Connections at the intersections: Innovating our student-staff partnerships through utilising critical, participatory and decolonial approaches

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As a British Bangladeshi, Muslim staff member and doctoral student in UK Higher Education (HE), the sense of out-of-placeness felt since starting my career has been a constant (see: Islam, 2019, 2020). Nevertheless, being able to engage with Student Engagement literature and practice as a staff member, and seeking methods and methodologies that articulate minoritized experiences as a doctoral student, have coincidentally allowed me to see many parallels that I would not have initially imagined. When presenting work concerning equity, diversity and inclusion in student-staff partnership work (Islam, 2021), it is clear that colleagues across the world are seeking approaches and appropriate languages to better ensure their partnership working is serving diverse student populations.
However, partnership as a concept and practice has been critiqued in relation to equality, equity and diversity (Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill, 2019; de Bie *et al*, 2021). Furthermore, we cannot ignore the fundamental role power plays in such relationships, and the imbalance present when students from underrepresented backgrounds are invited into these spaces (Mercer-Mapstone and Abbot, 2020). Nevertheless, there are obvious synergies between the practice of partnership with socially just and liberatory theories, which I believe dedicated student engagement practitioners could employ to further their partnership work. One parallel includes the intersection of partnership and feminism, in the sense that both share similar goals of transformation and disrupting inequalities (Mercer-Mapstone and Mercer, 2017).

I believe other critical theories (such as Critical Race Theory (CRT)) and decolonial approaches have provided me a powerful lens through which to speak to/with the experiences of underprivileged student groups. Like feminist theory, a CRT approach within education follows a framework with deliberate, ethical methods to challenge dominant power structures and related inequalities – with a particular focus on racial inequality (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). Scholars using CRT often follow five elements which form a basic theoretical and methodological approach (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002: 25-6):

- The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination (i.e. the differing layers of oppression e.g. sexism, classism, Islamophobia, that intersect with racial oppression).
- The challenge to dominant ideology.
- The commitment to social justice.
- The centrality of experiential knowledge.
- The transdisciplinary perspective.

CRT encourages practitioners to position racially minoritised groups and their knowledges as valid and powerful, similar to how partnership encourages a level of respect where students and what they bring to the classroom is seriously valued (Bovill, 2020). However, these

tenets of CRT can be more usefully translated into attributes and intentions needed to ensure that partnership is *truly* a transformational endeavour; fostering a mindset allowing us to abstain from passively reproducing established practices (Hylton, 2012).

Decolonial approaches, traditionally used to preserve and uncover issues facing indigenous populations, also encourage educators to question neutrality and objectivity, and to recognise the deep-seated effects of colonialism (Smith, 1999). Those involved in decolonising curriculum partnership projects, for example, remain cognisant of the fragility that authentic decolonisation requires and can (re)position their own efforts. This level of cognitive, emotional and (institutional) behavioural change is exemplified by Hall, Velickovic and Rajapillai's (2021) reflections where they clearly articulate their intention to sustain effective partnerships using a Freirean approach.

My own attitudes and approaches have been shaped by Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Islam, 2021a), a pedagogical and methodological process encouraging researchers to relinquish complete control of their research setting and advocate participants as co-researchers – enabling a sense of agency, rather than simply 'a voice' (Rodríguez and Brown, 2009). Whilst PAR principles (e.g. situated inquiries; participatory; transformative) have shaped student-staff partnership orientations towards communal action and collective ownership (Bobeva, Landmark and Khaled, 2020), the approach requires significant self-conviction. For example, asking research partners to actively develop an interview protocol with me, or sharing my own struggles as an individual in HE with research partners in an interview setting felt like I was breaking the norms of "accepted" social research. Where these approaches may appear unconventional, it is easy for those employing the working methods described here as 'lacking legitimacy' (MacDonald, 2012). This may detract student engagement practitioners from adopting the methods, outlooks and intentions demanded by critical and decolonial work, leading to continuous acceptance of traditionally used/unfit-for-purpose methods when seeking to absolve the inequalities faced by our diverse student bodies. We must therefore believe in ourselves, and advocate that these approaches do not make us "less than" researchers – if anything, they make us "braver than" practitioners.
As rightly asserted by de Bie *et al* (2021), how we position our problems to student-staff partnerships often determines their solutions. By using frameworks placing underrepresented students and their experiences of violence and harm at the centre of our pedagogical partnerships, we can support the potential for redressal. Where such violences and harms manifest epistemically, affectively and ontologically, we must acknowledge a certain inability to make sense of these experiences 'due to a gap in available tools for the interpretation of social meanings' (de Bie *et al*, 2021: 17). I posit here that the conceptual tools and approaches presented in CRT, decolonial and participatory research can fill this gap in a way that other approaches may not, as they force us to adopt specific ethical commitments, orientations and attributes that allow us to disrupt the status quo in a time when our students are desperately seeking equity and agency. These approaches, by definition, centre those that are under-represented and minoritised, i.e., the student(s) in the student/staff partnership model.

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