Interviewer – *Italics*

Interviewee – Normal

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Hello, everyone. Welcome to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast. I'm Fatima Maatwk and I will be your host today. I am very happy today to be hosting our host! So, I'm very happy to welcome Kyra [Araneta] who is currently doing her MA in International Relations at the University of Westminster and is also doing amazing work on the Pedagogies for Social Justice project as a research assistant. Welcome, Kyra, and thank you.

Thank you, Fatima, thank you for having me.

So, you have all heard Kyra on different episodes of this podcast, but today, I thought to put her a little bit under the spotlight, and I wanted to ask you maybe at the beginning to give us a little bit more insight about your educational journey, so from Social Sciences in your BA and the shift to International Relations in your MA – tell us more…

Yeah, of course. So, my journey in Sociology really started when I took it as a GCSE, when I was about 15, 16. I always knew that I'd pick it up as an optional course, and, literally, from my first week of classes, like I felt like it was something that I could study for like a really long time, which I think is quite rare at that age as well, like I looked forward to every class, I always had my hand up, like always asked questions, and gave my opinion, so taking it up as an A Level was definitely kind of like a no-brainer for me. I was introduced to topics like crime and deviance, religion, media, and I think, going into that depth as well, as well as having like really amazing teachers, like I felt like it was almost like a calling for me, or at least the Social Sciences were for me anyways. It's funny I say that now because like, during my UCAS application, like I was kind of in two minds about studying Sociology on its own because I also liked English Literature, and I knew that having like a degree in English would be like good on paper. But all of my applications were to like universities in the Midlands and Essex and like the majority of them were Sociology with English, and then, literally, I'd say like maybe a couple of months into submitting my application, I guess I had like an epiphany or something and I just wanted to do Sociology on its own and I knew that I wanted to study in London as well. So, I kind of went back to the drawing board and I looked at every Sociology course in London, and Westminster was the only university that had modules that I hadn't seen before, and they were like so different and contemporary and they just really excited me, and I think that's so important for you to feel that about a course before you pick it up, and I was like pretty much sold from then. I literally declined all of my offers, including Birmingham, and I just went through UCAS Extra, where you get to make one extra choice but you have to stick to that, so like there's no going back pretty much. Mind you, I didn't tell anybody about this until like my exams were over because I knew they'd probably try and talk me out of it, but, yeah, like I just knew Westminster was for me.

My undergraduate years were like the best, like I just loved every single module, and like of course the core modules as well, on top of my options, and like I remember studying like understanding race with [?] in year one, and like the class was just everything that I kind of expected and like what I wanted kind of out of university, and like I actually looked forward to like writing my assignments and getting feedback. And I remember like I used to tell my friends that and they used to just think I was like mad [laughing]. But, yeah, I thoroughly enjoyed studying Sociology here, and like, I say this all the time, but I think making that kind of like rash decision to just kind of like change was one of like the best things I ever did.

But, yeah, like fast-forwarding now, like in my Master's, still in the Social Sciences of course, but I think my choice to study International Relations came from having like a relatively like newfound interest, I would say, in like the wider political system and how that comes to be…how that comes to kind of like shape societies and the individual. I did my dissertation on Donald Trump's tweets about

Covid-19, and it was then that I really got a feel for studying and writing about kind of like global challenges and relationships between different states, political leaders, etc. So, yeah…and I will say actually, I took up a module called the Politics of Killing with Daniel Conway, where, again, like I was taught to think about kind of like the socio-political conditions of certain events in history, and obviously looking at kind of like domestic and international relations too. So, I wouldn't say the shift to IR has been like a really dramatic one, but I really see it as kind of like looking through socio-political classes, like I take everything I've learnt from Sociology to look at the content that I'm looking at now, and it definitely aids me in my analysis, which, you know, I'll always be grateful for. But, yeah, I'm really enjoying IR so far, and I look forward to learning more every day!

That's really amazing, and I do agree, I think it's very rare to know exactly what you want to do at 15, 16.

Mm, yeah.

I think, for me, it wasn't until maybe 10 years later that I started to understand what I might want to do, by which I had already done my studies, so…so it's really nice. So, in this educational journey, think of when you were at school or university, did you ever find yourself having to navigate your racial identity or was that something you were always very sure of?

