



LONDON REVIEW OF EDUCATION

e-ISSN: 1474-8479

Journal homepage:
<https://www.uclpress.co.uk/pages/london-review-of-education>

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Vicente Reyes, Jr , Sharon Clancy , Henry Koge , Kevin Richardson , and Phil Taylor 

How to cite this article

Reyes, V., Jr, Clancy, S., Koge, H., Richardson, K. and Taylor, P. (2021) 'Decolonising globalised curriculum landscapes: The identity and agency of academics'. *London Review of Education*, 19 (1), 26, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.19.1.26>

Submission date: 11 September 2020

Acceptance date: 25 May 2021

Publication date: 18 August 2021

Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymized during review.

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Decolonising globalised curriculum landscapes: The identity and agency of academics

Vicente Reyes, Jr*, Sharon Clancy, Henry Koge, Kevin Richardson and Phil Taylor – *University of Nottingham, UK*

Abstract

This article explores how academics in a higher education institution (HEI) make sense of the challenges that they encounter in a neoliberal context typified by an increasingly globalised curriculum landscape. Two key questions are explored: What are the contours of the shifting boundaries which define the 'global curriculum' in HEI contexts? How do academics navigate and make sense of this fluidity in an uncertain and disputed landscape? Using reflections on practice emanating from the redesign of educational courses to respond to a rapidly changing student cohort, this inquiry takes an auto-ethnographic approach, offering the perspectives of five academic staff from a UK-based HEI through the lens of their lived experiences, and acknowledging the emerging shifts in identities that they experience and the need to confront tensions in this curriculum space. We conclude that our own scrutiny of, and critical reflections on, our identity and positionality as teachers and education practitioners represent a form of decoloniality, enabling us to find ways to share what we know without excluding knowledge outside it and to welcome contributions and possibilities beyond our own experiences. In terms of how we should act, we recognise that it must be through a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty.

Keywords: decolonising, higher education, neoliberal education, reflexive narratives, globalised curriculum, United Kingdom

Introduction

How do academics in higher education institutions (HEIs) make sense of challenges in a neoliberal context typified by an increasingly globalised curriculum landscape? These critical challenges reflect the constant need to reframe what is defined as 'global' in view of powerful market forces that impact HEIs and consequent shifts that occur in academic identity and agency. It also calls into question notions of neutrality in our understanding of curriculum and knowledge.

While the curriculum is a fundamental idea in education and in educational processes, it is often considered simplistically as a neutral list of what to teach. Curriculum is, however, subject to a range of social, cultural and political influences, and the relationship between the curriculum and knowledge is complex. The meaning of curriculum can itself include multiple dimensions, such as the modules and the syllabuses taught, the pedagogical approaches adopted and the assessment methods in use. Close inspection reveals ways in which the curriculum is inextricably bound up with ideas of knowledge, and therefore the question 'What shall we teach?' raises

questions about the very purpose of education in the twenty-first century. What should be taught/learned and why? Why emphasise the learning of some knowledges and not others and who decides?

These wider issues were central to our inquiry into the global curriculum. We explore them through the reflections of five academics on their own teaching practices and attempts to provide critical, timely and relevant learning experiences within a global syllabus with distinctly Eurocentric traits. In investigating this, two specific questions are addressed: What are the contours of the shifting boundaries which define the 'global curriculum' in HEI contexts? How do academics navigate and make sense of this fluidity in an uncertain and disputed landscape?

Review of literature

Education represented by public service and educational institutions has seen the rise of neoliberal ideas typified by transformations that include 'increased exposure to competition, increased accountability measures and the implementation of performance goals' (Davies and Bansel, 2007: 254). More specifically, the higher education sector has borne the brunt of neoliberalism. This has led to an increase in valorisation of the economic potential of educational institutions in generating a population who are ready for 'economic participation and, in the process, aid in the nation-building effort' (Tan and Reyes, 2016: 19). The neoliberal agenda has shifted liberalism's definition of the value of social good into economic productivity, 'seen to come not from government investment in education, but from transforming education into a product' (Davies and Bansel, 2007: 254). In higher education embedded in neoliberal settings, education has been commodified into a tool, technology or competency serving as a means of exchange, in a social order dictated by demand and supply (Tan and Reyes: 2016).

