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JOURNEYS OF DECOLONIZATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH STUDENT-FACULTY/STAFF PARTNERSHIPS

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Journeys of decolonization in higher education may take different forms in different contexts. Here, I use the term ‘decolonization’ in a very broad sense to signal social and psychological processes that fight off repressive social structures, their power substantiated in culture, tradition, religion or institutional norms (foreign or indigenous) that secure the privilege of the dominant by claims to superior knowledge and legitimate power in higher education. This process of decolonization involves: a) re-presentation of self; b) discursive reconstruction of self and the other; c) and questioning the othering mechanisms (Agyepong, 2019). The three essays that I comment on not only provide evidence of these processes but also attest that this journey towards decolonization of self is essentially marked by a sense of risk, vulnerability, and self-doubt. The aim here has also been to draw attention to issues of equity and inclusion in higher education, while also keeping an eye on the emergent nuances of how gender- and class-based identities played out in higher education space.

This commentary focuses on three student-authored essays published in *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*. Two of these were written in the South Asian context of Pakistan and the third was authored by a student in the UK. I am a faculty member at a university in Pakistan, South Asia, where the Pedagogical Partnership Programme was introduced for the first time. Since this programme was brought in by a higher management team that had its roots in the West, it was simultaneously accepted and resented at the institution because of its top-down approach. Personally, I was very well positioned to accommodate, advocate and also co-lead the programme because I had somehow, by trial and error in my professional career, already discovered the power of looking upon students as collaborators, and my classes were already unconventional in that way. The two essays from Pakistan were written by my student partners during the implementation of the pedagogical programme at the university. I had two objectives in mind in selecting these essays: a) understand cross-cultural differences and similarities in the experience of student partners’ journeys, and b) gain insight into the gendered aspect of student partners’ experience. I chose my own student partners’ essays because I felt I knew the context and could interpret the cultural meaning of what the students were saying. I selected the essay of the student in UK context because of its theme of inclusion, close to my heart. In addition, the country context was different from Pakistan, yet quite familiar to me, since I completed my graduate work in the UK.

The student partners’ essays capture similar decolonization processes and shared feelings of risk, vulnerability, and self-doubt as they test the waters of student-faculty/staff partnership before wading in. This transition to a state of decolonization for all of them involved a re-presentation of self and a re-positioning of themselves in relation to the faculty/staff, as their voices were validated. The discursive reconstruction of self and the de-construction of the Other into a comfortable ‘we’ is evident in all three essays. Iftikhar (2021), Ansari (2021), and Brown (2023) all narrate their sense of empowerment as they made inroads into decolonized empowering higher educational spaces, as their partnership experience enabled them to see themselves as valued knowledge bearers who had a voice and a say in the educational processes of self and others.

The sense of risk, self-doubt, and vulnerability Iftikhar (2021) and Ansari (2023) feel in the South Asian context of Pakistan is similar to the feeling Brown (2023) describes in the UK, but their nature is different. It is interesting to note that while entering the partnership with faculty/staff was laden with a sense of risk and vulnerability for Ansari (2021) and Iftikhar (2021), it is entering the higher education that brings a sense of risk, vulnerability, and self-doubt for Brown (2023), who is labelled as a minority student with special needs. For Ansari (2021) and Iftikhar (2021), entering a pedagogical partnership programme in the Pakistani South Asian context brought vulnerability, self-doubt, and risk of losing face because as student partners they challenge two major social norms. First, they disrupt the social norm of quietly accepting what they are told by an elder, as a show of deference. Given that the norm is laden with religious overtones that demand obedience to the elders, the risk and sense of vulnerability is high. Second, they challenge the institutionalized norm of 'listening to the teacher' and doing what one is told without asking questions. Engaging in partnerships meant for them to revisit and redefine not only who had knowledge but also what counted as knowledge, and the sense of risk, vulnerability, and self-doubt is substantial, considering that these norms have been validated both at home and school. This was doubly so for Iftikhar (2021), since she was a girl in a patriarchal context, where the code of behavior for her was submissiveness and obedience.

Brown (2023) also faces a sense of risk, vulnerability, and self-doubt, but these experiences emerge not from entering the partnership but simply by entering the space of higher education. She finds herself doubly labelled here, as a person with a disability and as a minority student. She realizes that she had neither considered herself as a person with disability, nor had she reckoned that being a first-generation college student would make her a minority student. Brown (2023) highlights the dilemma of labelling, which, though done in good faith, filled her with a sense of self-doubt, risk, and vulnerability. Brown (2023) felt that the label meant that her presence in higher education was under scrutiny, and she had to legitimize her presence in the institution by working harder than others. This sense of vulnerability stays with her until the channels of communication open, and she gains insights into the working of the institution through her partnership with faculty/staff as a consultant.

