is also equally important for them to manage students' 'disruptive behaviours' to improve their academic performance. How to cope with such dual challenges? Bracher's idea of identity integration and self-analysis the way to achieve this goal of education in the emotionally charged learning environments.

Diversified platforms for healthy discussion and dialogues both inside and outside the classrooms contribute to making education and knowledge the process of inquiry. They also help to develop a more profound understanding of each other and their respective backgrounds as well. Let alone the influencing pedagogues, many scholars have attempted to represent such progressive education in their literary creations that could positively influence the pedagogical implications. One among such literary creations is E. R. Braithwaite's autobiographical novel, *To Sir with Love* (2005) that navigates the author's challenging but rewarding experience of teaching at a British school and thereby seeks to

set some effective pedagogical parameters.

Literature Review

Braithwaite's autobiographical novel *To Sir with Love* has drawn wide range of attention from a number of acclaimed critics across the world. Fielding (2005) has praised Braithwaite as a brave and innovative educator describing the novel as a testimony to "Braithwaite's courage and creativity as a teacher" (p. 128). Identity particularly that of the woman is a crucial issue in the novel for Sandra Courtman. She has criticized Braithwaite for not being sensitive to the woman's issues, claiming that "the woman's experiences had never been stated" (Courtman, 2012, p. 84) in the novel. Pole (1999) has examined black teachers' purposes of joining the teaching profession and unveils that the autobiographical novel of E. R. Braithwaite has brought about change in "approaches to the education of ethnic minority children" (p. 314). Pereira et al. (2004) have seen "different leadership quality" in the protagonist Braithwaite while analyzing teachers' primary role as a school leader. They found the novel offering "altogether a different line of thinking" (p. 12). Similarly, Torrance (1969) found *To Sir with Love* an "optimistic assessment of the potentiality of disadvantaged children" (p. 71) while studying the disadvantaged black children in 1969. The question of identity of teachers as well as students is a crucial issue in Braithwaite's *To Sir with Love* unexplored so far, and this paper seeks to address this lacuna analyzing it from the perspective of Mark Bracher's radical pedagogy.

Theoretical Framework

Mark Bracher's notion of identity based radical pedagogy has served as the theoretical base for this study. In his seminal book, *Radical Pedagogy: Identity, Generativity, and Social Transformation*, Bracher (2006) elaborates his notion of identity which does not simply confine with one's membership of a social group. Rather it operates at subtler and more individual level. It refers to the sense of oneself that drives and regulates one's activities. It is determined chiefly by three elements: linguistic (words), affective (effects), and imagistic (images). Unlike other forms of pedagogies, Bracher's radical pedagogy demands teachers' own self-analysis so that they do not interfere students' identities and carefully help develop generative identity of students as well. Bracher emphasizes the need for teachers' self-reflection which the critical pedagogies overlook and in order to bridge the fissures in critical pedagogies he draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis. Thus, Bracher has merged the concepts of critical pedagogy and psychoanalytic pedagogy to develop his identity and self-reflection laden radical pedagogy.

Analysis

The protagonist Ricardo Braithwaite's identity hinders the teaching learning process in the beginning of his teaching career at Greenslade Secondary School in East End of London. As he holds the British colonial ideals of being authoritative and well-disciplined, he fails at first to understand the heterogeneous dynamics of his classroom with students coming from diverse cultural backgrounds. He does not have prior teaching experience because it is his "first appointment" (Braithwaite, 2005, p. 12). Like everyone else, teachers also are driven by identity needs. Braithwaite aspires to establish his distinct and distinguished identity by getting quick recognition from his students.

Braithwaite firmly believes in the standard behavior which he himself maintains and expects the

same from his students as well. He is well dressed (imagistic); he seems to speak decent language (linguistic); he feels stinking situation (affective) when he finds his students running here and there haphazardly with Pamela Dare, one of the students with red hair, colliding with him twice. He is sad at the prospect of the students. He frequently becomes the victim of their prank and unruly attitudes. Besides, there are his fellow teachers to worsen the situation. Weston, one of his White colleagues who believe in racial superiority, does not see any prospect of improvement in students at Greenslade which he has already hinted to Braithwaite. When he faces the class, he finds Weston's every word justifiable. His frustration reaches to the utmost level when he finds burning of sanitary napkin in the classroom. He loses his temper and badly rebukes the girls, criticizing them as having "no sense of decency" (Braithwaite, 2005, p. 67). This strategy hinders the learning of students since they do not know where their place is. The headmaster, Alex Florin, seems to disapprove the authoritarian pedagogy as it imposes coercive force on students that can "undermine their identities" (Bracher, 2006, pp. 86-87). Authoritarian pedagogy that entails teachers' complete control over their classroom with focus on undisputed compliance to the rules is not entirely negated by Bracher as long as it engages students' desire for recognition, but it is alarming if students' identities are threatened.

