Journal of Impact Cultures

Surviving and thriving the Covid-19 Crisis: How University Teachers and Students supported one another through Feminist Co-Mentoring and Dialogue

Author
Anna Caffrey, Dr. Julie Botticello, Theeba Krishnamoorthy, M.D., Titilayo West, Simone Gordon

Corresponding Author:
Anna Caffrey, School of Health, Sports and Biosciences, University of East London

Keywords
Co-mentoring, feminism, dialogic, student-teacher/teacher-student identities

Abstract
The junction of the various crises and opportunities precipitated by COVID-19 pandemic is where this paper is situated. In responding to the call to action in *Pedagogies of the Pandemos*, we, as teachers and students within Higher Education, recognise the need to co-create spaces for dialogue, collaboration and change. In our article, five women of different ages, racialisations, ethnicities and cultures, who hold different positions within a UK Public Health academic department, reflect on these inequalities in their lives and in relation to higher education. Over the course of academic year 2020-21, our group – two undergraduate students, one PhD candidate and two senior lecturers – met online to talk, listen to, support and mentor one another for the different work we do. We have then each reflected as a result of our dialogues, thinking specifically about our experiences of learning and teaching since the pandemic took hold in the UK in March 2020. Our process has been simple as a practical exercise, yet it has revealed both hidden challenges and hidden opportunities afforded by the pandemic for understanding inequality in UK Higher Education. In this paper, we present and contextualise our experiences through the lens of feminist co-mentoring and dialogue.

Introduction

The crisis of COVID-19 in the UK has precipitated and made plain other crises. These include the crisis of health inequality affecting ethnic minority groups (Lassale *et al.* 2020; Marmot 2020; Razai *et al.* 2021; Pareek 2020); the crisis of Black Lives Mattering (Harris *et al.* 2021; Sharma 2020); the crisis of gendered labour (Zamberlan 2021; Zhou *et al.* 2020); and the crises of digital and educational inequalities (Blundell *et al.* 2020; Sharma 2020; Watts 2020). While COVID-19 has increased online connections (Kassoumeh 2020), the visibility and

audibility of teaching or studying from home brought unforeseen challenges around identity, expectation and the notion of safe spaces.

The junction of these various crises and opportunities precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic is where this paper is situated. In responding to the call to action in *Pedagogies of the Pandemos*, we, as teachers and students within Higher Education, recognise the need to co-create spaces for dialogue, collaboration and change. In our article, five women of different ages, racialisations, ethnicities and cultures, who hold different positions within a UK Public Health academic department, reflect on these inequalities in their lives and in relation to higher education. Over the course of academic year 2020-21, our group – two undergraduate students, one PhD candidate and two senior lecturers – met online to talk, listen to, support and mentor one another for the different work we do. We have then each reflected as a result of our dialogues, thinking specifically about our experiences of learning and teaching since the pandemic took hold in the UK in March 2020. Our process has been simple as a practical exercise, yet it has revealed both hidden challenges and hidden opportunities afforded by the pandemic for understanding inequality in UK Higher Education. In this paper, we present and contextualise our experiences through the lens of feminist co-mentoring and dialogue.

Context

Freire (1970) offers that dialogue in the classroom creates a situation in which both teachers and students learn from one another and grow, as teacher-students and student-teachers. This formulation recognises that education is not just a one-way flow of information from a broadcaster to a receiver but runs in both directions. However, power imbalances remain despite the flattening language of teacher-student (i.e: 'lecturer'), student-teacher (i.e.: 'student'), due to intersectional differences between and among the teacher-students and student-teachers (Botticello & Caffrey 2021). hooks, a Black female scholar, has written much about the excluding whiteness of academic institutions and the academic staff upholding these structures (hooks 1989; hooks & West 1991; hooks 1994). Her goal is for everyone to claim 'knowledge as a field in which we all labour' (hooks 1994, p. 14), thus making space for the views and knowledge from people outside the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy to matter and be heard (see also Spivak 1993). We take inspiration from hooks' radical transformation model, which aims to unmask the power imbalances between teachers and students and create the potential for transformational encounters. As hooks states (1994, p. 21):

> Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow and are empowered by the process.

hooks affirms the necessity of equality in the transformational experiences for both lecturers and students. Applying feminist pedagogy inside (and outside) the classroom means facilitating and promoting a positive learning experience for the intersectional relationship between teacher-students and the student-teachers (Collins & Bilge 2020). We have previously articulated the value of this approach (Botticello & Caffrey 2021, p. 21), saying:

> Creating a dialogic classroom means valuing each student's uniqueness of perspective and experience […] to create opportunities for dialogue and connection, and to reinforce a shared sense of purpose and excitement.

Infusing feminist values into the methods and process of teaching has resulted in the creation of 'teaching-and-learning experiences that do not reproduce the status quo' (Forrest & Rosenberg 1997, p. 183). One way to overcome this reproduction is for teachers and students to share their vulnerabilities across power differentials (Lee 2017). Previously, Lorde (2007, p. 122) recommended all women see one another as equals and to 'devise ways to use each other's differences to enrich our visions and our joint struggles.' Promoting a 'lifting while we climb' (Terrell 1898) philosophy, Yeste *et al.* (2011) urge that people of different levels of privilege and power dialogue and reflect together. Yeste *et al.* (2011, p. 284) argue that women, especially those in the most vulnerable of situations, have been excluded from 'research […] that analyzes the situation of inequality faced by women'. They suggest that by enabling the voices of women of different privileges (e.g.: ethnicity, age, profession) to enter into academic dialogue and discussion with one another, this inequality can be overcome, and women's lives improved. San Pedro and Kinloch (2017) outline how this may occur in the sharing of stories, as this enables those holding different power positions to connect through vulnerabilities concerning identity, subjectivity, and lived experiences. This sharing can motivate collaborators to 'co-create humanizing, inclusive learning spaces with others inside and outside' formal learning spaces (2017, p. 390S). Collins and Bilge (2020, pp. 31-34) build on this point, noting that power relations are one of several aspects embedded into an intersectional approach, which aims to understand and explain 'complexity in the world, in people and in human experiences' (2020, p. 2). Collins and Bilge (2020, p. 31-34) add social inequality, social context, social justice and relationality as further factors required to understand and act for the betterment of all amid the aforementioned complexity. Further, they suggest that these constituent parts can be used to help analyse and unpack contemporary situations and are means to engage in praxis toward taking action for change. The message from these authors is the need to engage in dialogue about ourselves and our different levels of privilege to effect transformation in one another and in society. This is the approach we take in this article, that through being vulnerable and sharing our stories, we create dialogic spaces where all involved engage in interpersonal realisations and personal transformations.