We argue that neoliberalism has created a context where HEIs have become market-driven sites where all relevant stakeholders – academics and students – are constantly being moulded to become productive economic actors in a market-driven society. As a consequence of neoliberalism, HEIs have undergone a profound shift. Increasingly, the collegial nature of academia, designed to foster creativity and civic-mindedness, has become an arena where academics compete while navigating a landscape rife with the terrors of performativity (Ball, 2003), which has a negative impact on the teaching and learning relationships between academic staff and students (Ingleby, 2015). We echo Fataar's (2018: 596) lamentation that academics and the entire HEI sector have not 'fully understood, nor engaged with, the complex nature of students' experiences'.

These are the important themes with which we engage in this inquiry. Furthermore, we concur with Rizvi's (2017: 3) identification of the proliferation of the 'neoliberal imaginary', which 'has resulted in privileging a particular way of conceptualizing the requirements of educational reform', a world view that prioritises education marketisation. We contend that apart from the emphasis on economic returns, another aspect of 'privileging a particular way of conceptualising education' has become more evident: a neoliberal curriculum – with distinctly Eurocentric features – that effectively silences other voices.

Analytical approach

We are five academics from varied disciplinary backgrounds – history, political science, business and education – who form part of a teaching team for graduate courses in educational leadership. An inchoate observation surfaces frequently in our conversations: how far our course development champions 'competition, values

academic learning, and is above all aimed at utility', undeniable descriptors of a neoliberal curriculum (Gaudelli, 2009: 71).

Many international students arrive at university seeking a Western study experience and to engage with related scholarship and research. Many students studying part-time while teaching, often in international schools, reflect upon and write about the intercultural dimensions of their practice as both enriching and challenging. Recently, however, we find that our graduate student body has been comprised of predominantly international students, most of whom come straight from school, with limited practitioner experience, and chiefly from mainland China. Informed by the tenets of sensemaking as an activity 'grounded in both individual and social activity' (Weick, 1995: 7), our continuing reflexive conversations have highlighted processes confronted with one overarching tension: the stark contrast between providing content predominantly created from Eurocentric perspectives, and conveying this to an increasingly non-Western international student body under the label of a global curriculum. Consequently, we realise that there is a need to problematise the Eurocentric neoliberal curriculum that we teach. More specifically, a deliberate effort towards decolonising the curriculum becomes imperative.

We have brought our own knowledge and experiences, our funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), to inform our teaching practices. These are represented in part by our own attempts to reframe and decolonise the curriculum by enacting practices incorporating contextualised scholarly resources from our own lived examples, which we hope will enrich our students' learning. These are our efforts to provide relevant teaching and learning experiences to our international students. We have reflected on these practices as efforts at redesigning educational courses to respond to a rapidly changing student cohort. We bring sources of knowledge and experience from the traditions and locations of our colleagues and students to our practice, broadening our mutual understandings. Navigating these sensitivities, sometimes from afar, is a process of 'working through the present to both understand the past and reinterpret the future' (Bhabha, 2011: 59).

We draw upon Bhabha's (1994: 2) theoretical lens, where the 'emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference' of our 'intersubjective and collective experiences' are negotiated and produced through performativity. We use the interstitial perspective in exploring and investigating how we navigate the contested and ever-changing terrain of the global curriculum.

We adopt something akin to an auto-ethnographic approach reflecting on a particular phenomenon – in this case, globalised curriculum – and how we make sense of it. Our narratives are 'analytical demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience' (Adams et al., 2015: 1). Five of us agreed to examine our individual and collective reflections through the 'construction of narratives of experience' (Vazir, 2008: 447). We then undertook a series of four guided conversations, each one or two hours long. Afterwards, each of us examined, 'constructed and re-constructed' (Vazir, 2008: 447) our individual stories, addressing two key questions: How do we make sense of the contours of the global curriculum that we continually navigate? How do we see ourselves while navigating a 'global curriculum'? Afterwards, we examined our narratives using abduction, 'conclusions drawn from everyday generalisation' (Thomas, 2010: 577), to arrive at practical wisdom and understanding of particular situations. We then created a collective account of our reflections, which resulted in the emergence of three preliminary themes: (1) sensemaking as lived experience; (2) identity formation in a neoliberal imaginary; and (3) tensions in decolonising the curriculum. The next section elaborates on our reflexive narratives.