Mm…I really like this question. Em…I think being like a mixed woman of African/Asian descent, in Britain as well, like I was bound to kind of have like issues with my identity, my racial identity anyways, especially when I don't look like African or Asian - like to this day, like I still get guesses that I'm kind of like mixed with Caribbean and white-British. So, I'd say I've definitely had to navigate my racial identity and teach myself to kind of be comfortable and happy with it. Like I can honestly say, like during my kind of entire childhood, and like most of my teenage years, like I was in this kind of like constant battle with myself because I felt as though…like I wasn't black enough or Asian enough or… like certain spaces or particular groups. And I know this is something that almost every mixed child kind of goes though and I think…feeling like I had to navigate my racial identity, on top of everything you already kind of have to navigate as a teen, and as like…as a young woman, like it can be like quite a lot. My parents were both quite young when they had me and were kind of like proper Londoners, I guess you could say. So, I'd say like my understanding of my cultures really came from my grandparents on both sides, so I'll always be grateful to them for that. But yeah, I think, coming into my young adulthood, did I really begin to kind of just get comfortable with being different and sometimes sticking out like a sore thumb in certain spaces, like especially on my Filipino side because I'm racialised as black first, and I think this is another thing that drew me to Sociology because I could identify with concepts like hybrid identities and dual identities, and I began to kind of see myself in the theory, which I really took kind of like comfort in.

But I'd say the one…the biggest lesson I've had to kind of unlearn was that…like I have to be one thing or the other – like it's just so far from true, and like…it's honestly like really damaging for children and young people, and I think we, as a society, just need to get rid of this obsession with trying to kind of put people in boxes so that we can identify or understand them. I've talked about this on the podcast before, but I remember always having to like tick the "Other" box, out of all of like the race and ethnicity categories, and like I just used to find it so jarring to have to like fill in, and like also a little bit disheartening too, and like I think, you know, human beings, like we're complex and we're… like we're going to have multiple identities, and I think it's important that we, as a society, make space for all of those identities, not try to kind of like diminish them or like box them in, but yeah…

That's really, really interesting, and I can relate very much because I'm myself also mixed, and I also always have to choose the "Mixed Other" box in these surveys.

Yeah.

Yeah, and…yeah, it's a challenge or a journey, I understand very much…

Yeah, absolutely.

So, at school or at university, did you generally feel represented in your curricula, especially considering the mixed backgrounds that you bring to the space?

Yeah. Em…I wouldn't say I felt like represented so much in kind of like the actual content of my curriculum, but I will say like I was lucky enough to have like really positive experiences with, em, my teachers, who were like all pretty much people of colour, during my time in secondary school anyways. Like I went to like a predominantly black, Afro-Caribbean high school in like Greater London, and almost all of my teachers were people of colour, so, in that sense, I would say I felt represented in school, and this kind of remained pretty much the same until I actually got to university, where things completely kind of like changed for me. Near enough like all of my lecturers were white and I think…I did find it kind of difficult to navigate at first because like I was so used to having conversations with teachers who were like black and Asian, em, or had like a similar upbringing to me, so like from working class homes – like to be in a university where I was now talking to like white, male professors about race, class and gender, like it took a while for me to kind of like find my feet and be able to kind of like translate my opinion in ways that could be understood by them – like the code switching was like real [laughing]. But, honestly, like I was lucky enough to have lecturers who just kind of like got it, like…they were never like dismissive of my input, and I did eventually feel like really comfortable about talking about those…like those concepts and topics again.

That's actually really interesting, especially because, as you were mentioning, in your studies, there is a lot about race and class and gender, so…so the shift is really interesting. How did you feel, if I may ask? How did it feel to make this realisation-?

Yeah! Like…I feel like, in the first couple of weeks, like you kind of just feel almost like a child again, and I think, when you're going to university, you kind of feel like, yeah, I'm an adult now, like I feel like liberated, but, I think, for the first couple of weeks, I kind of felt like…yeah, like I was finding my feet again, like I felt very much like a kind of small fish in a big pond, and I think… You get used to kind of being able to have these conversations freely with people who you kind of feel like you have already that connection and that trust because you come from similar kind of backgrounds and upbringings, and then, to be put in a position where…not many people really can relate to kind of where you're coming from, it definitely changes the way the kind of like respond and kind of the way that you…like translate like what you're thinking. So, it was definitely something I had to kind of like…yeah, like, again, like navigate and kind of just teach myself to…be comfortable in.

Mm, yeah. Thank you for sharing this. So, today I would like to talk to you a bit more about decolonising the curriculum and disciplines, and also about the project, so I just have some questions on these two things. So, if we talk a little bit about decolonising the curriculum first, to you, how are decolonisation and anti-racism relevant to Sociology and International Relations?