We hold the perspective that as feminist practitioners, both teacher-students and student-teachers have much to learn from one another, by being vulnerable and honest within our

differences. This can be understood as a process of feminist co-mentoring. Traditional mentoring relationships are hierarchical, limited in availability, and typically feature a one-way flow of information from mentor to *protégé* (McGuire and Reger, 2003, p. 57). Because of the inherent imbalance of power, traditional mentoring is open to exploitation and abuse of students, especially minoritised students. Conversely, McGuire and Reger (2003, p. 54-5) offer a new vision of feminist co-mentoring:

> Our conception of co-mentoring is rooted in a feminist tradition that fosters an equal balance of power between participants, seeks to integrate emotion into the academic professional experience, and values paid and unpaid work. […] Co-mentoring replaces the hierarchical model in traditional mentoring with one that focuses on mutual empowerment and learning. […] Each person in a co-mentoring relationship has the opportunity to occupy the role of teacher and learner.

By emphasising the strength of alternative modes of relationality between teachers and students, we call for more critical and anti-racist pedagogies, increased equality between students and teachers, and further resistance against neoliberal models of education that promote career orientated learning (Hastings 2019; Sharma 2020) over the development of critically reflective thinkers and multiple skills to better themselves and society. In these relationships, we embrace the whole person (both students' and teachers' lives and needs), helping us to flatten patriarchal hierarchies of power inside and outside the classroom that impede the learning journey. McGuire and Reger argue that feminist co-mentoring is especially powerful for 'underrepresented groups, such as white women, people of colour, older academics, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people' (2003, p. 54) compared to dominant groups who benefit most from traditional, more hierarchical mentoring relationships. For us, this process has created safer, more democratic spaces for discussing unsafe and vulnerable-making topics and feelings through dialogue, where everyone is responsible to contribute (hooks 1994). This is especially significant, as feminist co-mentoring values the responsibilities that academics and students, particularly women, have outside of the university by helping them to integrate their emotional, physical, and intellectual lives. Work and home are not separate, but are interconnected spheres of social life, which COVID-19 lockdown has made transparent (Zamberlan 2021; Zhou *et al.* 2020).

Methods

To develop this article, we engaged in an iterative process of dialogue and storytelling during multiple online and in-person meetings. We are especially interested in raising the voices of historically minoritised students (Botticello 2020; Botticello & West 2021) and highlighting how they survived and thrived in higher education during the pandemic. Drawing from critical race theory, we assert that the storytelling by students of colour is legitimate knowledge production and a challenge to white supremacist, dominant narrative, methodologies (Solórzano & Yosso 2002). Much educational theory and methodology has

been developed by white male, academics (e.g.: Alexander 2008; Biggs 1996, 2003, 2014; Brookfield 1995, 1998, 2015; Kolb, 1984; Lewin 1951; Vygotsky 1978), with an implicit assumption that their work was 'objective, meritocratic, colorblind, race neutral, and [enabled] equal opportunity' (Solórzano & Yosso 2002, p. 26). Critical Race Theory suggests otherwise, by re-positioning the otherness of those who fall outside the white supremacist purview from the margins to the centre. Not all Critical Race advocates accept white supremacy (e.g., Cole 2011) and argue instead for class-based inequalities. While we accept that class is a factor in oppression, we maintain that global white supremacy is a damaging political system in higher education and society. As Black women in the academy, Rollock (2011) and Lewis (2020) each reflect on the invisibility this marginal approach has placed on them. Rollock (2011, p. 67) notes that Critical Race Theory has enabled her to 'speak back' about racial inequalities in ways not possible using other theoretical tools. Lewis (2020) recognizes that Critical Race Theory has helped her unpack essentialising myths about race, and taken together with intersectionality, enabled her to better understand how race and gender are enmeshed oppressions.

Following Rollock (2011) and Lewis (2020), we draw further inspiration from practical models within Higher Education. One is offered by Gines *et al.* (2018), a Black woman philosopher in the USA, who, together with a group of students, produced a collaborative reflective account on the 'transformative impact of Black women's teaching pedagogies' (Gines *et al.* 2018, p. 144). Gines had previously argued that we live 'multiplicitous, intersectional, interconnected, and interdependent existences', and understanding these intersections are important for theorising both identity and oppression with academia (2011, p. 275). Her 2018 work takes these ideas into practical action, with Gines and five of her students, of differing genders and ethnicities, reflecting individually on the transformative value of her class in the context of their identities. Taking inspiration from the collection in which Gines e*t al.* (2018) chapter appears: *Black Women's Liberatory Pedagogies* (2018), Sobande and Wells (2021) offer a second model. They follow a similar dialogic process to Gines *et al.* (2018), but this time as a longitudinal exchange about UK higher education. In this later work, four Black women postgraduate students collaboratively undertake co-reflexive and identity work on the process of becoming Black academics. Throughout their PhDs, these four women shared poetry and other writings with one another. They marked these as 'intellectual production[s]' (Sharpe 2016, p. xvi) of their life practices, whose creative configuration lay outside the expected grammars of their theses. They positioned this methodology as a way 'to engage in the iterative and improvisational dance of co-constructing our shared knowledge of institutional embeddedness' (Sobande and Wells 2021, p. 5). This assisted them in exposing and navigating the whiteness of the institutions they were situated within.

