Commentary

A reply to 'Education, decolonisation and international development at the Institute of Education (London): a historical analysis' by Elaine Unterhalter and Laila Kadiwal

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Abstract

In this reply, I make three comments on the article 'Education, decolonisation and international development at the Institute of Education (London): a historical analysis' by Elaine Unterhalter and Laila Kadiwal (2022). Unterhalter and Kadiwal foreground the meanings and implications of the department's changing organisational titles over time, illustrating that these titles can be interpreted as metonyms that symbolise shifting registers of colonial and post-colonial identification for the department as a whole, as well as among individual staff at the UCL Institute of Education (IOE), London, UK. Geographies and positionalities are extensively elaborated in the analysis. Expanding on this, I suggest that the authors' initial line of thinking begins to show, and can show even more, the limited recognition at the IOE that decolonial identities and discourses are underlined by an affective dimension. This connects with Unterhalter and Kadiwal's observation that although recently decolonial theories and praxis at the IOE have taken on

a more nuanced, multidimensional perspective, further institutional and individual work is required. Thus, my response engages with questions around the modalities through which a narrative of history is constructed and naturalised.

Privilege, hierarchy and supremacy lie at the centre of the colonial project. This project requires an embracing of the colonial structure and with it an acceptance of the violence – physical, emotional, intellectual and otherwise – imposed upon the colonised. Necessarily, this also requires the internal rationalisation of continued systematic oppression (Memmi, 1965). Internal rationalisation is a continuous feature in both the colonial and the post-colonial moments. This rationalisation may take several forms, one of these being instances of knowing and/or not knowing. Relatedly, the other may be remembering and/or not remembering – that is, amnesia, either partial or complete – the breadth and depth of historical domination, as well as the continuity of this domination into the present and the future. The historic tracing of the organisational location and changing name of the field of study of education and international development at the UCL Institute of Education (IOE), London, UK, over 120 years provided in the article 'Education, decolonisation and international development at the Institute of Education (London): a historical analysis' (Unterhalter and Kadiwal, 2022) does one crucial thing: it brings to the reader the significance of metonyms, or what the authors refer to in one instance as metonymical description. By this, I interpret the authors as meaning that semantic associations with each naming of the department over the years illuminate different – sometimes concealed – positions on what it means to decolonise the field (or not), both to individual staff and to the organisation as a whole. Put differently, semantic associations illuminate that which is collectively and individually known and/or remembered, and how it is collectively and individually known and/or remembered. This is of significance, given that knowing and remembering present the starting point for decolonial progress.

As the Colonial Department (1927–52), the organisation during this time held no self-critical stance on its relationship with the colonies (Unterhalter and Kadiwal, 2022). Rather, it supported the Colonial Office's Advisory Committee (Unterhalter and Kadiwal, 2022). The lack of self-criticality shows itself in the aims associated with education at the time, where it served to neutralise the threats accompanying non-empire ideologies – 'nationalism, socialism and totalitarianism in Africa, Asia and Latin America' (Unterhalter and Kadiwal, 2022: 5). In this moment, the irony is in the empire's own use of pseudo-politics as the cornerstone of education planning and design, and the threat that this poses to the rigour of taught knowledge for teachers, education administrators and teacher trainers for the colonies. This reading of what is essentially manufactured fear around non-empire ideologies as threats marks the beginning of a convincing and provocative argument regarding the maintenance of the colonial logic over much of the history of the IOE. The maintenance of this logic underlies what Unterhalter and Kadiwal (2022: 5) describe as 'research, policy and practice ... marked by formulations that do not engage with the injustices of colonisation'.

In addition to those threats described so far, the naming of the department over time evoked a range of other imaginaries around what were considered undesirable conditions in the colonies. Relatedly, and here lies my first contribution to the analysis by Unterhalter and Kadiwal (2022), the misdiagnosis of the nature of these undesirable conditions, one of them being tropicality, presents an example of the ways in which semantic associations continued to maintain colonial discourses. This maintenance also served as fertile ground for future unknowing, amnesia and/or the complete and active denial of colonial injustices among those formerly colonising institutions and the individuals working in them. It would seem that the aim of the analysis is to bring these otherwise invisible patterns of knowledge and memory to the eye of the reader. To this end, the analysis provides an appraisal of the ways in which depoliticised forms of theorisation, as well as the application of concepts within development theories, misrepresent the role of education in international development. Between 1952 and 1973, the IOE was named the Department of Education in Tropical Areas (ETA) (Unterhalter and Kadiwal, 2022). Although the term *tropical* enjoyed a period of conceptual validity through founding father, English parasitologist Patrick Manson, the term is highly contentious. In addition to the criticism