Yeah. Em…I mean, I think, for me, especially doing the kind of work that I do now, like I think decolonisation and anti-racism is relevant to every discipline, but I'll say, for the Social Sciences, particularly International Relations, I mean, colonialism was a system that was…really…that really orchestrated like Western imperialism and dominance over the rest of the world, on like a cultural, economic, political level, and this kind of same hierarchy characterises International Relations today. So, to not consider questions of coloniality and race in any analysis of these relations between kind of states is to really miss like a significant chunk of understanding, and an understanding of how many like sovereign states and colonies came to be. And, actually, an example that we were kind of

discussing in class, a couple of weeks back, was Liberia and how it came to be a country because it was meant to kind of deal with the perceived problem of the growing number of free-blacks in the United States by re-settling them in Africa. So, if you look at kind of the histories of the relationships between certain countries and…just the histories of countries in general, of how they came to be, like you see those colonial kind of roots, and I think it's just so important to our analysis today.

Mm, yes, absolutely. And are there things in the curricula that you've noticed that you feel have colonial undertones or are even explicitly colonial?

Mm, em…I would say…I'm still early into my Master's, but I'm definitely aware that, like most disciplines, like it's still very Eurocentric and reflects kind of like Western thinking. So, like, in other words, like it portrays kind of like Western enlightenment as kind of superior and progressive and universally applicable, and, you know, even looking at IR founding theories, like liberalism and realism, like a vast majority of those scholars come from the West, which has a significant kind of like distorting effect on how we understand global politics, from the issues considered important, the actors that we give attention to, and like the categories of like self and other. So, I think, in terms of the literature and the political issues that are placed at the forefront of our curricula, like the curriculum itself like absolutely has some colonial undertones, in the sense that it kind of reproduces what is already dominant in the discipline and doesn't really dedicate enough space to critiquing them either.

Mm, yes, absolutely, and, actually, this is I think one of the hardest questions we ask when it comes to this work, the fact that the whole basis of the curriculum is, as you mentioned, Eurocentric and reinforces what's the mainstream and the dominant.

Yeah.

These are really excellent points. So, another very difficult question! What do you think lecturers can or need to do to decolonise the curricula?

Yeah. Em, I was thinking about this the other day, like in class actually, and I think we should be engaging with critical theory much more earlier on in our modules – like I think critical theories like postcolonialism, feminism, Marxism, like they shouldn't be left to like Weeks 8 to 12, like especially when we usually have at least one assignment due before those weeks as well. I'd like to see those critiques embedded throughout our learning, of like the founding theories, because like I'm just really not interested in learning about what Hobbs said in like the 17th Century for like an entire lesson. I think we dedicate too much time to learning about kind of like old white men of the Enlightenment when…like I would much rather focus on contemporary analysis of International Relations that can actually aid my understanding of like global politics today, if that makes sense.

And I think…it would definitely be great to see lecturers kind of engage with decolonial tools and resources in the classroom too, or at least make space for those kinds of conversations in the class. I say that not only because like I'm a part of the decolonisation project but also because like I think it would encourage more students to think like critically and outside of kind of the paradigms we've been conditioned to work in. Like university should be a space that encourages you to kind of question everything, so it would be great for lecturers to be kind of equipped with the tools that can help us do that.

Mm, yes, absolutely. I love these examples of what lecturers can do because they're very practical.

Mm, yeah.

You have some really good actions that can be taken, and yet they would have a big reflection on the curriculum.

Exactly, yeah.

So, amazing… And now, I mean, I feel like you're in a very special position to answer this question because you are doing a lot of work on decolonisation and on social justice pedagogies. You're also a student and doing this for an extended in-depth time, so to say. So, in your opinion, what do you think students need to navigate through these colonial nuances of their curricula?

Yeah, this is a good question. I guess it kind links back to my last answer as well, where I think we need the tools and the resources to do this kind of work and thinking. We also need to feel encouraged and to feel like these are questions that we're allowed to ask ourselves and ask our lecturers. So, I guess, in short, like we need those physical resources, but, more importantly, we need those like spaces, those safe spaces should I say, in which these resources can be utilised and kind of discussed because I think…I think, a lot of student, like we're all for kind of like making the first step, but I think we want to be able to make that first step and not feel like it's going to put our…our careers, our academic careers, in jeopardy, like we want to feel like we can ask these questions to our lecturers and raise these kind of issues. So, I think it's about kind of lecturers also kind of meeting us in the middle and allowing us to do that freely.

I find it really interesting that you say it is very important that lecturers encourage students. How…? I'm also a lecturer, and it would be helpful for me to know how can I do that…?

