Breaking the Cultural Silence Imposed upon Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants: A Snapshot of the Current Faith-based Project in Tigers Bay (North Belfast)

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Abstract

This case study tracks an established collaborative partnership between faith-based organisations and the local community of North Belfast. The initial stages of the project of implementing a welcome day, a cultural food and activities fest day and an Ulster University led Unblocking Potential programme. This set the scene for social cohesion and community integration through emancipatory praxis. The next stage of the project is to engage the group in theatre dramatising their experiences and disseminating the shared learning throughout the local community.

Through the delivery of our programmes we identified issues around fear, low self-esteem and the lack of mechanisms within the wider community to empower participants to confidently engage more meaningfully within their own community and the wider community bringing a new dynamic to transformational cultural diversity work.

Context

The context of creating cohesive partnerships at local level is heavily influenced by the existing social constructs of a people in a process of conflict transformation. The cultural paradigm shift that has been created by the influx of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants, who have been allocated housing in already contested and polarised communities, can paradoxically further the cause of conflict rather than build bridges of hope and provide opportunities for reconciliation.

Collaborative Partnership in Action

The partnership between the faith-based group St Paul and St Barnabas (STP&B) and All Nations Ministry (ANM) came about from an invitation from

ANM's leader, David Maganda. He came along to an evening church service, and asked if the church could send a representative to a meeting the following week to discuss how they could begin building relationships in the area. The rationale for the church becoming involved in such a partnership was firmly embedded in the vision strategy of outreach to the local community which included: embracing diversity, provide a safe warm and friendly environment where indigenous people and newly housed refugees, asylum seekers and migrants could learn how to live together in community, to learn about cultural traditions and difference, whilst not losing indigenous identity, and gain skills of integration.

David Maganda (ANM, 2018) gave an update stating that recent statistics revealed there had been 150 families from Syria accommodated in North Belfast since December 2015, and that new groups arrive every eight weeks. The ongoing work with such groups is widely recognised as being extremely important. This was highlighted by the Church of Ireland Refugee Working Group Report on supporting asylum seekers and refugees (2018):

> Clergy and parishioners whose neighbours include asylum seekers and refugees are encouraged to take up unexpected opportunities to serve as and when they arise e.g. by offering lifts to hospital appointments in rural areas, food banks, helping people to improve their English language skills through classes and everyday conversations, or giving goods for mothers and toddlers.

During the first information sharing meeting with community representatives, a request was made for use of the STP&B church premises to host a weekly 'drop in' session as the premises they currently were using was not suitable for group activities. Further discussions resulted in the suggestion of a welcome service to mark the initial launch of a suggested 'drop in' at the church. This was the first test of collaborative partnerships as the organising committee consisted of representatives from local churches/residents, ANM and local faith-based groups. The plans were detailed and action points taken on board. The STP&B group took a coordinating role and set in motion some action plans for each representative.

This first collaborative working group meeting was highly encouraging and a statement of commitment from each representative was made. The critical thinking behind the role required by the leaders is based on the definition given by one of the group leaders (Hawthorne).

> The construct of transformational leadership in a contemporary framework is about re-visioning praxis, bringing forward initiatives for change and taking responsibility for developing people and projects. It is our understanding from a community development perspective that transformational leadership is not about taking a key role of managing people or projects in any authoritative way but working in a collaborative, inclusive and participatory context that drives positive change.

The support for this and the notion of collective action formed part of the initial discourse and was agreed by the leadership group. However, as the weeks passed, there was a heightened sense of panic and frustration as the action plans were not being executed as previously designed. This lack of communication increased the frustration and anxiety among group members. There was a palpable sense of racial discrimination where some voiced 'typical African time, they work to the beat, dead slow and stop', and other discriminatory comments such as: 'I spent 2 years in Nigeria, so from my experience, once you realise 'they' are on a different time-zone, you will have to make a decision either to go with 'their' time-clock, or forget working with them'. After some critical reflection we realised this was a clear indication of deep rooted differentiation and that we needed to confront our preconceived ideas and prejudices we each held, and deal with these accordingly. This reinforced for the group, the seismic problem facing us in trying to encourage people from the local community to cognitively reframe *their* prejudices, as we realised we needed to deal with our own that had lain dormant until awakened during this process. We agreed that we needed to skilfully work through this towards building an inclusive environment that would permeate into each group and situation we might encounter. This also brought home to us the importance of developing a partnership that would be based upon integrity and strive to be committed to being collaborative and supportive to each other.

The paramount aim of this partnership was to build social capital which according to Field (2003, pp. 1–2), is based upon the central idea that 'social networks are a valuable asset … and are the basis for social cohesion'. Putman (2000, p. 19), further postulates the trustworthiness that arises from these networks that is closely related to 'civic virtue' and this is most powerful when embedded in social relationships within such partnerships.