levelled in Unterhalter and Kadiwal (2022), the term also semantically constructs the tropical world as the West's environmental *other*, conjuring up a range of pseudoscientific associations, including biological inferiority. A recent report by Hirsch (2022) sheds further light on the subject by describing the colonial history of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, which played a role in the interdisciplinary and interdepartmental nature of work in the ETA. In a note on terminology, she indicates the range of limitations surrounding the colonial connotations of the term. Specifically, Hirsch (2022: 13) cites Lyons (1992), who argues that because 'many diseases labelled "tropical" are in reality diseases of poverty', the term is not 'an accurate geographical, medical or political term'.

That it is hidden that the tropical problem is actually a problem of poverty embedded education in the ETA's research and teaching in ways that took the wrong starting point. Rather than foregrounding the links between colonial domination and economic domination, which together have implications for development outcomes such as health, it maintained the perceived biological and other forms of inferiority of the colonised in the eyes of the colonising. As this idea of biological inferiority is internalised and entrenched in the identities of the colonised, it evokes feelings of aversive self-awareness and shame. I come back to these and other affective dimensions of colonial and decolonial experiences later. For now, I want to make the point that the insertion of education in the language of the tropical (and later *developing*) fabricates the notion that the role of education includes goals other than to humanise the colonised, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of the colonisers. It also fabricates the notion that there is a social justice advancing role for education in the absence of structural reforms that lead to shifts in resource distribution towards poverty eradicating ends that, among other things, affect health outcomes such as rates of infection for tropical diseases. By way of this reflection, the article illustrates the modalities through which a narrative of history is initiated, further constructed and entrenched, and a specific relationship between education and development is naturalised over the course of this construction. The initial naturalisation of the historical relationship between education and development is further evidenced in the article when it relates how Peter Williams, who joined the ETA in 1972, recalled a department wherein staff were largely White and male, usually had previous affiliations with the Colonial Education Service or ties with Christian missionaries and mainly had interests in practice, rather than in academic literature on education or development theory (Unterhalter and Kadiwal, 2022: 7). These assertions of the colonial identity carry forward into the uncertain genesis of post-colonial identities.

Based on the analysis, it seems that with the turn of the 1980s, post-colonial identity was largely framed through the language of comparison on an international scale. As the Department of International and Comparative Education (DICE; 1985–95), it appears comparison was considered pivotal if one desired an understanding of her society – the British Empire – in relation to others. One of the founding fathers of comparative education, George Bereday (1964: 6), argued: 'It is self-knowledge born of the awareness of others that is the finest lesson comparative education can afford.' With DICE emerged a turn towards engagement with more theoretically informed issues, raising questions of politics, power and exclusion. The authors offer up the example of Angela Little's (2004, as cited in Unterhalter and Kadiwal, 2022: 8) inaugural lecture in 1988, which stressed a view consistent with this set of ideas when she articulated 'the need for those domiciled in the North but who worked in and with the South to learn from the educational realities of developing countries'. While the analysis illustrates that this and other individual and collective assertions of post-coloniality expressed the need to problematise development, post-development and the ways in which inequalities arise, the lack of discussion around staff travel and aid-funded research noted by Unterhalter and Kadiwal (2022) demonstrates an absence during this moment in thinking around the geopolitics of decolonisation at the IOE.

There are two reasons for which it seems appropriate to elaborate some of the critical issues brought to bear at this point in the article through the lens of feminist geopolitics. The first has to do with the spatial nature of colonisation and decolonisation, as evidenced in the semantic content of the IOE's organisational titles over history. The second is concerned with the critical feminist approach taken by the two authors themselves in their analysis of their own positionalities. While feminist geopolitics is concerned with understanding the sources, dynamics and spatiality of intersectional oppression, demonstrating that identities are spatially contingent, it certainly also spotlights the sometimes variable nature of spatiality over the course of one's life and, therefore, the variable nature of subject formation, otherwise referred to as positionality. It also, therefore, demonstrates the unstable nature of positionalities.

