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Doctoral Studies as Learning to Rename the World

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Doctoral Studies as Learning to Rename the World

Cover Page Footnote

I acknowledge the contribution of Noshmee Baguant and Venoo Payneeandy, doctoral graduates from the Mauritius Institute of Education and the University of KawZulu-Natal.

Doctoral Studies as Learning to Rename the World

Hyleen Mariaye, Mauritius Institute of Education

Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself.

Albus Dumbledore

~J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

Naming the world is a form of praxis requiring engagement and dialogue with others to change it. The process involves acting and reflecting in tandem to bring more social justice by awakening others to the possibilities of a different reality.

I have always been inspired by Freire's (1968/2000) conception of *naming the world* as a process of defining and finding one's place in it. Achieved by means of sustained dialogue with others, we learn to *read the world*: seeing beyond what is visible, noticing patterns in the way decisions are taken, ideas are articulated, shaped, and conveyed, examining intentions and actions. Such is no ordinary dialogue, however. It is a conversation fueled by careful, informed, rigorous, critical, and curious exploration of the social, political, cultural, linguistic, and economic spaces we inhabit to see what lies beyond what is made immediately visible to us. Yet, there are costs to naming the world, to seeing and understanding the darkness. There are risks to losing one's naïve reading for a more sophisticated, possibly unhappy one. So much is linked to our own narratives, our

families' narratives, to our perception of what is meaningful, necessary, and right.

The COVID—19 pandemic rewrote our shared narrative in a most disruptive way requiring all of us to abruptly rename our world individually and collectively. It also vividly exposed the deep-rooted inequities of our political and economic system. The social fractures we experienced manifested in intense worldwide protests of citizens demanding to be heard, revealing citizenship at its best and at its worst. It revealed our connectedness, but also the isolation of economically, geographically, and culturally alienated communities. It revealed our power to change and mobilize resources and expertise rapidly, but also made clear how restricted and privileged access to health care and support was.

In the remotest corner of the world, on a far-flung island in the Indian Ocean, we stood at the margins of an oncoming pandemic; we watched China, Italy, the UK, and the US. Waiting and praying. When the virus reached our shores, we went into an immediate lock down for over two months. We were COVID free and safe.

Unfortunately, as our borders re-opened, we counted the deaths in the hundreds. As if this was not enough, a major oil spill from a Japanese ship ruined our pristine waters forever. Almost two hundred thousand people took to the streets, something our population of 1.2 million never saw or thought possible. The citizen whom we thought was sedated by the lure of middle-class pursuits had awakened. Similar to the experience in larger nations, citizen-led actions morphed quickly into mass manipulation in the Mauritian context which channeled the power of crowds into new forms of dictatorship denied of rationality and understanding. The world was named in

a particular way generating a dangerous construction of our social reality, polarizing and essentializing people into identity groups. The awakening could possibly mean the death of democracy as we have known it and perhaps the death of the citizen.

Sitting in front of a laptop for 180 days and counting, supervising research work, teaching, and participating in meetings and conferences online, I resented the abstractness of my work, its sterility in effecting the much-needed social reconstruction work. Was this the purpose of my work? Was this who I was? Was this all I could do to affirm the democratic values I claim to uphold through my teaching of Paulo Freire, Maxine Green, and Henry Giroux? This reflexive stance led me to engage once more with what it means to do research and to prepare the next generation of scholars. I began to see my role more as linked to affirming democracy through criticality, by enabling individuals to name the world autonomously in increasingly more complex ways, seeing contradictions, and being conscious of how we are choosing to surface certain aspects and not others.

My own experience with learning to name the world as an academic is closely tied to my multiple but connected identities as a researcher, teacher, and programme-lead, having explored for the past 20 years the world of education and trying to learn to conform to what is expected of an academic. How politically infused is the work that we do and how willingly we become silent accomplices of a huge machinery designed to perpetuate hegemonic forces through ethnicity, race, masculinity, hierarchy became increasingly obvious to me.