Our exchanges took place in the virtual realm of online meetings, mirroring our teaching and learning experiences in the pandemic year. Then, like Sobande and Wells (2021), we

individually drafted first person narratives and shared them among ourselves, with the texts becoming prompts for our subsequent online discussions. Through these discussions, we agreed on broad themes and suggested which were the strongest threads to emphasise in our individual accounts. We organised this article so that each student-teacher speaks individually and first on various themes including the challenges and triumphs of their pandemic learning and teaching experiences, feminist co-mentoring, the power of storytelling, and overcoming low expectations by society. Then the two teacher-students follow, sharing and reflecting on collective themes arising.

Inspired by our reflections, Theeba captured our approach to feminist co-mentoring in Figure 1, which illustrates our multidimensional and multidirectional relationships. The relationships include Anna supporting Theeba in her Fellow of the Higher Education Academy application and Theeba and Julie supporting Anna with her Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy application; Julie, Simone and Titilayo working together to deliver an online summer school; and Anna supporting Julie with her PGCert in HE, whilst also collaborating on multiple projects – with all of us engaging in dialogue to discuss and reflect on these co-mentoring relationships.

Our Stories

Below, Theeba, Simone and Titilayo as student-teachers draw our attention to key challenges of the pandemic experience that we would have missed as educators had we not approached our relationship from feminist co-mentoring and dialogical perspectives. Then, Anna and Julie as teacher-students reflect on their pandemic experience and on the key themes raised across the student narratives.

<u>Theeba, PhD student-teacher</u>

Thich Nhat Hanh's philosophy of teaching emphasizes that: 'the practice of a healer, therapist, teacher or any helping professional should be directed toward him or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people' (cited in hooks 1994, p. 15). Over the past two years as a student and lecturer in Anna's class, I was inspired to transgress boundaries and bring my whole self to the classroom and respond to each student's individuality (hooks 1994). It was Anna's reproductive justice lectures that revealed to me the traumatic colonial legacy of my medical and academic profession, and its historical conflict with my community (Oparah and Bonaparte 2016; Sivanandan 2008). In my awareness of this internal turmoil, I was finally able to begin healing the rift between myself and my community and unlearn the internalized racism I harboured towards my own cultural identity. Learning from each other's lived experiences in class and from Black and/or female scholars revealed to me the multiple realities that existed in the world, widening my horizons and returning me to my community. I have since strengthened my teaching approach by drawing examples from

my personal lived experiences as a London-born, Sri Lankan Tamil woman, creating teaching materials influenced by scholars of diverse backgrounds, using a sociological imagination (Mills 1959) to connect the colonial history to present day diaspora communities in the UK, whilst adopting an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1989) to my lectures and using storytelling.

University classrooms were fundamentally changed by the global COVID-19 pandemic, as classroom learning moved to online platforms. I was relieved to find that narrative power continued to triumph in these online spaces. In line with hooks, collectively we found that by telling and sharing stories we were able to start building an online community, particularly around topics on gender and sexuality that have often remained shrouded in silence and shame (hooks 2010). In the absence of a physical classroom, we supported one another through posting messages and emojis. The year before COVID-19, classroom discussions revealed multiple real-life experiences on gender and sexuality from across the world, expanding our imagination. Upon hearing everyone's different experiences students expressed surprise at how despite differences in gender, faith, culture, geography etc., we were all united in having received poor sexuality education. As an unmarried woman in the Sri Lankan Tamil community here in London my stories too often go unheard. I felt proud to create a learning space where everyone had the opportunity for their stories to be heard and valued. However, sharing stories and the vulnerability that comes with them can be particularly difficult in online spaces, with no videos turned on, no human faces from which to read visual clues – which I found daunting at times. Making online spaces feel welcoming and safer remains a challenge as we continue with blended (online and in person) approaches to teaching post-pandemic.

When the sudden shift to online spaces first began, there was an urgency to upskill staff/students in using online platforms and address inequalities in access to technology. It was only as the global pandemic protracted, the emotional toll from the blurring boundaries between the classroom and the home space became apparent. Speaking as an educator in this instance, I found myself challenged once again by my hybrid identity, an internal conflict I thought I was beginning to resolve, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic resurfacing in my home space. In the multiple and hybrid spaces I occupy in London, I find different social characteristics take primacy in different spaces. I visualize my university as a space where my education and professional identities takes precedence. My university is in the heart of a diverse London borough that is heavily populated with my diaspora. I imagine this space to be fenced away from the outside world, where I can offer my views of gender and sexuality with privacy. However, during lockdown and the subsequent restrictive periods when universities were closed, the spaces I was limited to (i.e.: home) was where my identity as a Sri Lankan Tamil woman took precedence. To illustrate the dilemma of teaching from home, I shall reflect on a scenario. To set the scene, I had assigned a preparatory reading ('Homosexuality, religion and the contested legal framework governing sex education in

England') for students to complete, ready to discuss in class. Silence. The quietness during this class activity was uncharacteristically deafening. My first reaction was to take this as a personal failing solely on my part. This was my first time conducting a reading circle, did I come across as uncomfortable or uneasy? If so, why?