Embracing Cultural Diversity
The task then has been to work collectively to frame the scaffolding needed to introduce the community at large to change. This means nurturing and helping

people to identify the building blocks that will help increase confidence and give assurances. The purpose of this was to encourage congeniality rather than dissension that historically has manifested when territorial claims are threatened. An entrenched introspective worldview of sectarianism and racial discrimination is common with people in this area, and the idea of embracing integration across ethnicities is fraught with tensions.

Already the indigenous community live in a contested space, and this new cultural shift presents a complex and multifarious task to all involved in collaborative transformatory praxis working toward social justice, social cohesion and inclusion. Already in this community there have been incidents of hate crime and heinous acts of violence against ethnic minority families who have tried to settle in the area. In more recent weeks one family from Somalia was intimidated and had to have Police protection to relocate to another part of the country.

The task was clearly a mammoth undertaking to avoid further community conflict as indigenous people are suspicious when they believe their identity is threatened, at which point, attack becomes their first line of defence. It is within this context that the outreach initiative to welcome refugees, asylum seekers and migrants is located. The project is firmly grounded in a faith-based community partnership that has an inherent desire to reach out to those who are in need as strangers, and to help indigenous people embrace cultural diversity. This mirrors the thoughts of Nic Craith (2003, p. 16) who advocates for the pluralism and ethnic diversity with the penultimate aim to integrate into the host society.

The need for this project has been established through previous work and consultation with the refugee, asylum seeker and migrant communities through the delivery of a celebration of Diversity Welcome Day. Thirteen different nations were represented and a total of eighty-three people attended. The programme provided opportunities for story-telling, music, dance, and multicultural food tasting. Each of the dishes served had been prepared by the participants. This was followed up by a 'food fest event', and sixty-five attendees joined in fun activities that included arts and crafts, games, drumming circles and a variety of food tasting. Since then, there has been a programme of activities during an on-going weekly 'drop-in'. The primary aims of these sessions were to provide advice, help with language, ensuring the basic needs of food, clothes and shelter are met. A significant consideration was how to create an environment where participants have a sense of belonging and gain confidence to explore possible shared future goals.

Breaking the Cultural Silence by Creating Space for Transformative Intellectuals to Grow

One of the key issues voiced by participants in the drop in sessions was the lack of educational opportunities open to the refugees, asylum seekers and migrants' community. This evidently reinforces Freire's (1984, p. 50) concept of 'cultural silence'. As a group we were aware of and concerned with addressing the social injustice of discrimination and inequalities. We recognised the need to provide a forum where participants identified as most silenced in our community could engage in consciousness-raising activities that are liberating. By using generative themes in a problem-posing way through critical praxis approach, we reasoned they could perhaps begin to question their lived experiences of oppression. Freire (1993, p. 109) postulates that in order to reach critical conscientization, the seeker must be fully immersed in curiosity, critical reflection, rigour and humility. Ledwith (2016, p. 54) suggests this can only be realised if it is 'coded in the language and culture of the people'.

We began thinking about how we could address these important issues. Research on the effect of formal educational opportunities by Hawthorne-Steele and Moreland (2014, p. 91) concluded that

> Transformational learning can occur within a formal learning environment and that, given the right conditions of providing a positive mutually accepting learning environment, one that freely allows the learner to participate in life-scripting, critical reflection and dialogue, students can begin the process of engaging in transformational learning.

Transformative Educational Opportunities

The opportunity to advance the group came in the shape of the Unblocking Potential (UP) programme designed and delivered by the community development team from Ulster University.

The UP programme aims to bring individual participants and their educational histories to the fore and to increase self-worth, self esteem, and confidence building, allowing them to explore setting goals and work towards achieving these. The course is regarded as a stepping-stone towards further education. It further aims to create opportunities for people from disadvantaged communities, who are often disillusioned by the barriers they face that prevent them from accessing third level education. It is underpinned by the value-base of creating social mobility often achieved through educational advantage. Whilst

we recognise the significant civic value of promoting positive social change by encouraging indigenous people to become what Gramsci (1971) describes as 'radical organic intellectuals', who work to a political agenda to raise awareness in the working class producing leaders to engage people in collective struggle, we believe it is in fact, more closely aligned to Giroux's (1988, p. 151) assertion that advocates 'transformative intellectuals who provide moral, political and pedagogical leadership'. We determined that providing access to higher education is a critical element of social mobility. It is our ambition then, to encourage people to avail of educational opportunities so they may then serve as positive relatable role models within their communities. Through the course they would be equipped with the skills to articulate the needs and issues of the oppressed. The UP programme is designed to introduce students to learning theories and discovering their specific learning needs. Often the apparently immovable obstacle in the journey of an adult learner lies in ignorance about tailoring learning needs to the individual. Once this is processed and unblocked, the learner can begin to enjoy learning. The UP programme with the refugees, asylum seekers and migrant community group, is currently in an early stage with twenty active participants, and an essential aspect is ensuring participants gain knowledge and understanding about their particular learning style. The tutors of the programme noticed the attendance at the beginning was sporadic and discussed this with the students and discovered that a number presented as Muslim and needed to set aside time to pray. The start time was changed to accommodate this and the attendance problem was averted. The intention is to continue to monitor progress and critically evaluate the impact of the programme upon completion. It is hoped this will help identify what areas of the partnership that may need to be strengthened or perhaps eliminated.

