I want to learn new things but still be myself:
A decolonial approach to Education for Social Justice

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Introduction

I recall conversations with students who professed that they wanted to learn new things but still be themselves. They did not want to be faced with the decision to sacrifice their identities and dislocate themselves from their communities in order to 'progress'. Such conversations prompted thoughts about how social justice can be achieved by enabling individuals to enjoy the fruits of higher education while still living in harmony with their communities (Reisch, 2014). As Walker (2003, p. 168 – 169) states, 'While social justice must be for individual flourishing, it should also be for collective solidarities, the one with the other'. To contribute to this discussion, this essay will utilise a decolonial lens that will peruse Education for Social Justice (ESJ) to identify a culturally responsive approach for students to prosper in higher education. A decolonial lens is a fitting approach to interrogate ESJ because it allows for the deconstruction of dominant Eurocentric forms of intellectual production and transmission whilst promoting the pluralisation of the knowledge field (Zembylas, 2018; Mignolo, 2007; Domínguez, 2019). Moreover, the texts that constitute the decolonial approach overwhelmingly emanate from the Global South, which can lay bare unquestioned Eurocentric assumptions that underpin frameworks like the ESJ (Zembylas, 2018).

Decolonising social justice?

Confronted with the agenda of Education for Social Justice (ESJ), decolonial projects encourage us to interrogate such concepts. Do such frameworks achieve their stated goals? If so, at what cost? Are such goals even desired by our students? Such interrogation is warranted to avoid educators utilising what Quijano refers to as 'distorting mirrors'. He lamented the utilisation of European traditions and counter-traditions without meaningful interrogation,

> Because of it, for a very long time we have been what we are not, what we never should have been, and what we never will be. And because of it, we can never catch our real problems, much less solve them, except in only a partial and distorted way (Quijano, 2000, p. 22).

Most importantly, it is necessary to avoid the pitfall of conflation; social justice and decolonisation are erroneously used interchangeably. Tuck and Yang emphatically state that,

> Decolonization is not a metaphor for other things we want to improve in our societies and schools… Decolonization, which we assert is a distinct project from other civil and human rights-based social justice projects, is far too often subsumed into the directives of these projects, with no regard for how decolonization wants something different than those forms of justice.

Curating the decolonial lens

What is meant by 'decolonial'? There are at least six different approaches (Jansen, 2017; Ammon, 2017); as these conceptions are discussed, it is essential not to read them too rigidly; there is significant overlap. Out of these six approaches identified in the literature, three approaches are not entirely relevant to the British higher education context as they relate to indigenous knowledge and practices (Jansen, 2017; Ammon, 2017). Such a small number of approaches are due to the context-specific nature of the decolonial discourse. The discourse is unified by the notion that no approach provides 'an eternal philosophical foundation or universal and neutral knowledge transcendent of historical horizons, cultural conditions and social struggles' (Rabaka, 2010, p. 20).

The first of the three is the 'additive-inclusive approach' (Jansen, 2017; Ammon, 2017). This approach asserts that the current Eurocentric canons are valuable but insists that new knowledge should be recognised and added to the settled curricula. However, this approach remains problematic because it can be considered 'window dressing' in the sense that conventional authors and concepts are left as the canon, 'undisturbed in many ways, and all non-canonical theory occupies a secondary place in the imaginations of both students and instructors' (Philipose, 2007). Similarly, Dominguez (2019, p. 51; Paris and Alim, 2017) points out that inclusion of alternative voices is 'often peripheral, positioning multicultural content as outright appropriation, or merely stepping-stones towards the 'real' content of the western canon'.

The second approach is assimilationist; that is, it doesn't seek to separate knowledge into neat binaries like 'us' and 'them'; 'the Global South' and 'the Global North'; European and Non–European. Instead, it views 'our knowledges', in likeness to our human existences, as intertwined' (Jansen, 2017; Ammon, 2017). Implementing this approach can be construed as a disservice to learners. Muddling intellectual traditions together may make it difficult for traditions to be treated with their proper respect and consideration of their particularities, whether European or non–European (Jansen, 2019). Building on this point, feminist Philipose (2007) argued why it is essential that we dedicate time to engage with each tradition; 'Without comprehending the ideas that shape us in our political locations, we are without the necessary language to challenge and disrupt the continued institutionalisation of traditional concepts and ideals'.