On critical reflection after the class, I realized this was the first time in this lecture series we had deviated away from the narrow approach to sexual health (i.e.: adverse biomedical outcomes) towards a broader approach (i.e.: sexuality) that is often resisted (Welling & Johnson 2013). Furthermore, I came to the recognition that such a deviation within the home space is personally complicated for two additional reasons: (1) *in the present* – I am situated within hearing range of my own family; and (2) *in the past* - the nationalist movement dictated that the home space is the sole legitimate sphere for women wherein traditional gender roles/ values take priority (Roy 2019; Jayawardena and de Alwis 2001). Subconsciously I felt my mind shackled to a pre-modern state, where progress (if any is permitted) is only acceptable beyond the home walls – an inaccessible space during lockdown restrictions. Talking this through with Anna afterwards made us both realise this potentially could be an issue for students who were studying from home, creating difficulties to speak in class for differing reasons, such as a child, partner or other family member overhearing. Acting as a critical mirror for my teaching practice, Anna in our debrief sessions would reveal to me surprising insights about teaching online, reassurance of my strengths and areas where I could develop.

During lockdown I found myself revisiting Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching philosophy (cited in hooks 1994) to critically reflect on whether I was happy as a teacher, lecturing from within the home, where I am in constant conflict with the essentialism of the 'Sri Lankan Tamil daughter'. The locus of my happiness as an educator could no longer seek refuge in the privacy of the physical classroom, as the COVID-19 pandemic thrusted me into the public arena of the home, a gendered space dictated by colonial and postcolonial legacy. As such there was and remains a demand for a transformation in my process of self-actualization during lockdown and now. The family unit is paramount in traditional Tamil society (Somasundaram and Sivayokan 2013), therefore does that mean I should consider the role of my family in the process of self-actualization? This is something I am currently exploring and will continue to do so as we move forward in delivering lessons from different spaces.

<u>Simone, UG student-teacher</u>

The global pandemic has left most students confined to working remotely, many with limited access to resources at home, but it has also made us strive to continue learning more about each other and ourselves in (perhaps) ways only a crisis would allow. My cohort is made up of mostly Black women, most of whom are parents, balancing academia and working full-time, which has massive impacts on well-being, attainment, consistency and productivity (Broos 2005). In contrast to face-to-face learning and teaching, I find working

from home refreshing, and eye opening. It has taught me to be resilient in unfamiliar territory – not every day are you faced with a global pandemic, right when you're about to take on your final year dissertation in public health. We need a new word for 'strength' to match these 'new norms'.

At times I reflect on the barriers constantly presenting themselves without invite. Being Black, being a woman, being an academic, being a single parent to a young Black male. When we get a short break from classes, I run to check that my son is getting on with his own remote learning as lockdown is equally a challenge for the younger population. I wonder about the extent to which these barriers/opportunities will present themselves in his life, as he watches me typing away or having critical dialogue and debate on structural racism (Razai *et al.* 2021) or intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991). He listens and raises his eyebrows in astonishment quite often. I am so proud that he is fortunate enough to also learn terminologies and ideologies from academia whilst he attempts to push back on me at my ideas. Home is where we equally learn and be learned.

During the summer of 2020, a few colleagues/peers and I collaborated through remote channels to deliver a Public Health Summer School over three days - inviting prospective students to meet with us, then Level 5 students, and academic leaders. Julie, Titilayo and I co-created this event as student-teachers/teacher-students to design a mini public health module for online delivery to encourage prospective students to join our Public Health course. This experience gave me insight into how often we recycle information and knowledge among each other every day, in safe, co-creative spaces. I found that online engagements have allowed the less confident participants to engage a little more, with fear of speaking in groups and having an opinion or voice slowly disappearing from the dynamics. Dialogue between student-teachers and teacher-students can now be regarded as a safe space for learning and dialogue between people to grapple a wider understanding of subject specific areas, cultures, and perspectives. It is equally visible that the teacher often learns from us as students during classes. My most exciting and inspiring times of learning both in the classroom and online, is when the teacher has the courage to transgress those boundaries that would confine pupils to an assembly line approach to learning (hooks 1994, p 13).

Black women sometimes find themselves conforming to systems that they have spent years learning about, only to become that same system. I find that students are often speaking their truths, even when going against the grain. The interrogation and unpacking of systems and structures designed to marginalize, criminalize, dehumanize, and victimize people of ethnic backgrounds must continue. I observe my allies becoming fatigued and withdrawn as the weathering of the COVID storm impacts Black people and people of colour. I often think about times when Black people were forbidden to obtain knowledge and what it may look like through the eyes of white supremacy racism. I often ask myself how and why culture

and geography supremacy invite so much dislike and hatred amongst my own people at times, when we already have such an enormous job fighting these racist institutions and groups. Still, my allies bringing me forward – empowering me to use my voice and what I have learned, in turn, they learn how I have learned and what I have been taught.

My community are used to this way of living in 'survival mode' - everyday being of colour, being a woman (Shonkoff, Slopen & Williams 2021). My desire to achieve regardless of what odds may be considered against me requires me to reach deeper academically, think more critically, foster new skills and engage as much as virtually possible in my own best interests. The support, guidance and encouragement from the more tapped-in academic leaders and peer groups alike make up the foundation for my personal academic and professional attainment. As a Black woman in 2022 Britain, I am aware of the beauty in being able to talk to some of my academic leaders human to human, rather than from hierarchal positionality. The work continues as the journey continues.

Titilayo, UG student-teacher

The role of a student as a teacher was not something that came with ease. In 2020, I co-delivered the Public Health summer school. I had the task of helping young students understand health, and the challenges and factors that affect people's health like the social determinants, inequalities, and the impact of COVID 19 on different groups of people. I was doubtful about my ability to perform well and was worried about being able to engage the students from the beginning to end without losing momentum. My mind was constantly plagued with the idea of being asked questions that I would not be able to answer.