Yeah. I think, for me, just from…like speaking for myself personally, I think me being able to kind of lead in certain aspects, like from the project as well, like I think me being able to have that kind of responsibility to take charge and kind of like…show leadership, that in itself has kind of like allowed me to kind of have enough confidence to ask questions and kind of like… If I have like, em, an opinion, like I'm happy to kind of raise that with you and Jennifer – like I think it's just like even the little kind of like relational aspects, where, you know, students can be made to feel like, you know what, this is a space where you can question what I'm doing and like…and I will kind of give you a response that is constructive and not…you know…? So, I think it's just kind of like…I think, really, it just comes down – I guess we'll talk about this soon, but it just comes down to kind of like the personal relationships that you have with your students, and I think that, just that alone, having that kind of relationship alone, it really goes a long way.

Thank you. That's very good to hear and I think a very good point for our audience as well. So, now, moving a bit to the Pedagogies for Social Justice project, which I could spend hours talking about all the amazing work you do…

Yeah…

So, still, I would like you to tell us a bit more about your work on the project…

Yeah, of course. So, my work really started at the reading lists, and this was kind of like the summer of 2020, and this was when we called the project like the Decolonising the Curriculum Toolkit, and I was pretty much responsible for like taking them out of their Word documents and putting them into lists on Tallis, and then I had the opportunity to also make some of my own reading lists on like anti-

racist pedagogy, decolonising research methods, and I'm currently working on some more about kind of like allyship and solidarity. But my work really started, I'd say, from those reading lists.

And then like we were having kind of questions and ideas about how we could expand the project, so we formed like a steering group of about like 10 lecturers, students, academic liaison, librarians, and like external academics as well, and like I was responsible for obviously planning kind of the monthly meetings, and taking leads in those meetings as well, which is what I was talking about earlier, and how we would kind of like execute the project and generally just keep it grounded to our shared vision, so like a commitment to centring the voices of under-represented groups, developing new and critical ways of understanding disciplines, and obviously keeping it at the heart of the Student-Staff Partnership as well.

Obviously, a tool that came out of that was this podcast, and I think that really also came out of just realising that the conversations that we were having in the steering group would really benefit people on the outside, and maybe even encourage others to have like these kind of conversations themselves. Yeah, with the podcast, we really just wanted to kind of create a space to host meaningful conversations about decolonisation, anti-racism, and how we can kind of transform learning and teaching. So, you know, as our listeners will already know, we've got guests from across the disciplines and, you know, from, literally, across the world, and they've given such good and valuable insight into how we can do this work. So, yeah, that was one of the things that came out of that.

And we also have the glossary now, which is our newest tool and still in production, but I think, by the time this episode is released, it will be up and running. But, yeah, we really wanted to create a tool that provided context and guidance for using terms associated with race and coloniality. I think this tool is really special because it's completely like student-led. So, I was managing two students over the summer, who are kind of like our main writers, and it really…it's really just starting to come together. We've had our first few like peer review sessions, which allowed us to kind of like bounce off each other's ideas and feedback, so work has really been productive so far.

But I will say about the glossary, kind of like the rest of our tools I guess, like it's a living resource, and like we have that understanding that, you know, just as languages, meanings, and thinking around certain concepts evolve, like so will the glossary. So, it will definitely need that kind of like updating over time, and, you know, I'm committed to helping do that.

But those are kind of like the main tools that I'm responsible for…

Yes. I think I can say with certainty that those listening to us are all waiting for this new tool as well, and I'm sure it will be excellent. So, Kyra, I know that the Pedagogies for Social Justice project is a partnership project, so I wanted to hear, why do you think it's important to do this kind of work in partnership between staff and students?

Mm. Em, I will say, like the Student-Staff Partnership and kind of like the Students as Co-Creators Programme was honestly new to me when I first joined, like during the pandemic, like I definitely didn't have an understanding of it like I would say I have now. But I think, working alongside Jennifer and you, like I've learnt so much, like the importance of kind of like collaborating with under-represented students and faculty and how we can do this in ways that aren't just kind of like tokenistic and about kind of like using their knowledge and their labour, and I think partnership is kind of pivotal to any like kind of social justice work in higher education – like you can't effectively help under-represented groups without working alongside them or giving them opportunities to lead, and I think… Well, I like to think of our tools as kind of like a good representation of how decolonial work can be done through partnership.

Thank you. And so, you've told us about your own journey through higher education and now we know all about your work as well. So, how has this project shaped your views on decolonisation in higher education but also your own personal journey through the UK higher education system?