This leads us to the critical inquiry approach (Jansen, 2017; Ammon, 2017), which offers students the most straightforward path to remain in touch with their authentic selves while learning new ways of seeing and experiencing the world. The critical inquiry approach advocates the empowerment of students to engage with canonical knowledges by critical questioning; where did this knowledge come from? In whose interest does this knowledge serve? What does it include

and leave out? Whose lived experiences is this depicting? How can I utilise this knowledge to understand and map my lived experience? This critical inquiry approach has the propensity to help students learn new things without having to sacrifice their identities; the otherworldly and heavenly glow that permeates canonical tradition is given 'earthly' attention, compelling students and educators to confront 'uncomfortable' issues about the development and implications of Eurocentric traditions. Moreover, students play a lead role in creating new knowledge as they interrogate traditional canons aided by voices of dissent (Jansen, 2017; Ammon, 2017).

Applying the 'Critical Inquiry' lens to ESJ

Placing this critical inquiry lens on ESJ, it becomes clear that educators are inspired by varying interpretations of social justice. Hytten, (2006 p. 224) notes, 'While there have always been educators calling for a social justice approach toward education, this vision has never been the dominant one'. Since the theoretical foundations provide grounding for the pedagogical application of SJE, it is worth commenting on the varying interpretations (Reisch, 2014; Vincent, 2012). Though such a task is 'complex, multifaceted, and not without controversy', it is possible to identify four broad trends (Vincent, 2012; Reisch, 2014). First, Rawls' earlier work (1971) settled on the notion that distributive justice is essential to social justice.   Second, grounded in critical theory, Young (1990) focuses on the systemic and structural nature of oppression that makes violence on several levels possible and even acceptable.   Third, Sen's 'capability approach' (2009) assumes that the opportunities and choices that individuals exercise are critical. The fourth perspective appears to align closely with decolonial aspirations. Reisch (2014, p. 391) explains that social justice is achieved when *individuals* can live in harmony with their communities; 'harmony is significant in that it speaks to the importance of congruence between individuals and their communities'. This perspective deviates from contemporary social justice perspectives that incline towards individualist and Eurocentric bias at the expense of overlooking an individual's connection to their community. Similarly, Pitt (1998; Nieuwenhuis, 2010) supports the view that contemporary notions of ESJ are aligned to an ideology of liberal democracy that has resulted in the emergence of a 'hyper-individualism'. In such a situation, the social whole and social identity are marginalised (Pitt, 1998; Nieuwenhuis, 2010).

The adoption of this fourth perspective may prevent an 'unjust' education that ruptures and distances students from their communities by devaluing their 'home cultures' and lived experiences; implicitly, students are required to choose between 'progress' and the centrality of their home cultures (Castro-Gómez, 2020; Domínguez, 2019). Correspondingly, such an 'unjust' education distances students from their university communities through othering 'mediated through structural and systemic power differentials that give rise to one side objectifying the other with little or no chance of being objectified itself in a similar manner' (de (Oliveira, 2013, p.39 – p.40).

The alignment of ESJ and decolonisation

When ESJ is characterised as the fourth perspective, individuals living in harmony with their communities, decolonisation becomes a metonym for ESJ (Reisch, 2014). In the sense that 'culturally responsive' learning environments are created for individuals to learn new ways of

seeing and experiencing the world, but they are still able to draw strength from their' home cultures' (Wright, 2015; Nicol et al., 2020). This is because their home cultures are treated as resources and assets rather than matters that need to be refined, erased or replaced (Wright, 2015 Nicol et al., 2020). However, there is a recognition of the fluidity of culture, so the facilitator establishes a bridge between their home cultures and university cultures, which allows students to travel back and forth at will (Nicol et al., 2020).

Much of this bridge has been paved by the London Metropolitan University's (LMU) Education for Social Justice Framework (ESJF) (London Metropolitan University, 2019). In 2019, LMU launched the ESJF to ensure that its curricula and practice align with principles of equity, diversity and inclusion: with who our students are, and the challenges facing London and its communities' (LMU, 2020, p.1). The ESJF is made up of six components; of interest to this particular paper is the 'Identity, Personalisation and Reflection' component. The component speaks to student's 'education experience, which validates and honours their identities and their lived experience… A relatable curriculum where students see themselves and their traditions reflected will engage them and reduce feelings of alienation'. Though legitimate questions remain about the distance between LMU's aspirations and actual practice, it is difficult to find an equivalent in other UK HEIs. For example, York St John University's approach to social justice is very much fixated on 'fixing' individuals; bringing them in from the unrelenting cold into the warm and rehabilitative confines of the academy (York St John, n.d.).