I expressed my feelings to my lecturers and their words of encouragement and assurance helped to alleviate some of the fear and anxiety. There was also the need to think about different ways to be creative to deliver sessions, to address learners' preferences because the learning was taking place online and I needed to motivate the students (Persaud and Murphy 2019). After a lot of preparation from the lecturers, I put different ideas together to capture the students' attention.

One of the values of feminist pedagogy is to recognise and give power to the quiet one (Webb *et al.* 2002). During the summer school, I created safer and more relaxed small groups activities, and the quieter ones began to express themselves more freely. For example, each student answered an icebreaker question, 'If you were an animal which one would it be and why?' To express my own vulnerability, I answered the question first, choosing a lion. I love that the lion represents a powerful animal, feared by all the animals, confident to go anywhere without being intimidated by other animals. As a woman of colour, people have looked down on me most of my life. I have experienced rejections, been told that I am not good enough, and my experience in the UK has not always been easy. So, I see a lion as a symbol of strength,

which I embrace and just like a lion, I would not let difficulties deter me. From my vulnerable response, students became comfortable sharing their own stories. One student said that the animal she would like to be is a dog, as she is very protective of her younger brother. Another student chose the tortoise, as she loves to take life easy, and does not rush to do things. I thought the answers were eye-opening, and everyone enjoyed the exercise and multiplicity of perspectives in the room.

Teaching online also meant that people have the option of showing their faces or not, which I found challenging. Reports agree that the lack of face-to-face teaching has been particularly challenging for lecturers and students (Goothy *et al*. 2020; Cao *et al.* 2020). One of the strategies I adopted was to show myself on the video and share some stories about my personal life, my journey, and my aspirations. Sharing some details about my life experiences helped me to relate better with the learners and to create an environment where critical pedagogical practices can take place (Feigenbaum 2007). Freire (1970, p. 53) states that 'education must begin with the solution of the student-teacher contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students.' I had begun to understand that to be a good teacher, I had to embrace being vulnerable and open, as much as I hoped my students would be.

Throughout academic year 2020-21, I continued to teach young prospective students. I am infinitely grateful for the lecturers' support. They have continued to nurture me. I have been given the power to plan the slides and be in total control to decide how I wanted to deliver the teaching. As a woman of colour, I am not taking this opportunity for granted. I am aware of their sacrifice, managing their workload, and giving their time to continue to impact us students. In turn, I am becoming more confident and courageous as I teach and impact others. In my sessions, I was open about the fact that I am a student, and although in my final year, it is not easy to come out and do this. I have been open to the fact that I do not necessarily know everything there is to know, but hoping that as I teach, I can also learn from them as well. I created an atmosphere of mutual respect, making the most of the situation as teaching continues online. My lecturers and fellow students had to adapt to new technology. Students had to be motivated to show up and to contribute their ideas, not leaving the lecturer to speak for three to four hours. This experience has enhanced my knowledge about different types of learning, such as independent learning and collaborative learning, which are both critical in the learning-teaching process. I feel fulfilled that I was able to engage the students, that they remained on the online session from the beginning to the end and offered with excellent positive feedback.

<u>Anna, Senior lecturer, teacher-student</u>

COVID-19 caught us all off guard, and while getting to grips with our online learning platform was not too challenging, re-learning how to teach on it was. I felt ripped away from the

classroom in a physical sense – no more writing on the board, looking students in the eye, or sensing from body language how individuals or the group are feeling. At the time I wrote:

> Love of education and shared learning quite quickly became something different and urgent as we try to get by. I feel aware and uncomfortable about this power shift but unsure how else to use the little energy I had between caring for children, caring for students, and worrying about my family and community. Is my critical and anti-racist approach to the classroom going out the window? There are no longer chairs to put into non-hierarchical reading circles. Instead, we have PowerPoint slides and only half-decent WiFi connections. I try to get students to do most of the talking, to debate and discuss. Silence. Cameras off. I have shameful thoughts about lack of trust – are they even there?

Many students, we would learn, were silenced with no way to access their learning, having no laptops or WiFi at home. People were suddenly caring for children, including myself, struggling to maintain some sense of 'professionalism' with a never before navigated rupturing of the public/private binary (Martin 2001). It could at times feel like we were 'all in it together' as my children interrupted my online teaching, while a student had to apologise and mute her microphone while her baby screamed in the background. But at the same time, I was the teacher – a privileged one with a laptop, WiFi, a steady income, and access to childcare. Our pandemic experiences were worlds apart in many ways.

Working together with our student-teachers, however, helped narrow these gaps, giving me insight into students' experiences of home learning that I had not imagined. For example, Theeba reminded me that family members overhearing the gender and sexuality topics we were discussing could feel uncomfortable or wildly inappropriate for some. A few weeks into pandemic teaching, I wrote:

> Theeba is doing an incredible presentation. The students are engaged! They are talking to each other! I am pleased to see this PhD student as a teacher confidently teaching. She reflects on her time as a younger student. The students in the room do the same. They are able to connect and it feels disarming, authentic. I take on the role of the student listening to her speak – and embrace the joy of learning something new.

Co-mentoring and supporting our students have enabled positive transformations within the pandemic education situation and were stand-out highlights of the pandemic year.

<u>Julie, Senior Lecturer, teacher-student</u>

Four months into the first lockdown, I led the 2020 public health summer school, online. We had a topic – 'COVID-19 and Beyond'. My intention for this was to enable the students to lead, with me offering guidance from the sidelines. Working together, but also trusting each student to bring herself to her teaching, the student-teachers (Titilayo, Simone) each

developed their own materials, sourcing data, film clips and images with which to inspire the students in their groups. This gave the student-teachers the authority to be the teacher and not just parrot deliver something handed to them. It came with accountability too, as Titilayo reflected on her worries about not knowing enough or being able to hold a class for a certain time period. However, it also came with joy, as both Simone and Titilayo recount, in seeing the engagement from the students and in hearing their transformations in thinking and participation as a result of their teaching work.