A gendered strain seems to run through the discourses Iftikhar (2021) and Ansari (2021) use, and the intersecting identities of gender and class play out at the site of higher education. Perhaps because gender hierarchies are less prominent in the UK, Brown (2023) does not discuss gender. Iftikhar (2021) describes herself as a girl from a small town, and she finds her mind flooded with questions as to why she and not any other student was selected to participate in the partnership programme (Iftikhar, 2021). In contrast, Ansari (2021) only wonders if this is a trick to reduce the burden of teachers and to thrust the course planning on students. Iftikhar (2021) finds it difficult to trust herself and keeps on questioning her own abilities, wondering what could she possibly contribute to a knowledge-building exercise. Ansari (2021) also feels anxious, sharing the same physical space in the workshop with his teachers, and being discursively positioned to be an equal participant. However, he is quick to notice that, despite being what was being said in the introductory workshop, the faculty were keeping their distance from the students by not sharing their tables, as if to stay aloof from the students present in the room.

Despite initial discomfort in the partnership work, all three students describe a sense of becoming more confident and agentic. The decolonization processes are discernable in the discourses of all students once they find their niche through partnering with faculty/staff. As Ansari (2021) feels his views are valued, he grows in confidence and contributes more substantially by taking on the work of surveying faculty; Iftikhar (2021) develops her voice and gets involved in advising the faculty on implementing the programme; and Brown (2023) repositions herself from a space of self-doubt and vulnerability to one of power to influence institutional policy. Specifically, Brown's partnership with faculty/ staff allow her to embrace her status of a person with disability and a minority student from a position of power, which she comes to see as an authentic vantage point to evaluate and make better institutional policies for inclusion. All the students move from othering and being othered to finding positions of power and respect through validation of their opinions by the faculty and staff. They reject their representation as students in need of help and advice, and they come to re-present themselves as occupying positions of power, as bearers of valuable knowledge, and as discursively claiming a higher positioning as equal partners with the faculty/staff. From being othered as mere naive students, as in the case of Ansari (2021) and Iftikhar (2021), or being labelled for addressing special needs, as in the case of Brown (2023), they move from being considered as in need of help and advice to helpers and advisers, crossing the othering barriers.

There are three things I realize from going through these essays. First, learning to 'trust' as a student author Iftikhar (2021) puts it, is the cornerstone of all collaborative work. The partners need to trust themselves, the other person involved in the partnership, and the process itself. The responsibility for developing this trust, while shared by both partners, lies more with the faculty, given their position of power. The faculty/staff have to give their students the right to speak and to be heard, validate their decision-making, believe in the abilities of the students, and value the knowledge they bring to the table. This decolonization process does not happen organically but rather through carefully addressing the vulnerabilities of the student partners and also of faculty/staff partners as the latter also go through a decolonizing process, where they re-position and re-present themselves in the position of a partner and discursively construct partnerships diminishing the barriers of othering into a 'we.' The journey of decolonization then is essentially collaborative.

Second, towards the end of their essays, as all the students work with faculty and staff, I can see them re-constructing and re-presenting themselves in a new light, where the boundaries between the self (student) and the other (faculty/staff) diminish into a stronger and confident 'we.' As the knowledge of the students is valued and brought forth and they are given the power to question and challenge, the processes of decolonization in the spaces of higher education are set off.

Third, reading these essays, I have come to realize how the fear and self-doubt of the students actually may feed into the power that faculty and staff hold. When we as faculty take on knowledge 'transmission,' we constantly keep the students in a state of dependency and powerlessness. It is only when we restore the trust of students in themselves and in the value of their knowledge, and when we work with them as collaborators in the co-generation and co-construction of knowledge, that we decolonize education and step towards equity and inclusion.

In addition to these three realizations, the students' journeys remind me of two things as I step into my classroom. First, it is not just whom we get to label as minority students in

classrooms (because of class, location or gender, etc.); the processes of exclusion and marginalization are perpetuated for everyone if I am dismissive of student knowledge. So, inclusion is not just about bringing in marginalized students and being cognizant of the effect of labelling; it is also knowingly curtailing marginalizing processes in our interaction with students. Second, more often than not one loses sight of gender differences in the classrooms, as we see everyone sharing the same physical space, so the sociocultural context of Pakistan that constantly holds girls in a state of dependency, insecurity, and self-doubt becomes invisible. Girls have to be carefully nurtured within education to be able to become responsible, confident, and self-reliant so that they may have equitable opportunities to achieve what they value within education and through it, for which pedagogical partnerships emerge as a promising route.

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