Sensemaking as lived experience

Sensemaking is a search for plausibility and coherence, that is reasonable and memorable, which embodies past experience and expectations, and maintains the self while resonating with others. It can be constructed retrospectively yet used prospectively, and captures thoughts and emotions. (Brown et al., 2008: 1038)

We jointly undertook sensemaking reflections, searching 'for plausibility and coherence', and bringing a critical lens to the tensions of teaching within a contested global curriculum landscape. We reflected upon, questioned and justified our practices and sought to expose the specific challenges that this curriculum brings. Our primary and overarching challenge is our positionality in relation to patently Eurocentric subject content that often lacks relevance to, and is disconnected from, the experience of non-Western international students.

Other key themes emerged through the sensemaking narratives of three of the authors, all of whom come from very different backgrounds. Their narratives are linked, however, by a common thread, that of their own lived experiences, and they each explore issues of commodification, student attainment and well-being, and whose knowledge is valued. These sensemaking viewpoints serve as landmarks in navigating the contours of the global curriculum.

Phil: Commodification of learning

As a White male with a long career in the UK education sector, my scholarship is inevitably shaped by Western ideals and ideas. I became a teacher, and then leader, in comprehensive secondary schools in London, before relocating to the Midlands to work in local authority advisory roles. This move afforded deeper understanding of contextual complexity and variation across education settings, with growing recognition of tensions between practice development and quality assurance. For the last decade in higher education, supporting the further study of educators, my professional identity remains that of a teacher, occupying the 'swampy lowland' of practitioner inquiry more than the 'high ground' of pure research (Schön, 2011: 2). My work as an academic interested in complex professional practices without always experiencing them first hand, is guided by ideas from Davis and Sumara (2006: 25) about the 'practice-oriented' question of 'how we should act?', as much as the 'fact-seeking' question 'what is?' or the 'interpretation-seeking' question 'what might be?'

Drawing on experiences of teaching, I hope that inclusion and diversity come from acknowledging students' own cultures, while recognising that they sometimes seek to transform or even escape them. Again, reflecting on my own motivations, a reason for extending horizons beyond Western scholarship is also to transcend its constraints, in particular, the overweening influence of marketisation, competition, ranking and categorising, and the demand for continual, yet impossible, growth and improvement. Yet I am complicit in perpetuating and participating in an academic culture that increasingly commodifies learning through qualifications funded by international fees, and which keeps us employed.

Kevin: Well-being of students

As a White male and former senior leader in both the further and higher education sectors in England, my professional journey has been from an initial role as a lecturer

in business studies through to the study and teaching of management and leadership, informed primarily by Western mores. My experience has now drawn me to reflect on the first principles of teaching and learning and the needs of the learner as a key transformational experience that enhances life chances. As acutely aware as I am of the imperatives of organisational growth, quality and student satisfaction at the macro-level, my role on a teaching team has encouraged me to connect more closely than in the past with the motivations, engagement, needs and learning journey of the international students that I have direct responsibility for as tutor.

I accept that I am working in the context of a neoliberal education market and that I am employed to serve a growing number of international students providing vital revenue. I am aware that there has been a lot of research into learner motivations to study abroad, and these motivations have been perhaps best encapsulated through McMahon's (1992) push–pull model. It feels relevant at the macro-level, but at the micro-level, where I contribute, it offers little in relation to understanding individual students' personal experiences and motivations once a learner has started to engage in the course.

What has become clearer is that there is a growing need to take a greater interest in the care and success of our students. As obvious as this need might appear to be, perhaps it also needs to be informed by a consideration of the attainment gap between UK and overseas students, as highlighted by Crawford and Wang (2015), who concern themselves with the difficulties that students from outside the UK experience during their university studies. Scholars have argued that student satisfaction is an ever-changing construct and a dynamic process (Elliott and Shin, 2002), a complex argument that I continue to interrogate. In my role, for example, I have noted that broad levels of student satisfaction are not necessarily linked to learner outcomes. I have also observed a range of issues and concerns relating to different types of new experiences of students that can be distracting in the formative weeks of learning in an international setting where the learners' first language is not English.