Recognising Crenshaw's intersectionality (1991), about multiple and overlapping factors of disenfranchisement and disadvantage, I realised that as a white American woman, of an Irish mother and Italian-American father, I could mentor across many differences such as ethnicity, nationality, heritage and age. Intersectionality offers a pathway to connect with those who share similar life experiences toward creating new groups of unity. During the pandemic, I reflected:

> I recognize in Black and Brown female students' similar experiences to those I have weathered – of being a single parent while studying, of being a mature student, of studying in the hope that it will change my life for the better, and yet, of having lots of self-doubt, and having to push back against repressive tropes in society about what you can or cannot aspire to do in spite of that self-doubt. If now that I hold a position of power within the academy as an academic, then recognizing my own battle through, I embrace the opportunity to enable others, who feel disempowered and excluded by the system, to encourage and support, resulting in mutual transformation in our hearts, souls and practices.

However, this is not without qualification, as Titilayo's reflection, in response to Julie and Anna's questioning about the value of mentoring across ethnic differences, reveals:

> The relationship that we have with both of you could not have been better. Yet, it is not without recognition that there is not equal representation of Black academics whose presence alone serves as inspiration. I think it is always good to acknowledge that obviously that is still very much missing.

We gained much from each other, but we also recognise our limitations as teachers and our privilege to teach at our institution.

Discussion

In reflecting on all five narratives, one point on which we all agree was the need to lead by being vulnerable, with each other and in the classroom. This vulnerability around identity and experience is something Gines (2018) and Sobande and Wells (2021) emphasized as important for humanizing our experiences within higher education institutions and co-constructing spaces of belonging there.

Reflecting on our individual narratives, Theeba shared about her challenges of balancing different aspects of herself – on the one hand, a Tamil daughter, who must fulfill cultural expectations, and on the other, a medical doctor and social scientist, who is striving to break free of norms for herself and others, to live a fuller life. Simone reflected that the online environment, as a Black single mother of a teenage son, offered her academic freedom. The spill overs from class into her home life were welcome, as she felt her son benefitted from picking up on discussions around structural racism or intersectionality and understanding the challenges of inequality well before entering university. Titilayo offered insight into her life to her online students, to help them feel safer and able to share. She also developed alternative ways to seek interest and engagement from her students, so that they could reveal something about themselves, and yet not feel completely at risk for doing so. Anna shared that she was dealing with similar issues as her students of caring for family whilst also working and teaching. She worked hard to make the teaching space one that welcomed students amid their life circumstances. Julie reflected on the similarities and differences in life experiences between herself and her students and of being able to use these to forge connection and trust with her students. All pointed to the honesty and vulnerability needed to create an online classroom space in which others beyond the immediate self were considered and respected.

These insights show how engaged dialogue, of sharing and being vulnerable, and holding the space for others to do the same, creates the capacity for authentic relationships between teachers and students (San Pedro 2017). This authenticity also operates within each of ourselves, helping us to understand ourselves, our relative privileges and challenges, and where these intersect with others, as well as how to overcome internal feelings of not belonging, based on transparency about who we are.

As McGuire and Reger comment (2003, p. 55, italics added)

> While feminist co-mentoring provides emotional support, it is more than a relationship in which to discuss personal problems and concerns. Co-mentoring challenges the hierarchical structure of academic development and the dominant understanding of what it means to be an academic by equally valuing rational, logical thought *and* emotional expression.

Although it has been a difficult year, by focusing on what is common amongst us, through *pandemos*, we have been able to forge new confidences, new roles, and push boundaries to discover fresh ways of thinking about ourselves, higher education, and our communities.

We wish to emphasise a few key points and open the way for enhancement of co-mentoring going forward. Vulnerability and narratives about ourselves, through being open and transparent, are crucial for both students and teachers alike. Teachers must lead on this and create spaces where sharing is safe. Following, emotions are important aspects of education,

as much as critical thinking. We are complete beings and emotions need to be honoured in our classrooms and learning spaces. We also need to be thinking about the next generation – taking 'a lift as we climb' approach – to ensure that we can inspire those coming after us as we push forward ourselves. The academy needs to be more representative of its student body and society, so that more Black academics can also serve as inspiration for Black students. White academics are indeed responsible for the current situation in academia and white academics need to further the cause of raising up the next generation of multiethnic scholars, so there is equal representation in the future, fostered by our students in the present.

1. Conclusion

The impacts of COVID-19 and the UK lockdown have magnified and made clear conditions of inequality already at play: of hyper-visibility and invisibility, of connection and disconnection, of ease and discomfort, of fear and safety, within UK higher education system. Feminist co-mentoring and dialogic engagement are two means by which teachers and students work to build a more transparent and transformative relationship with one another and offers a practical application of *Pedagogies of the Pandemos* theme, though our co-creation of dialogic spaces for collaboration, contemplation and change. Co-reflecting through dialogue and visual mapping can be an empowering exercise, as Gines e*t al.* (2018) and Sobande and Wells (2021) attest. As seen in this article, the three student-teachers have undergone diverse experiences of both teaching and being a student in a pandemic, where there have been heightened vulnerabilities but also heightened opportunities. The two teacher-students have also learned that bringing their vulnerabilities to the spaces for learning helps everyone else embrace each person in the classroom and value their experiences. This collective iterative reflective account of our process, our different roles, and what we learned from one another, through a dialectical engagement toward mutual transformation, can serve as a further co-mentoring model, based on Critical Race Theory and intersectionality, for others to employ.