Florin seems to be well aware of the identity issue of students. He does not favor punishment as the appropriate tool to handle the difficult students in the school. As a remedy, he practices three major strategies – disciplined freedom, weekly review and midday dance sessions. He reflects:

It is said that here we practice free discipline. That's wrong, quite wrong. It would be more correct to say that we are seeking, as best we can, to establish disciplined freedom, that state in which the child feels free to work, play and express himself without fear of those whose job it is to direct and stimulate his efforts into constructive channels. (Braithwaite, 2005, p. 26)

Rather than absolute liberty, the school practices disciplined freedom which most of the youngsters want and expect from school. In Bracher's line, it is to realize "primal identity need, caring for the other" (Bracher, 2006, p. 157). It not only enhances wellbeing of educators and students but also the wellbeing of everyone in the society. The headmaster is well aware that democratic principles of freedom, equality and justice for students inside classroom capture their interest to learn contrary to subdued authoritative approach. He does not offer Braithwaite a "blueprint for teaching" but gives him freedom of choosing appropriate teaching methods telling him that "success or failure with them will depend entirely on you . . . So long as you work within the broad conceptual framework I have outlined, I shall not interfere" (Braithwaite, 2005, p. 27). Thus, the headmaster provides the protagonist egalitarian space to work out his pedagogical approach for his success as well as the profound personal and academic growth of his students.

Well aware of the desires of the adolescents, the headmaster introduces another scheme for the students to enact their nonacademic contents which, according to Bracher, ultimately helps to boost their academic growth. The headmaster provisions the students to engage in the midday dance session that not only woos their worries but arouses sexual stimulation in them. Dance is the fundamental part

of any culture. So the headmaster sees it as the process socialization as well. Though Braithwaite is not much concerned about the dance, he frequently dances with students. After gaining recognition as the best teacher, students and fellow teachers organize a farewell dance party where, one of his favorite students, Pamela Dare, dances with Braithwaite paying a tribute to him in a stimulating appearance in the party.

Emotions constitute an indispensable aspect of an effective pedagogical approach that demands special skills from teachers to deal with stimulating matters where students' emotional responses take center stage. Sayer (2005) has emphasized significant role of emotions in our learning and in constituting our sense of being as well. He claims emotions "such as pride, shame, envy and resentment, tell us a great deal about class [and other identities] and the difference it makes to our lives" (Sayer, 2005, p. 36). Indeed, emotions are deeply rooted in our sense of selves and we react when our identities are being challenged or threatened. They also "give meaning to experience, signify important interactions, create or destroy social relationships and facilitate agency for change" (Callahan, 2004, p. 82). The protagonist in *To Sir with Love* loses his temper and badly rebukes his students when he finds them burning sanitary pads in the dustbin in the classroom. Braithwaite feels his authority and identity of a teacher threatened to see the girls' act and reproaches them – "only a filthy slut would have dared to do this thing, and those of you who stood by and encouraged her are just as bad" (Braithwaite, 2005, p. 66). This emotional outburst of the protagonist ruptures his rapport with students who at the same time feel stripped of their identity in the class. This emotionally charged situation compels Braithwaite to analyse his approach and also helps him think seriously about his students' identity vulnerability. Now being tolerant and flexible in his approach towards them, he explores opportunities to integrate with them. Therefore, he accepts the challenge from one of his students for boxing despite having no prior experiences of it.

At times, Denham, the most rebellious student in Braithwaite's class, challenges Braithwaite to play boxing with him. He hesitates in the beginning but when Denham does not give up, he agrees. Denham hits him in the face and gets Braithwaite hurt, which creates "a moment of stunned silence" (Braithwaite, 2005, p. 80). It leads to another turning point of his relationship with the class. He is at once aware of a crucial change in his relationship to his students, and experiences "more than a mere satisfaction in receiving their attention, obedience and respect with their acceptance of my position as their teacher" (Braithwaite, 2005, p. 81). This emotionally charged atmosphere outside the classroom brings Braithwaite emotionally close to his students earning him more respect and obedience from them.

