Decolonizing academia at LSE: 'Global South' students' experience

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Project title/research question

How do MSc students who identify as from the 'Global South' in Health and International Development programme perceive and experience Development Studies at the LSE?

Motivation

As a Global South student pursuing a Masters in International Development at the LSE, I am interested in how Global South students perceive and experience Development Studies within the Department of International Development at the LSE. As such, this calls for a greater need to uncomfortably confront the colonial roots of this discipline and the neocolonialism of contemporary development projects in light of the decolonizing curriculum initiatives at the LSE.

Literature Review

Freire's (1970) work in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* demonstrates not only the need to confront these power hegemonies but to *liberate* people from it. Yet, Freire's (1970) skepticism about liberation led by oppressors also mirrors the experiences of Global South students in the Department today. Moreover, his conceptualization of "dehumanizing" the student within the academic sphere can extend its analysis to how students from the Global South understand and relate to their identities in the classroom. The space within higher education and academia is merely a microcosm of the greater demands by members of the Global South and BAME communities and their calls for greater social transformation and the radical shifting of power hierarchies (Le Grange, 2016; Heleta, 2016; Luckett and Shay, 2017). Without such an approach, the Development studies field will lack in critical analyses required to productively engage with the Global South and rectify the oppressing roots of the discipline.

Methodology

This research conducted two focus group discussions and one 1-2-1 interview via Zoom, averaging about 90 minutes each with seven students, identifying as one male and six females, who self-identified as from the Global South in MSc in Health and International Development track within the International Development Department at LSE. This research defines the Global

South synonymously with people of color from the Global South and Global North with White. They were asked to reflect on their perceptions of Development studies at the LSE based on their reading materials, lectures, classroom/zoom interactions with their global north peers. The inclusion criteria for this study included students with a nationality from countries in the Global South, those with dual nationalities (at least one from the Global South), and those born in the Global South but currently hold nationality in the Global North.

Findings

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from this study concerns hierarchy of voices within the Development studies, with the dominant voices being white. Students mentioned that the vast majority of the assigned essential readings were from white scholars, taught by majority-white professors/teaching staff to a majority of Global North white students, which meant that voices from the Global South, including people of color, were drowned out. As such, the participants shared their feelings about the curriculum being catered to Global North students, where Global North peers would speak about the lived experiences of the Global South without any reflexivity on their positionality.

To the participants, reflexivity and positionality are of central concern. They constantly had to rethink their place within their culture in the Global South and their place within the culture of the Global North. To them, Development studies were not just a degree or a career but everyday life in which their Global North peers might not necessarily have to wrestle with the day-to-day consequences of it. Therefore, the participants viewed this demand for separation of subjective from objective academic life at LSE as superficial, which consequently gave rise to white voices over lived experiences of communities from the Global South. To the participants, this education and experience at LSE was genuinely concerning as they believed that university education is a foundation for how the working world continues to manifest itself. They believed that if the university is not going the extra mile to break down these barriers, it is not merely enough to pay lip services to decolonize the curriculum.

Therefore, the participants relied on other Global South students with similar backgrounds and experiences for coping mechanisms. One of the popular mechanisms was identifying and expressing their thoughts to other Global South peers on specific topics via in-person or group chats. The participants shared that actively seeking peers from the Global South was necessary because the Department lacked support on issues that explicitly emerged from having their Global South identity, i.e., microaggressions, racism, the fetishization of lived experiences. As such, the participants believed that the decolonizing academic initiatives at LSE are dangerously falling in the realm of the rhetoric, i.e. we acknowledge, recognize, but lacking in action.

Likewise, participants shared an assumption that some academic responsibility to explain the lived experiences of Global South challenges fell on the Global South students. This was felt whenever a popular case study region or a country-specific questionnaire appeared. Some of their peers/staff would expect anecdotal evidence of their personal lived experiences. However,

when they did share their personal narratives, they felt that their lived experiences were seen as exotic and fetishized. Moreover, their Global North peers would be surprised when their narratives told positive sides of their lived experiences rather than how it was portrayed in the readings by white people a decade ago. Participants, therefore, shared that decolonizing and enlightening somehow has become their responsibility. Moreover, some Global North peers would privately message the participants, unaware of the burden of their inquiries on constantly having to explain themselves, which consequently led to participants feeling mentally exhausted and shut.

Recommendations

Critical reflexivity for staff and students – departmental level
1. Preliminary researched-based workshops between academic staff and Global South scholars and/ or global south professional diversity/inclusivity trainers on how to better understand the experiences of Global South students and how best to support them.
2. Establish a researched-based training course for all students on the power dynamics of the classroom setting at the beginning of the first term.
3. Academic staff should encourage Global North students to critically reflect on their positionality within the Global North and their positionality in the global south. I.e., their country's involvement in the underdevelopment of the Global South using inward reflection.
4. Networking events also need to address the power dynamics in the field, i.e., inequity in salaries of international staff versus nationals, top-down approach recruitment (white Global North centered recruitment events), etc.

Avenues to address global south students' concerns in the classroom – departmental level
1. Allocate separate online departmental feedback surveys for Global South students to express concerns/recommendations for their taught courses and the wider LSE community.
2. Provide an exclusive space for Global South students to come together (without staff and Global North students present) to voice concerns and/or recommendations to be relayed to department/and or academic staff.
3. Establish paid Global South peer support liaisons and have them professionally trained to respond and address specific concerns that arise explicitly of having a Global South identity.

Avenues to address systematic oppression – school level
1. Increase funding and efforts towards hiring more Global South staff.
2. Increase scholarships and efforts towards increasing Global South student representation/population.
3. Increase Global South scholars/voices in the reading curriculum.
4. Promote the 'Inclusive Teaching' session by the Eden Center

5. Address the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) representation and retention of the department by establishing an EDI committee with heavy representation by BAME students and staff.
6. Initiate Research Dialogues on these issues that everyone from the Department can attend and contribute.
7. Have an expert on decoloniality and/or critical race studies to audit working and teaching in the department.

References

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