2. Acknowledgement

In December 2021, the world lost its foremost intersectional academic mentor, bell hooks. Throughout her life she embodied in practice the spirit of her teachings, of being against white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. She inspired so much of our thinking and practice, hers is a great loss to our collective spirit. Yet, despite her untimely passing, bell hooks will remain a formidable mentor on how to live authentically.

References

Advance HE (2020) *Equality in higher education: students statistical report 2020*. London: Advance HE, available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/media/5942, accessed 18 June 2021.

Alexander, R. (2008). *Essays on Pedagogy*. London: Routledge.

Biggs, J. (1996). Enhancing teaching through constructive alignment. Higher education. 32 (3): 347-364.

Biggs, J. (2003). Aligning teaching for constructing learning. AdvanceHE, pp.1-4. https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/hea/private/resources/id477_aligning_teaching_for_constructing_learning_1568036613.pdf

Biggs, J. (2014). Constructive alignment in university teaching. HERDSA Review of higher education. (1): 5-22.

Blundell, R. *et al.* (2020) COVID-19 and Inequalities, Journal of Fiscal Studies, vol. 41 (2) pp. 291–319.

Botticello, J. (2020) Engaging Many Voices for Inclusivity in Higher Education. *Journal of Impact Cultures*. Vol. 1 (1), pp. 22-38. https://doi.org/10.15123/uel.8805x

Botticello, J. and Caffrey, A. (2021) Reflections on Teaching Anthropologically and Fostering Belonging as Anti-Racist Allies in a 'Widening Participation' University: An Ecological Approach, *Teaching Anthropology,* 10 (1), pp. 16-29. https://doi.org/10.22582/ta.v10i1.589

Botticello, J. and West, T. O. (2021) Ethnic Minority Students in the UK: Addressing Inequalities in Access, Support, and Wellbeing in Higher Education. In E. Guerrero (ed), *Effective Elimination of Structural Racism*, London: IntechOpen, pp. 1-16. DOI: 10.5772/intechopen.101203.

Brookfield, S.D. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brookfield, S. D. (1998). Critically reflective practice. *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions*. 18 (4): 197-205.

Brookfield, S. D. (2015). *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom,* Somerset: John Wiley and Sons.

Broos, A., (2005) Gender and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Anxiety: Male Self-Assurance and Female Hesitation. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 8(1), pp.21-31. [Accessed July 2 2021]

Cao. W., Fang. Z., Han. M., Xu. X., and Dong. J., (2020) The psychological impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on college students in China, *Psychiatry Research,* vol. 287, pp. 1-4.

Cole, M. (2011) *The CRT concept of 'White supremacy' as applied to the UK: Eight major problematics and some educational implications* in K. Hylton *et al.* (eds) Atlantic Crossings: International Dialogues on Critical Race Theory, pp. 244-265.

Collins, P. H. and Bilge, S. (2020), *Intersectionality*, Second Edition. Oxford: Polity Press

Crenshaw, K. (1991) Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color, *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43, (6), pp. 1241-1299.

Dahlgren, G., & Whitehead, M. (1991) Policies and strategies to promote social equity in health. Background document to WHO - Strategy paper for Europe. Arbetsrapport, Article 2007:14. https://ideas.repec.org/p/hhs/ifswps/2007_014.html

de Alwis, M. & Jayawardena, K. (2001) *Casting Pearls: The Women's Franchise Movement in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Karunaratne & Sons Ltd.

Feigenbaum, A. (2007) The Teachable Moment: Feminist Pedagogy and the Neoliberal Classroom, *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 29:4, 337-349, DOI: 10.1080/10714410701291145

Forrest, L. and Rosenburg, F. (1997) A review of feminist pedagogy literature: The neglected child of feminist psychology, *Applied and Preventive Psychology,* vol. 6, pp. 179-192.

Freire, P. (1993 [1970]) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Hammondsworth: Penguin.

Gines, K. T. (2011) Black feminism and intersectional analyses, *Philosophy Today,* vol. 55, pp. 275-284.

Gines, K. T., Ranjbar, A. M., O'Bryn, E., Ewara, E. and Paris, W. (2018) Teaching and learning philosophical 'special"'topics: Black feminism and Intersectionality, in O. Perlow *et al* (eds) Black women's liberatory pedagogies, London: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 143-158.

Goodall, H. L. (1999) Casing the Academy for Community. Communication Theory, 9(4), 465–494. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.1999.tb00208.x

Goothy, S.S.K., Goothy, S., Choudry, A., Potey, G.C., Manju, P., and Mahadik, V.K. (2020) COVID-19 lockdown impact on the mental health of students: need to start a mental health cell'. *MOJ Anatomy & Physiology*, vol. 7 (2), pp 51-52

Harris, S. *et al.* (2021) A Collision of Crises: Racism, policing, and the COVID-19 pandemic, London: Runnymede Trust, available at: https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/projects/CoDE%20Briefings/Runnymede%20CoDE%20A%20Collision%20of%20Crises%20FINAL.pdf, accessed 1 July 2021.

Hastings, M. (2019) Neoliberalism and Education, Oxford Research Encyclopedia, available at: https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-404, accessed 1 July 2021.

hooks, b. (1994) *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. London: Routledge.

hooks, b. (1989) *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black***,** London: Sheba.

hooks, b. (2010) *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*. New York and Oxon: Routledge

hooks, b. & West, C. (1991) *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*, Boston MA: South End Press.