In fact, Braithwaite does not confine his teaching merely in the classroom. Though it is difficult to supervise and control forty-two students, he takes them to visit Victoria and Albert Museum in which the students show unprecedented interest. They feel pretty happy and are alert about the visit in the changed atmosphere. Their happiness gets reflected in their weekly review which makes the headmaster happy as well. Moreover, Braithwaite finds everyday lessons more interesting afterwards. Even the silent Seales begins interacting in the class. More importantly, it is reflected well in the half yearly review of the Student Council. Seen from Bracher's perspective, these students not only behave like adults but also recognize others' contribution in their lives as their teacher empathically

takes care of interests as well as identity needs.

Braithwaite acknowledges some identity components in addressing some of the social problems that arise in course of his academic journey. Racism is what he experiences bitterly. He is not aware of his skin color when he is serving in the British Royal Air Force during the Second World War. But after he comes to Britain in search of job he is denied of several jobs during the interviews because of his black complexion. Helpless Braithwaite chooses to be a school teacher despite having sound qualification in engineering. He feels compelled to take this job by "the very urgent need to eat" (Braithwaite, 2005, p. 29). He is frequently humiliated by colleagues, students and news reporter in the school. Weston frequently calls him 'black sheep' and 'sunburn' friends. He cannot be a tenant in the white British home because of his skin color in course of his teaching career. Though he has developed a kind of tolerance with few resentments, he cannot bear it anymore.

One of his students, Seales' mother passes away. The students collect money for the funeral bouquet but none of them are willing to take it to Seales as he is born out of a local white woman who has colored husband. When he asks, Moira Joseph replies "what people would say if they saw us going to a coloured person's home" (Braithwaite, 2005, p. 164). Had it been the incident of his initial days in the school it would not trouble him much. But he thinks he has already changed the thinking pattern of students and fellow teachers so well that he has got victory over their racism. Therefore, he feels derided at this unexpected juncture of his life.

Actually, the children are grown up in the community where there is strong racial and religious tensions and prejudices. His meagre effort at Greenslade could not bring about a drastic change in the social scenarios out rightly. But one of his students, Pamela Dare, dares to do it, saying "gossips don't worry me" (Braithwaite, 2005, p. 168). On the funeral day, to his surprise, he finds nearly all of his children in their best clothes in the funeral procession. He feels recharged and reenergized in his pedagogical attempts once again.

Likewise, Barbara Pegg's mother also begs pardon with Braithwaite for denying him the room by meeting him in the school personally. She says, "I want to talk to you about the room, Sir. You see, I didn't know that you was Babs' teacher, you know what I mean" (Braithwaite, 2005, p. 99). He comprehends well the change in her attitude towards him. This indicates that he gradually gains approval from the community as well. He gains the gradual recognition about his position as a black teacher in combating the racial discrimination in the British contemporary society. Braithwaite gets paid for his sincere act of identity integration contributing to students' psychological and academic growth as well as social justice. Most importantly, Braithwaite gets acknowledged by all of his students as the best teacher they have ever had in their life.

In the farewell dance party, after Braithwaite finished dancing with Pamela Dare, Moira Joseph, another student representing all students, addresses him telling "we are much better children for having had you as a teacher. We liked best the way you always talked to us, you know, not like silly kids, but like grown-ups and like that. You have been good to us, Sir, and we'd like you to accept a little gift to remember us by" (Braithwaite, 2005, p. 185). He receives a parcel inscribed TO SIR WITH LOVE with signature of all the students which makes him emotional and gets him to address

them as his children. This shows that his hard work pays and that he will continue to educate the children at Greenslade.

Conclusion

The educators in the text assimilate identity based pedagogy. They face multiple challenges in the teaching learning process as their identity hinders it. Gradually they try multiple ways of dealing with students without being discouraged even if their attempts fail several times, and ultimately they are able to change the mindset of their students in order to prepare them for the better society. Likewise, their colleagues and parents also get motivated by their identity based pedagogy for their own self-analysis and simultaneously for paying attention to students' identity and social justice.

Braithwaite's experiences as a teacher in the tough East End secondary modern school reveal how much challenging and volatile learning sites can be. His courage and creativity as well as the pedagogical insights of the headmaster yield very highly positive result at the end. Exploring the common understanding and identity vulnerabilities of each other, the teachers in the novel have succeeded to create a profound teaching-learning environment which helps them understand each other and also develop a better sense of self. In many ways, the expectations placed on identity integrated pedagogy are enormous but its highly productive impact on both educators as well as students prove that it is a better science.

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