Sharon: Reflexivity and power – Learning with and from students

I transitioned from practitioner to academic in 2016, as the lead UK researcher for a European project examining adult learning for disadvantaged young adults, having had a background in middle and senior management in community/public engagement, both within the community and the university. It was necessary to speedily adapt to a demanding, performative and competitive research environment, working with partners across eight European countries, the UK and Australia.

In terms of my own educational background, my father, a miner, gained a scholarship to Ruskin College in Oxford, a residential adult education establishment for working-class people, to retrain as a social worker in his 30s. My own academic penchant enabled me to follow him, gaining a place at the University of Cambridge. I have always trodden two paths, at the interstices of academic and practitioner, which has created in me a strong belief in the vital role of education in promoting social justice, the importance of tacit, informal knowledge and of lifelong learning – and how this is expressed at the cultural level.

My background and experience have enabled me to be alive to learning about, and from, the students I teach in the educational leadership context in ways which I could not have anticipated, a reflexivity which I have sought to embrace – and which has exposed to me something of the nature of both knowledge and power, and particularly how knowledge is valued and whose knowledge is primary. I have felt grateful for the knowledge exchange and the personal enrichment gained through

learning about other global curricula and cultures, specifically China – its education system, its pedagogical, philosophical and political beliefs and structures.

Identity formation in a neoliberal imaginary

New managerialism built on market-driven, neoliberal principles can be discerned in higher education contexts. Universities in different parts of the world have embraced this 'because of the need to supplement reducing government recurrent funding through fee-paying, largely international students' (Blackmore, 2009: 857). Growing dependence on market forces has created an overt tension in higher education contexts: on the one hand, demanding an increase in international student numbers and, on the other hand, requiring the maintenance of the quality of the student experience. In order to navigate this space, academics often have to resort to performative practices (Blackmore, 2009), actions that can significantly alter academics' identities.

This is reflected, for instance, in Phil's search for a sense of stability, indicating that, faced with uncertainties and challenges, his identity 'remains that of a teacher'. Kevin manifests a malleability, stating that his experience has prompted him to 'reflect upon the first principles of teaching'. Sharon sees herself pursuing an academic identity situated in the 'interstices of academic and practitioner', in which she seeks to counter economic performativity, and is informed by community and liberal adult education principles. In our collective sensemaking, we acknowledge the 'ever-changing configuration of interpretations that individuals attach to themselves' (Geijssel and Meijers, 2009: 473) in the process of encountering and interpreting new lived experiences.

We argue that the contemporary HEI context is deeply entangled in a neoliberal imaginary that 'deeply affects how individuals construct their own identities and social relationships' (Yoon, 2018: 374). We focus on the narratives of three of the authors, whose varied experiences shed light on how academic identities are shaped and distorted while navigating a global curriculum landscape.

Henry: The pressure faced by new academics

I draw upon my experience as an African male and a skilled science teacher, and my leadership roles as Dean of Studies and Director at a private college in Cameroon, which quickly transitioned into school management consultancy after completing my doctorate. As a practitioner, consultancy has been a space of practice that I enjoyed very much prior to joining academia.

Much of my professional identity and focus has predominantly been shaped through processes and actions that are geared at optimising school performance and students' outcomes, with tangible deliverables for my 'clients'. Developing leadership and management training, as well as tailored coaching services within the African context, was a niche I was comfortably crafting for myself.

Although I joined the university with the idea of playing a similar role (training Bangladeshi college principals and senior leaders), transitioning into academia unearthed challenges that were more complex and ambiguous. Two of the most prominent issues stemmed from the disconnect between my students and the Eurocentric material, and from what I perceive as culture shock. These paradoxes created both opportunities and tensions, stretching my teaching role, orientation and professional identity. Amid all these, I realised that I would fall back on adopting teaching familiar content, which inadvertently was still predominantly Eurocentric. Consequently, I felt a need to engage with a much more relevant set of research and publications that could inform my teaching.

Kevin: Tutors as anchors providing support

For me, a good lecturer/personal tutor 'support system is the "anchor" on which the support system of the university rests' (Wheeler and Birtle, 1993: 3). It is when we can link together the psychological well-being of the learner, the educative process and the learner outcomes that we generate a shared understanding of need. It is a process and set of values that form part of being in a neoliberal market in which we serve, and as a result it helps us to enhance our position in an increasingly competitive market. It is a product of how we evidence the time we take to show we care by building strong relationships that foster a sense of belonging with the student community, and more specifically with our tutor groups.