The next stage for this group is currently in the early ground-breaking stage. We are working to develop and deliver over a period of 12 months across North Belfast a three-phase project. This was borne out of listening to some of the harrowing stories of people who have been active participants in STP&B outreach programmes.

This project is grounded in the model of transformatory praxis. To this aim we intend to provide a pedagogic pathway by ensuring these programmes are accredited so that participants can readily access higher education, thus exercising the right for an inclusive education. The aim of the practical aspect of the project is to capture stories of integration or those attempts to integrate, into the local community, through using the expression of arts, primarily Augusto

Boal's (1995) theatre of the oppressed workshops. The project recognises the importance of tracking transformational change through measuring outcomes of social capital, educational attainments, healthier lifestyles through use of professional video and roadshows, performing with other communities, and producing 'integration guidelines' for future incoming migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Putman asserts,

> Social capital can help to mitigate the insidious effects of socioeconomic disadvantage … children are powerfully shaped by social capital … opportunities, educational achievement behaviour and development … public spaces are cleaner, people friendlier and safer, lower crime rate … better health and happier lifestyle. (Putman, 2000, pp. 319–320)

Story-telling

The aims of this project is to record the stories of the refugees, asylum seekers and migrant community from North Belfast. Their stories will identify the issues they face as 'newcomers' coming to live in Northern Ireland and report on the difficulties they suffer including racism. The overall project objective is to highlight their issues and dispel misconceptions from the indigenous community around the 'taking our jobs and houses' statements as so often referenced in media reporting. The second phase of the programme will involve working with the refugees, asylum seekers and migrant community to bring to life some of those stories using Boal's theatre of the oppressed techniques. This will give the refugees, asylum seekers and migrant community the opportunity to proactively do something to address the issues that have been explored and address the key problems and issues facing themselves and their families trying to make a new life in North Belfast. Such voices are seldom heard. Besides being considerably isolated by regulatory requirements, limited resources and language difficulties, they live in a society whose renowned expertise in sectarianism, the first cousin of racism, makes interaction with mainstream society a risky business for strangers. Many persons seeking sanctuary live with a constant sense of anxiety – about their situations, their family and friends and, particularly, the outcome of their claim, which can lead to random arrest. Many have a well-founded fear of 'authority' figures based on previous experience, making it hard to trust those who are often in positions to help them. In consequence, people who live among us with much to teach us all about values and priorities, are voiceless, and live in a vacuum that forces a culture of silence within a hegemonic environment, hence the importance of this project. The third and final phase of the programme will allow us to showcase and use our

theatre pieces to tour around local schools and community centres to highlight the issues of the refugees, asylum seekers and migrant community. It is hoped this process will allow interaction from the audiences and create a safe space for dialogue. This programme will inform the wider community and help to dispel inaccurate myths about the refugees, asylum seekers and migrant community. It will hopefully give them confidence to voice their opinions, influence their community and the wider society for the better of all. In terms of personal development, it will hopefully enable them to their build their self-confidence and self-esteem levels and lead to their increased participation within their community and beyond.

The biggest destabilising factor within working class communities is disinformation or 'fake news'. Historically we as a community have built walls to keep each other out, resulting in division and allowing 'others' to feed our own sectarianism. This programme will address the spread of racism delivering the facts around immigration and immigrants and their entitlements and in a way through theatre that humanises them as people through the telling of their own stories. This will inform the wider community of those facts and contribute to more cohesive neighbourhoods. In this partnership programme we seek to work towards addressing racism and the wide spread damage it causes to people and communities.

Envisioning the Future

We envision the social impact in the short-term to provide a safe space for the refugees, asylum seekers and migrant community to have their voices heard. Through the storytelling they can begin to dispel the myths that have grown and inform the wider community with the facts. This will undoubtedly empower and develop the capacity of the refugees, asylum seekers and migrant community through programme delivery. We envision the long-term impact to work towards eradicating racism in the wider community, and bring about opportunities for all to celebrate the diversity of cultures within North Belfast, forging neighbourly relationships and creating a safer community.

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