The term *international* is homogenising insofar as the international project creates affective equivalence between individuals and their positionalities, when there is in fact little or none. The lack

of scrutiny around perceptions of 'cultural contact' in earlier years (Unterhalter and Kadiwal, 2022: 6) is seemingly carried forward. This arises through the absence of awareness that the experiences of academics coming from former colonies to the IOE can be potentially traumatic. Before DICE, under the Department of Education in Developing Countries (EDC; 1973–85), those temporarily contracted to teach on certain courses at the IOE were sometimes academics from Kenya, Bangladesh and Ethiopia, although it was expected that later they would occupy senior positions in their home states and institutions of higher education, rather than remain at the IOE (Unterhalter and Kadiwal, 2022). This indicates the lack of awareness of the trauma associated with travelling to, and immersing oneself in, the physical former colonial empire as a former subject of the empire. It may then also nullify the dysphoric, and maybe even schizophrenic, subjectivity of resentment in their participation in the decolonial process from within colonial institutions. The article alludes to the absence of an awareness of the affective dimensions of the decolonial project at the IOE in a most clear way. Nowhere in the historical tracing of teaching and research, or the utterances of those whose words are recollected in the article, do terms such as *guilt* or *regret* feature, either explicitly or implicitly. As a caveat, the authors would note that further research is required into the lexicon of IOE staff and their work when expressing emotive views in relation to the decolonial project. It would be interesting to learn the findings of such research. Nonetheless, I might still feel inclined to emphasise that not only is it knowledge, but also feeling that gives the colonial memory substance. Without such feeling, there appears to be only a partial knowledge and memory.

In summary, the article demonstrates the meanings and implications of shifting registers of colonial and post-colonial self-identification among staff at the IOE, demonstrating this through the slippages in knowing and not knowing, remembering and not remembering, as well as the convenience of each of these states in certain ways. What are seemingly neutral organisational titles, in fact are not. Memory is not stable. Rather, it is dynamic, changing over time in response to internal and external pressures. Memories compete with one another and are the effect of negotiations with self, groups and the surrounding world. Some moments of memory in the history of the IOE appear more ambiguous than others, as they represent entry into new scholarly terrain, while also giving no clear indication of the decolonial nature of this terrain. Among the changes that have taken place in the IOE was a shift into a department with sociology and philosophy of education (EFPS) in 2002, which deepened engagement with a critical scholarship on race, gender, intersectionality and inequality. However, it remains unclear how much these shifts deepened or dissipated concerns with decolonisation (Unterhalter and Kadiwal, 2022). The article is critical, while also showing fairness and reserving the kind of judgement that may be too harsh, given the long-term nature of the decolonial project and the early beginnings of the project that are the main substance of the article. In another article, Moghli and Kadiwal (2021) argue that while intellectual proposals of decolonisation are garnering more interest and support, the enactment of decolonisation is sporadic and remains in its early stages.

Finally, three strands of decolonial work are identified in the article, each one located somewhere along the spectrum of moderate or radical decolonial thought and praxis. The authors argue that since the formation of the Centre for Education and International Development (CEID), all three strands have been expanded upon. Their discussion of how this has taken place – through the Decolonial Study Collective, and Discussion Cafes – suggests that a concerted effort is being made to overcome coloniality, especially in teaching and learning on master's programmes. One of the final questions posed in the article is, 'How are we ourselves as academics, implicated and complicit in the problems we want to address?' (Unterhalter and Kadiwal, 2022: 11). This raises normative issues underpinning arguments for disruptive approaches to decoloniality, which include the selection of ethical means over ends, helping to mobilise the formerly colonising and colonised.

In conclusion, this article interrogates critical issues in relation to decoloniality at the IOE. It does so with an autoethnographic approach which brings to bear the difficulty of acknowledging the task at hand when undertaking the decolonial project from within an elite institution, even if the authors themselves come from more complex backgrounds and positionalities. Both for those who are and for those who are not well-versed in the debates raised in the article, this is a stimulating starting point for future research into otherwise hidden histories. These histories can be elucidated by spotlighting the links between metonyms and knowing and/or remembering and not knowing and/or remembering, which the article does, as well as, as I have argued, further centring the affective as an essential means of further knowing and/or remembering.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

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