Vicente: Cultures of performativity

As a former school principal in my home country of the Philippines who transitioned to academia, my teaching and scholarly trajectory explore the political sociology of education. My decade-long experience in Singapore and then in Australia influenced my ethos. Signposts guiding me along my journey as an academic in a global education landscape were competitive tropes: initially 'publish or perish' and 'impact factor', and much later, 'student evaluations'. The hyper-competitive culture in HEIs remains a barrier to collaboration: university academics contest the very limited academic tenure positions, which are mostly determined by publications. It is no surprise, therefore, when academics feel that they 'continue to play the game and conform to the demands of a hyper-competitive, highly-individualistic academic world' (Charteris et al., 2017: 346). As I navigated the cut-throat academy, I engaged in an opportunistic mode of publication – I had to play the game.

Alongside the emphasis on publications, my experience in a market-driven HEI context has been the almost inordinate desire to uphold a culture of high student satisfaction, measured primarily by student feedback on teaching. For most of the academics that I dealt with, we viewed student feedback disparagingly as a 'disciplinary technology' (Blackmore, 2009: 857) in order to make sure that our clients (students) were satisfied with what they pay for. My reaction to this was to fabricate a professional mode of working with students: My role was a 'benevolent' taskmaster, to primarily help them learn and not to make them happy.

Within the neoliberal imaginary of HEI contexts, our narratives demonstrate how academics from diverse disciplinary backgrounds experience shifting identities: Henry, as a new academic transitioning from industry, is thrown right into the maelstrom of neoliberal HEIs, typified by the increasing pressure of teaching and publications. On the one hand, Kevin identifies the need to become an anchor providing secure moorings for students, as someone providing stability for learners thrust into an unfamiliar learning landscape. On the other hand, Vicente finds himself needing to deploy several identities – opportunistically struggling to play the academic game and a benevolent taskmaster immersed in cultures of performativity.

Tensions in decolonising the curriculum

A decolonised curriculum is evidenced by a shift in subjectivity from the arrogant 'I' (of Western individualism) to the humble 'I' – to the 'I' that is embedded, embodied, extended and enacted. (Le Grange, 2016: 9)

In our continued conversations, and in our efforts at sensemaking, we acknowledged the importance of interrogating the 'global curriculum'. We realised the urgent need

to undertake changes to ensure an 'embedded, embodied, extended and enacted' decolonised curriculum (Le Grange, 2016: 9). We focus on the narratives of four of the authors, who shared their viewpoints in relation to the challenge of decolonising the curriculum.

Henry: Giving voice and volition to learners

I believe that the true value of education is a journey of knowledge discovery and reconstruction (one that is of a practical nature), with opportunities to provide the learner with mental models that are culturally responsive. In this manner, I have found myself emphasising the value of learning from practical experiences. I continue to adopt strategies that enable students to gain their own voice and volition through deliberate engagement with experiences. I have come to realise that student-centred teaching orientation and practices support the needs of my learners and is more favourable as it veers away from HEI's fascination with students' performance metrics.

Sharon: Epistemic injustice versus student empowerment

Many of our students are seeking a Western education coming from a world view that seems to say that our knowledge is inherently better. This is what I have understood in my adult education work as a form of cognitive or epistemic injustice, a Western lens which struggles to recognise the plurality of epistemologies and the manner in which people around the world provide meaning to their existence and their lived experience.

Emphasising criticality, and a form of public pedagogy which is able to consider and scrutinise power differentials and fake authority, creates the space for the development of critical consciousness and political action. This could be described as education for social purpose, seeking a quantitative and then a qualitative change as its end point in real-world applications or practical inquiry. Seth Visvanathan (2009) has described this approach to education as being predicated on 'cognitive justice', which enables us to perceive that 'diverse communities' have a stake in problem solving, based on conversation, narrative and reciprocity, and promotes recognition of alternative paradigms or knowledge systems by facilitating and enabling dialogue between often incommensurable knowledges: 'These forms of knowledge, especially the ideas of complexity, represent new forms of power sharing and problem-solving that go beyond the limits of voice and resistance' (Visvanathan, 2009: n.p.).