The anti-module

The concept of an anti–module brings together the decolonial critical inquiry approach and the social justice goal of living in harmony with their communities. A module is one of the separate parts of the course curriculum taught at universities. Generally, modules cover a six-week to twelve-week period. Correspondingly, the anti-module is a dialogic module in the core course curriculum that challenges and disrupts the conventional module1 and facilitates a greater expression of identity. For example, the traditional module 'Caring for Vulnerable Adults' is complemented with the anti-module, 'Deconstructing Caring for Vulnerable Adults', which provides a space for students to unpack the core tenets of Caring for Vulnerable Adults, understand the context and development of Caring for Vulnerable Adults, shed light on the hidden assumptions of Caring for Vulnerable Adults, identify areas where students could benefit the field of Caring for Vulnerable Adults and encourage theorisation from their lived experiences in the field of Caring for Vulnerable Adults. The anti-module's assessments would stretch the boundaries of academic discourse by showcasing to students the variety of ways to express themselves; introducing students to Walter Mignolo's (2011) journal article that resembles a 'jazz score', circular, rhythmic, and repetitive writing, which intersects with his linear and analytical discussion; Paul Zeleza's (1997) use of short stories to set the scene for his academic book; Chakrabarty's (2007) consideration of bringing the divine into secular spaces; Mbembe's (2011) fusion of African fiction and theoretical analysis.

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[1] Conventional modules need to remain because as Philipose (2007) states; 'Without comprehending the ideas that shape us in our political locations, we are without the necessary language to challenge and disrupt the continued institutionalisation of traditional concepts and ideals'.

Trouble ahead

It would be amiss to provide a vision of achieving social justice through the establishment of 'culturally responsive' learning environments without acknowledging the realities of UK HEIs. The facilitator runs the risk of a 'violent' backlash from staff members, interrogating the canon and by extension 'whiteness' is a 'violent' activity, which in turn prompts 'violence' even within so-called progressive teaching circles (Mignolo, 2009). There is a deep, almost spiritual connection to the canon; there are many individuals within the academy that work within the spirit of Bloom's words 'Without the canon, we cease to think' (Pine, 2014, p.70 - 72). Any interrogation of such sacred objects will not go unnoticed or unpunished.

Also, we have to acknowledge that many students pursue higher education to escape their home cultures; they have subscribed to the promise of progress and advancement, ready to discard parts of themselves (Gorzelsky, 2007; Durst, 1999). Their readiness to adapt, no matter how pragmatic or shallow it appears to educators, must be respected. It would be unprincipled to cast their goals aside; otherwise, we would be 'imposing our goals on students rather than doing what we are ethically obligated to do as teachers – to support students as they pursue their own goals' (Gorzelsky, 2007, p. 431; Smith, 1997). Moreover, the non-alignment of the pragmatic ambitions of students and the agenda of the activist teacher could lead to a 'collision course' in which neither party achieves its goals (Durst, 1999; Gorzelsky, 2007; Wallace and Rothschild-Ewald, 2000).

These realities should weigh heavily on the minds of educators as they attempt to move the furniture around the 'master's house'.

Conclusion

Following Le grange (Jansen, 2019) who ended his chapter with a section titled 'some parting thoughts in lieu of a conclusion', this author does not 'really wish to conclude and sum up, rounding off the arguments so as to dump it in a nutshell for the reader'. Instead, I hope to cause educators to reflect on the two issues raised in this article. First of which is to interrogate the concepts that come across our desks *before* we implement them within our classrooms; do social justice initiatives serve the interests of our students? Do they require our students to lose themselves and sever the connections with their communities? This article has implicitly recognised that some compromise is needed to meet students where they are and take them to what is required of them by their subject disciplines, but where this point of compromise is must be constantly interrogated by educators. The second issue relates to the understandable scepticism that accompanies institutional efforts, like LMU's ESJF. Although such initiatives are often performative, they open up spaces, opportunities, or 'cracks' for radical agendas. As Walsh (2015) contended, 'The cracks become the place and space from which action, militancy, resistance, insurgence, transgression and/as pedagogization are advanced, alliances are built and the otherwise is invented, created and constructed'.

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