Kassoumeh, B. (2020) Online Peace-building Dialogue: Opportunities & Challenges Post-Covid-19 Pandemic Emergence, *Journal of Dialogue Studies*, vol. 8, pp. 86-112.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development (vol. 1), Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Lassale, C. *et al.* (2020) Ethnic disparities in hospitalisation for COVID-19 in England: The role of socioeconomic factors, mental health, and inflammatory and pro-inflammatory factors in a community-based cohort study, *Brain Behaviour and Immunity*, Vol. 88, pp. 44–49. doi: 10.1016/j.bbi.2020.05.074

Lee, C. D. (2017), 'An Ecological Framework for Enacting a Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy' in D. Paris and H. S. Alim (eds), *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*, New York: Teachers College Press, pp. 261-273.

Lewin, K. (1951) *Field theory in social science: Selected theoretical papers*, New York: Harper and Row.

Lewis, D. (2020) Undoing hypervisibility, in J. Thorpe (ed), *Living While Feminist: Our bodies, our truths,* Cape Town: Kwela Books.

Lorde, A. (2007) *Sister Outsider,* Berkeley: Crossing Press.

Lyotard, J. F. (2005) The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge (Repr). Manchester Univ. Press.

Marmot, M. *et al.* (2020) Build back fairer, the COVID 19 Marmot review, available at: http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/build-back-fairer-the-covid-19-marmot-review/build-back-fairer-the-covid-19-marmot-review-executive-summary.pdf.

Martin, E. (2001) *The woman in the body: a cultural analysis of reproduction*. Boston: Beacon Press.

McGuire, G. M., & Reger, J. (2003) Feminist Co-Mentoring: A Model for Academic Professional Development. NWSA Journal, Vol. 15(1), pp. 54–72.

Mills, C.W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press

Oparah, J.C. and Bonaparte, A.D. (2016) *Birthing Justice: Black Women, Pregnancy, and Childbirth*. New York and Oxon: Routledge.

Pareek, M. *et al.* (2020) Ethnicity and COVID-19: an urgent public health research priority, *The Lancet*, Vol. 395, May 2, pp. 1421-1422.

Perlow, O., Wheeler, D., Bethea, and Scott, B. (2018) *Black women's liberatory pedagogies*, London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Persaud, A. and Murphy, Y. (2019) School Leadership and Education Diplomacy, *Childhood Education*, Vol. 95 (2), pp. 20-28.

Razai M.S., Kankam H.K.N., Majeed A., Esmail A., and Williams D.R., (2021) Mitigating ethnic disparities in covid-19 and beyond, *BMJ*, 14;372:m4921. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m4921.

Razai, M., Majeed, A. and Esmail, A., (2021) Structural racism is a fundamental cause and driver of ethnic disparities in health. *BMJ*, p.n938. [Accessed July 3 2021]

Rollock, N. (2012) The invisibility of race: intersectional reflections on the liminal space of alterity, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, Vol. 15 (1): pp. 65-84

Roy, A. (2019) *Gender, Sexuality, Decolonization: South Asia in the world perspective.* New York and Oxon: Routledge

San Pedro, T. (2017) 'This stuff interests me': Re-centering indigenous paradigms in colonizing school practices, in D. Paris and S. Alim (eds), *Culturally sustaining pedagogies*, New York: Teachers College Press, pp. 99-116.

San Pedro, T. and Kinloch, V. (2017) Toward Projects in Humanization: Research on Co-Creating and Sustaining Dialogic Relationships, *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1_suppl), pp. 373S-394S. doi:10.3102/0002831216671210

Schön, D. ([1983] 1991). The Reflective Practitioner, How Professionals Think in Action, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing.

Sharma, A. (2020) The pandemic, race and the crisis of the neoliberal university: study notes from lockdown London, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 21 (4) p. 645-655.

Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the wake: On blackness and being*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Shonkoff, J. P., Slopen, N. and Williams, D.R. (2021) Early Childhood Adversity, Toxic Stress, and the Impacts of Racism on the Foundations of Health. *Annual Review of Public Health* 2021 42:1, pp. 115-134.

Sivanandan, A. (2008) *Catching History on the Wing: Race, Culture and Globalization.* London: Pluto Press

Solórzano, D. G. and Yosso, T. J. (2002) Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 8 (1), pp. 23–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800103

Somasundaram, D. and Sivayokan, S. (2013) Rebuilding community resilience in a post-war context: developing insight and recommendations – a qualitative study in Northern Sri Lanka. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, vol. 7 (1), p.3.

Spivak, G. (1993) Can the subaltern speak?, in P. Williams and L. Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory*, New York: Colombia University Press, pp. 66-111.

Terrell, M. (1898) National American Woman Suffrage Association 1898 convention, available at: http://www.ohiohumanities.org/h-at-home-mary-church-terrell/, accessed 23 June 2021.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Watts, G. (2020) COVID-19 and the digital divide in the UK, *The Lancet*, Vol. 2 (8): pp. E395-E396.

Webb, L. W., Allen, M. W. and Walker, K. L. (2002) Feminist pedagogy: Identifying basic principles. *Academic Exchange Quarterly,* Vol. 6 (Spring), pp. 67-72.

Wellings, K. and Johnson, A.M. (2013) Framing sexual health research: adopting a broader perspective. The Lancet, vol. 382 (9907), pp. 1759-1762.

Yeste, C. G., Ferrada, D. and Ruiz, L. (2011) Social Inequalities and Improving Scientific Knowledge Through the Inclusion of All Voices, *Qualitative Inquiry,* vol. 17 (3), p. 284–294

Zamberlan, A. *et al.* (2021) Work less, help out more? The persistence of gender inequality in housework and childcare during UK COVID-19, *Research is Social Stratification and Mobility*, vol 73, pp. 1-17.

Zhou, M. *et al.* (2020) Gender inequalities: Changes in income, time use and well-being before and during the UK COVID-19 lockdown, University of Oxford Report, available at: https://files.osf.io/v1/resources/u8ytc/providers/osfstorage/5ed64215c75686044d2d5b69?action=download&direct&version=8, accessed 30 June 2021.