Kevin: Isolation and a sense of belonging

A phenomenon that I frequently encounter is a feeling of isolation among international students. They often find themselves in potentially negative initial experiences, which I have noted is then manifested in minimal levels of engagement. This is made worse by an institutional lack of opportunities to gain a sense of belonging. I often find myself managing large groups and completing competing tasks, taking me away from my aspiration to 'develop a personal, consistent relationship' (Drake, 2011: 10) with students. Balancing a heavy workload, preventing isolationism and building belongingness is a recurring tension that I navigate.

Vicente: Problematizing the curriculum

Disturbingly, the content in our courses has limited examples of literature from Asia. One possible – troubling – reason is that in the area of educational leadership, there is a tacit agreement that Eurocentric literature dominates the field. This phenomenon must be problematised. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA),

spanning more than a decade, has consistently identified Asian jurisdictions (for example, Shanghai and Singapore) as consistently top performers (Reyes and Tan, 2018). Surely there is much to learn about school leadership in those contexts? Yet, scholarly voices from Asia remain silent. Growing numbers of international students are exposed to a decontextualised 'global' curriculum. I fear an entrenched 'culture of passivity' seemingly proliferating in our UK teaching context: students from the 'Orient' are docile recipients of knowledge, while academics passively regurgitate Western views, absconding on their role of critically interrogating scholarship.

In our sensemaking efforts while teaching a Eurocentric graduate course to non-Western international students, we have made tentative steps towards grappling with decolonising the curriculum. Henry, who has extensive corporate exposure, asserts that students' voice and volition take centre stage. Sharon, a staunch advocate of adult education, warns us to attend to the balance between the undesirable phenomenon of epistemic injustice on the one hand, and authentic student empowerment on the other. Kevin, coming from a business and management background, reminds us of rising cases of isolation among students and of the need to build a sense of belonging. Vicente, who is informed by political and sociological perspectives, points out the immediate need to problematise the current state of our global curriculum.

Insights and reflections

We sought to address two specific questions: How did we make sense of the contours of a disputed global curriculum landscape? What impact did our sensemaking experiences have on our identities? In order to answer these, we looked back at our practices and realised a commonality that we all shared, regardless of our diverse disciplinary backgrounds: the importance of sensemaking as lived experience. Seeing ourselves embedded in a Eurocentric curriculum landscape, we discovered that interstices, enabled by our lived experiences, allowed us to confront challenges. We modified readings and deliberately engaged with students, allowing us to navigate a terrain riddled with issues of subject matter relevance and student disengagement.

Furthermore, our reflections on our sensemaking made us discover that our identities flowed in disparate trajectories along the contours of a problematic global curriculum. A neoliberal ethos typified by economic productivity, and a closely related performativity culture, was counterbalanced by the desire to provide pastoral care and relevant learning. At times this tension simultaneously both distorted and enhanced these contours. Vicente, Henry and, to a certain extent, Sharon, experienced oscillating identities while manoeuvring past these obstacles, which typified the tensions between performativity and quality. Kevin and Phil experienced both stable and malleable identities in navigating features of the curriculum, enabling practice-informed, pastoral care and learning-centred imperatives. We contend that our own identity formation and our critical positionality, within the interstices of the curriculum, represent our attempts at decoloniality: 'Importantly, decolonizing emergent curriculum is not superficial inclusion or assimilation of Indigenous content into Euro-Western curriculum – decolonization requires radical disruptions of curriculum-as-usual' (Nxumalo et al., 2018: 447).

We acknowledge that our fragmented efforts to decolonise our teaching by incorporating what we believe is relevant literature, as well as including more of our lived experiences in our teaching, are not enough. We have not yet reached the point of 'radical disruptions of curriculum-as-usual' (Nxumalo et al., 2018: 447). However, what we have modestly accomplished is the creation of an opportunity for each one

of us to deliberately forge our own identities by exploiting the interstices found in the overpowering and dominant neoliberal imaginary that remains deeply entangled in a Eurocentric global curriculum. The narrative reflection of one of our colleagues, Phil, serves both as a clarion call and as an aspirational message.

