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REFLECTING ON THE NOTIONS OF SUCCESS AND BELONGING

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Measured through degree classification, “success reflects individual merit and hard work,” or so it is assumed by neoliberal ideology (Gillborn et al., 2018, p175). Yet in a post-‘Rhodes must fall’ era, success has come to be redefined with students taking ownership of these new conversations. Two such students, Huzayfah Ali and Jin Wang, have in their own ways and through sharing their experiences in UK Higher Education (HE), have questioned the notion of success. Their insights made me reflect on the importance of decolonizing western understanding of success and it may offer greater depth to what success means for a diverse group of university students, including for white students. This commentary will reflect on these students’ conversations.

Why we need to decolonize the notion of success

When I read Ali’s (2023) and Wang’s (2023) respective papers, I saw the uniqueness of their experiences; yet they engaged with the notion of success in a similar way. The Cambridge Dictionary (2023) defines success as “the achieving of the results wanted or hoped for.” If success is about individual aspirations or personal goals, then, as they both rightly argue, success cannot remain as a benchmark for achievement in HE. Student success in HE is inevitably tied to very tangible outcomes, including assignment grades and ultimately degree classification. Yet, Ali and Wang challenge this often taken-for-granted understanding of success. Success is about diversity, inclusion, and belonging. Success therefore needs to be redefined; success needs to be decolonized.

Having been the decolonization lead for the School of Education (University of Birmingham) since 2020, I find it now almost impossible to view HE in any other way, from its neoliberal agenda right down to its most important aspect (for its own survival): student success, indeed. With this call for redefinition, I could not help but ponder on Ali’s and Wang’s discussions through a decolonial lens.

UK universities are entrenched in colonial histories, evidencing a desire for superiority of the Western world, or the UK over the rest of the world to be more precise (Bhambra et al., 2018). Success is therefore not seen as achieving the outcomes one wishes or aims for, but as the position of superiority over other students that one ought to be in as set out by the institution itself. This divisive approach has shaped the ways in which we engage in HE and how we evaluate outcomes and, more importantly, what is allowed to be considered in the evaluation of outcomes. It has left a legacy whereby individual students, through their assignments and degree classification, are subjected to a hierarchy. No one wants to be at the bottom of it. This is precisely what Ali’s and Wang’s papers made me reflect upon.

We need to deconstruct what success means. We need to allow for student diversity to be mirrored in what qualifies as success as a whole and on a more individual level. In an ideal world, we would allow for personal goals and aspirations to be valued no matter what. Yet, I am all too aware of the impossibility to achieve this.

The inescapable shadow of neoliberalism

What if a personal aspiration is to enrich one's knowledge or simply enjoy social experiences? This personal aspiration simply cannot exist in our neoliberal academy. The reality is that no university will promote itself in this light. The market-driven functioning of HE that we have experienced since the 1980s has created a system wherein competition for students (or indeed their money) is won by those institutions that can demonstrate value for money, effectiveness, and quality for students' "post-experience good," or in other words, their degree (Brown, 2015, p. 9). As such, the meaning of success in higher education mirrors the meaning of success in the labor market, or, put it more correctly, the *perceived* meaning of success in the labor market.

It is indeed first "personal attitude, employability skills, relevant work experience" and only then degree result that are on the top list of employers for recruiting graduates (McMurray et al. 2016, p. 120). Success, if defined as securing a graduate level role, is not so much about the degree classification but about who the graduate is an individual and their personal qualities. These qualities cannot blossom in an environment that is hindering one's sense of identity and belonging in the name of superiority in outcomes. This misconception that the highest degree classification is what employers are looking for primarily in graduate candidates is driving this colonial, divisive, and restricted understanding of success in higher education (Uffindell, 2017).

This neoliberal race to the top therefore runs contrary to the notions of equality and inclusion for two main reasons. First, it does not allow for a diverse and collaborative learning community to prosper or for a sense of belonging to be fostered outside groups we share narratives and positionalities with (Anthias, 2002). And second, with racism rooted in UK universities (Arday & Mirza, 2018), not all students are equipped for this race or to achieve the success dictated by a neoliberal higher education.

Concluding thoughts

Reading Ali's (2023) and Wang's (2023) papers has given me an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which I may contribute to challenging the notion of success. Ultimately, as an educator I do believe in the significance of creating an inclusive and collaborative learning environment that gives space to the diversity of students and the diverse experiences they bring when entering university (in an effort to decolonize higher education) (see an example of this in Naseem & Zhu, 2023). Acknowledging and valuing who students are will undoubtedly create an environment wherein "construction of we-ness" will promote "inclusion, access and participation" in both academic and social contexts (Anthias, 2008, p. 8). This in turn, if prioritized and implemented well through pedagogy and practice, can lead to students' success—that is, feeling a sense of belonging as a diverse and valued member of their learning community.

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