Yeah, this is a good question. Em…I think, on a pedagogical level, like where this work is really focused, like teaching in most of the disciplines still centres kind of like white, Western knowledge, and like I've come from a Social Sciences background, and, even though I've been lucky enough to kind of study modules that allowed me to kind of study like diverse knowledge and be introduced to like postcolonial theorists and scholars from the Global South, like I still see that there's so many students who can't say the same, and like I think that that like deeply saddens me. Like I think, especially like a student in 2021, and especially at like the most diverse university in the UK, like should not be looking at a module reading list or their course content, or even like their board of academic staff, and feel like they aren't being represented. And I think…what this project has taught me is that there are nuances in this kind of work as well, like decolonisation looks and feels one way in English Literature, and one way in Business and Law, and, you know, there is no single way to do this work. And, even though that potentially makes it more difficult to do, I feel like that's where like student-staff partnership really comes in and plays like a really pivotal role, and I'd say this project has definitely helped me to kind of understand like the multifaceted nature of decolonisation, but also has taught me kind of…to have patience for this kind of work as well, and that it really is in the relationships that we have with others.

Yes. So, which parts of the project are particularly interesting and inspiring to you?

Well, without sounding too biased, honestly, like this podcast – like I think like the people that I get to meet and the conversations that I get to have with them are like unmatched, and like I always feel so inspired in what I do and like I always want to take my work as far as possible like after having a conversation on the podcast. I'll say like the most interesting thing I get to do is probably host – like I mean like how many people get to say that they host a podcast? Not many [laughing], so I'm definitely grateful!

Absolutely, and, I agree, the episodes are amazing – they're always an inspiration and I always find myself smiling to the extent that my face starts to hurt.

Yeah!

I do agree. So, if you think of this project, this work you are doing, and you are really very uniquely contributing to the project, what is something that you dream of, whether for yourself or the project?

Em…I think I really, really love the idea of creating like an international network with universities and like working in partnership with them. Like, from the podcast, like I've met so many like unique people who do this kind of work in their own universities, and like whether they're in the UK or, you know, in Canada or, you know, other parts of the world, like it would be great to see something…like on an international level kind of like develop. I don't want to give too much away about like the plans that we have [laughing], but I do really love the idea of just, yeah, an international network of like decolonial scholars, lecturers, students, and like community organisers. That's the dream for me.

Yeah. I would love to see that dream come true, especially because, the more I talk to people, the more I feel like decolonisation is so different in different spaces and locations…

Yeah, exactly.

So, I think it would be a space of great learning.

Yeah, no, literally. I feel like there's so much…like I feel like, even though I would say – I wouldn't say I'm established in the work that I do now, but I do have like a good understanding of kind of like decolonial work in higher education. But even then, I still feel like there's so much more out there for me to learn, and I think who better to learn from than people who have already been doing this work, like, you know…

Absolutely. So, we like to always end – which is something you obviously know, but still – we like to end the podcast with a question, with the same question actually, to all our guests. So, I would like to ask you, what is something you would like to see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

Do you know what, to be on the receiving end of this question, like it feels so nerve-wracking, like I really under-estimated it [laughing]! But I actually have quite a few. I feel like it's just too difficult to pick one. I think the main one, for me, is I want to see more like black female professors, but I think, at the same time, like…I don't want them to be put under kind of like the immense pressure that they usually are put in because they're expected to do like all the EDI work, all the decolonial work, and like other social justice work. Like I want to see more black women in HE, but I want them to be cared for and treated with respect, you know?

And I think, as a student, like…that will soon be in about 40, 50 grand debt, like I'd love it if my sister and like other students after me wouldn't have to go through the same! So, I think, yeah, like my undergrad was such a positive experience for me, and I think…I'd hate to think of how many young people like missed that opportunity and those experiences because they want to kind of avoid like the financial cost of university, you know – it's really sad.

And I guess, like on that, on a similar note, like I think it would be great to see more well-paid opportunities for students at the university while they study. Like this job has helped me a lot, like finding new opportunities to work and like gain experience in other fields, so I think more funding should be dedicated to kind of creating more student jobs in the university, for sure, because, at the end of the day, it all contributes to kind of like your academic career.

And I think, lastly, I would say I think just better like mental health services or like maybe more funding and bodies in the ones that we have like currently, I think would go like a long, long way, like especially just in the times that we're living in now, like I think caring for your mental health has never been like more important, and I think, if the university can provide like support and resources to do that, like it should do that in effective and really thorough ways. So, I would love to see more of that too.

These are some really excellent things that I think we all would like to see develop.

Yeah.

Yeah.

So, I will personally keep my fingers crossed [laughing]!

Yes, please do [laughing]!

Kyra, thank you so much for being our guest today and thank you so much for all the wonderful work you constantly do. I hope everyone will have fun listening to this episode.

No, thank you so much for having me, honestly – it's been a pleasure. And I can't wait till you're on the receiving end and I get to interview you [laughing]!

Thank you!

[End of Recording]