Further tensions reside in our hopes for decolonising the curriculum. Seeking diversification in scholarship from contexts where we have limited experience, we must guard against tokenism or, worse, a new type of colonisation through appropriation. Worse still, if the knowledge born of other peoples, places and times is misappropriated and misinterpreted through a modern Western overlay of 'unequal exchanges', we risk 'epistemicide' or 'destruction of knowledge' (Santos, 2016: 242). The recent co-occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests is instructive. The disproportionately negative impact of COVID-19 on Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities is clear and concrete, as are structural racism and inequality. Yet we become absorbed in presentational and propositional knowing – in debates about which statues and images should be pulled down. These are symbolically important, and we have too often walked past without noticing or questioning, but they distract us from what matters – from grounding knowing in experience and fulfilling it in practice (Heron and Reason, 1997). Educational practice must find ways to change lived experience, tackling injustice through equal exchange. In short, academic critique is not enough and political action is necessary.

Perhaps we need to rethink what is meant by curriculum in order to decolonise it. A living curriculum for professional practice in teaching or educational leadership needs to start from the lived experiences and future hopes of its participants (tutors and students), rather than from an approved body of knowledge or research. Perhaps our students choose to study with us because they think we have something to offer, and they arrive expecting to be taught and to learn *from* us. But we must remain open to learning *with* and from them in equal exchange. For us, this entails a shift from pedagogy, meaning (from the Greek) 'to lead the child' – which, long ago, Knowles (1973: 42) described as a 'millstone' – towards heutagogy, or self-determined learning, in which adults are no longer taught as children (Hase and Kenyon, 2013). This is a collaborative and participatory approach to curriculum as a continuous process of development. It might also enable us and our students to put knowledge and practice to work in changing professional lives and contexts for the good of all.

The challenge is to find ways to share what we know without excluding knowledge outside it, to welcome contributions and possibilities beyond our own experiences. Recent developments such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the HEI industrial actions in 2019 and 2020 have become much more accentuated during the global pandemic, making us recognise not only the importance, but also the urgency of the challenges we confront. In terms of how we should act, it must be through 'a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty' (Bhabha, 2011: 58). As Maturana and Varela (1992: 246) explain, social life and possibilities for knowing are generated by the biological 'acceptance of others', perhaps an act of 'love' (emphasis in original), where coexistence remains viable even through conflict, without one negating another. It is mutual acceptance that leads to coexistence, the co-creation of a shared world and a sense of belonging.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the special issue editors for providing us with the opportunity to share our insights and reflections.

Notes on the contributors

Vicente Chua Reyes, Jr. is Associate Professor with the Centre for Research in Educational Leadership and Management of the School of Education, University of Nottingham, UK. Vicente is also Honorary Associate Professor with the School of Education, University of Queensland, Australia. Trained as a political scientist, his current research interests are in the interface of technology, educational leadership and reforms. His latest book is *Networks of (Dis)Trust* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).

Sharon Clancy is Assistant Professor in educational leadership at the University of Nottingham, UK. Her PhD, writing and research focus on adult education, historical and contemporary, particularly issues of class, culture and social justice. Sharon was Head of Community Engagement at the University of Nottingham between 2007 and 2013, and Senior Research Fellow on ENLIVEN between 2016 and 2019. A voluntary sector leader before entering academia, she was previously CEO of Mansfield Council for Voluntary Services.

Henry Koge is Assistant Professor in Educational Leadership at the University of Nottingham, UK. Henry holds a PhD in leadership and management from the University of Warwick, UK, and is a member of the British Educational Administration Leadership and Management Society (BELMAS). He was Assistant Professor at the University of Nottingham, Malaysia, doing research and practical work in establishing and developing professional learning communities (PLCs), and supporting school-based change initiatives in Malaysia.

Kevin Richardson is Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Management at the University of Nottingham, UK. Kevin has a background in the English further education sector and studied part-time for an MSc in personnel management (Aston University) and an MA in industrial relations (Keele University), the latter by distance learning, before taking an EdD at the University of Leicester. Kevin's primary area of interest is the role and experience of middle leaders in the post-16 sector.

Phil Taylor is Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Management at the University of Nottingham, UK. During his career in education, Phil has taught mathematics, computing and ICT in two London comprehensive schools, holding various leadership posts, before settling in the Midlands and working in local authority advisory roles. Since moving into higher education, Phil's work has involved supporting the professional growth, and the personal and organisational development, of teachers and educational leaders, particularly through practice-based inquiry.

Declaration and conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests with this work.

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