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Critical Reflection

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No, You're Not Uncultured; It's Oppression

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Abstract

This reflective essay draws on my experience as an Asian student in Western academia to argue that equality of opportunity is insufficient as a framework for educational justice. Equal access and anti-discrimination measures merely cast a veil of formal equality over structural inequalities. When curricula encode particular cultural, national, racial, and class perspectives as common sense, students from marginalised backgrounds expend additional cognitive effort simply to participate, deepening existing inequalities in self-confidence and self-esteem. Following Young's concept of cultural imperialism (1990), I contend that these dynamics are not incidental but structural. Equality in education therefore requires moving toward actively decolonising teaching methods and unsettling whose knowledge counts as common sense.

Keywords: decolonial curriculum, decolonial pedagogy, equal opportunity, cultural imperialism

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Equality in the classroom should go beyond equal access and anti-discrimination to include decolonising teaching methods and challenging what is considered common sense.

Another day in my Irish university seminar, 10,000 kilometres from home, the challenges of studying abroad and being in a diverse classroom were unfolding in subtle, unexpected ways. Again, I caught myself prefacing my stories with, 'Where I am from, which is [insert country name], things are like this…', when sharing about my culture. I constantly felt the need to translate my background, situate myself, and clarify my references with a deafening anxiety: 'What if no one understands what I am talking about?'.

Meanwhile, knowledge alien to me continually took centre stage. Waves of confusion and inadequacy washed over me when the lecturer launched into analysing this policy in Ireland, or that new US political phenomenon, whilst classmates enthusiastically made quips and inserted insights. Topics flowed rapidly, leaving little space to interrupt and request contextual clarification. Whilst the lecturer and others nodded along at yet another mention of some UK politician, I was grasping to understand what seemed like common sense, yearning to feel included. Common sense had been encoded to reflect cultural, national, racial, and class perspectives that felt familiar to a particular few.

Ongoing efforts towards equal opportunity in higher education, such as international scholarships, have enabled students with limited economic resources from Asian or African countries, including me, to access Western academia. Universities promote international intake, campus diversity, and operationalise anti-discrimination policies (Scott, no date). Once admitted, it is easy to assume that the playing field has been levelled and that students from the Global South are now free to compete based on their capabilities. After all, the essential idea of equal opportunity is to bridge access gaps for the disadvantaged by redistributing resources and ensuring that people are not explicitly ostracised because of their identities (Baker *et al.*, 2009).

So why was I feeling excluded and insecure? My contributions were never openly ridiculed, nor were my lived experiences disregarded (Omodan, 2023). Is this a personal problem that I need to resolve? However, I am not alone in this situation. A 2022 study on inclusion and belonging in Irish higher education for Black and minority ethnic students showed that, like me, these students also face ongoing exclusion within an educational culture that primarily focuses on the white, Irish experience (Darby, 2022).

These experiences are symptoms of structural inequalities embedded in classroom dynamics and the curriculum, privileging some knowledge and

identities at the expense of others. They were similar to what political theorist Iris Marion Young described as *cultural imperialism*, one of five faces of oppression: the intentional or unintentional 'universalisation of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm' (Young, 1990, p. 59). In class, a group's dominance is established when its stories, narratives, experiences, and values circulate most widely. Through this network of dominant meanings, others' experiences are marked as Other. Even without active silencing or insults, the dominant group whose narratives are centred and valued still enjoys the privilege.

Classrooms are spaces of overlapping power relations (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2024). Power, here, isn't merely violence or an official title in a hierarchy, but also a force within each person, shaped by their knowledge, capabilities, confidence, and self-esteem, permeating through physical spaces. In the classroom, these powers interact, creating relations that might be harmful or nurturing to one's learning experiences. As moderator and knowledge-bearer, the lecturer holds overwhelming authority. Therefore, when class time is taken up by discussions of perspectives and students' ideas that align with the lecturer's cultural and social backgrounds, and the curriculum primarily highlights cases from their society, it signals whose knowledge is more powerful and appreciated. All in all, equal opportunity merely allows a mythical veil of equal standing to be cast over the classroom.

The experience of navigating such a minefield of power relations carries profound implications for the culturally oppressed student. It harms their equal participation when they are always playing catch-up and have to expend extra cognitive effort to understand the curriculum. Furthermore, inequality in self-confidence and self-esteem is further entrenched as students blame their personal shortcomings for the problem, rather than the structural devaluation and exclusion of their knowledge and contributions from the norm.

To address the limits of equality of opportunity and alter the structures of oppression and domination in education, proponents of decolonising education have called for universities to fundamentally change how learning happens (teaching methods and teaching spaces) and what is learnt (the curriculum) (Morreira *et al.*, 2021; Aggarwal *et al.*, 2024). Specifically, decolonialisation means critically thinking about and challenging existing power structures between students and lecturers, and among students, to ensure that knowledge disseminated in the class isn't lost on anyone and that some students' perspectives are highlighted while others face the pressure to qualify their experiences. Learning needs to be understood as situated and cannot be dissociated from one's personal experiences and the context in which it occurs. Rather than a goal to achieve, learning should be an ongoing co-learning process in which both

students and teachers are learners involved in creating, expanding, and gaining knowledge and skills. Additionally, unveiling the unconscious bias towards hegemonic Western world-views within Euro-centric curricula, is essential to promote a cultural practice that interrogates the realities in which knowledge was produced, along with their assumptions and other perspectives that are excluded (Chang, 2020). In an ethnically diverse classroom, this means ensuring that all students understand the context of the theories, concepts, and case studies presented, whether or not they belong to the authoritative body of literature.

Granted, equal opportunity in education has its merits; it has diversified our campuses, putting real faces to the once wholesale generalisation of the 'Global South' people in academic discussions, and has provided a crucial sanctuary for those fleeing genocide and gruesome violence (Academia for Palestine, 2025). However, a sense of belonging and human flourishing needs more; it requires each of us, egalitarian or not, to look inside ourselves and ask: 'What can I do to nourish my power, and that of others?'.

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