When the opportunity to be part of a doctoral team presented itself in 2011, I accepted. Little did I realize what it meant in

terms of how transformative and disruptive it could and had to be. Doctoral learning is a form of praxis, of deliberate thoughtful and reflective action on one's own reading of the world. Perhaps a PhD changes little beyond the person who completes it, incarnating a humanizing action through intellectual and ethical exploration of the social order and the ways in which it can more equitably be recreated.

Twenty years down the road, I am beginning to understand how much depends on the supervisor's own reading of the world, positionality, posture, and, more importantly, how we can construct our work of advising and assisting students as a form of critical consciousness (Freire, 1968/2000). I will illustrate this process by means of my experience of supervising two completed doctoral dissertations: (a) one on marginalized secondary school students, and (b) the other on gendered experiences of students in engineering. I make no claims here that these were the ways in which they engaged with their doctoral journey but rather my own subjective standpoint and reading of how I constructed them.

Venoo

Venoo came to me to co-supervise his thesis in 2012 having been in the secondary school circuit for more than 20 years. He was a teacher of physics having spent most of his professional life teaching students at elite schools and being transferred towards the dusk of his career to a suburban school with the problems associated with low performance and indiscipline. He is from the dominant Hindu majority group of the island and was appointed a senior educator to support teachers working with students from African descent (Creoles). These students hail from

very difficult life circumstances and have a history of academic failure. His choice of thesis title and research question indicated how he politically positioned himself with respect to official policy which forced mainstream secondary schools to include large classes of students who had repeatedly failed the end of primary cycle examinations for reasons linked to the deleterious effects of their poverty. The issue was evidently close to his heart, and he wanted to champion their cause by selecting inclusive education as a focus. He had named the world for them constructing his own relationship as one who can give them voice and visibility through his doctoral project.

He brought the legacy of his master's study in education: steeped in an interpretivist approach, a new awareness of self, a new sense of dignity stirred by a new hope (Freire, 1968/2000). He read the world with empathy and emergent sensitivity to forms and patterns of oppression and domination.

In my opinion the pre-vocational students were being marginalised and I felt sympathy for them. To me, they were just a bunch of adolescents surrounded by people who did not seem to understand them, and who consequently were not making the required effort to bridge the divide. I thought that as a senior educator I could help them by giving advice to their teachers. (Payneeandy, 2021, p. 7)

Surprisingly, such empathy based on proximity and engrossment in the realities of the students became constraining in the process of truly naming the world in a dynamic and multi-perspectival manner. It

appeared to cloister him in a naïve view of understanding the world which set people into categories seeing them more as objects rather than subjects. This was, firstly, not only revealed in the way he referred to the students as victims, but also evident in the kinds of literature he was choosing to read: many global policy documents which have the quality of representing the world in ways which are often reductionist, of seeing the oppressed as a project to be worked upon.

The real doctoral work happened effectively in the second year when his engagement with literature changed in terms of both what he was reading and the questions he was asking. This effectively moved him to look at the *other* and how he progressively saw them more as students with some decisional power. This is captured in one of his concluding remarks:

They picked and chose from the curriculum offered to them, and the nature of the subject or of the activity determined the level of their engagement. Basically, they chose their way of existing as a student in the school, and this defined their relationship with the different components of that environment. (Payneeandy, 2021, p. 170)

The complexity of scholarship which we selected together gave him tools to engage with a more layered and ambiguous naming of the world than what he started off with. He understood his own place and purpose in the world as a teacher, but more importantly, as a researcher. He became conscious of how masculinities were enacted and shaped how the students related to each other, their teachers, and school in general as he explained:

Because of their constant rowdy behaviours, the participants experienced disapproval and rejection from many teachers and mainstream students. It emerged that there was a conscious lack of effort at self-regulation and self-control by the pre-vocational students to curtail their indiscipline, and this was also explained by the masculine culture that prevailed in their group. The personal characteristics of the students and the masculine culture prevailing in their group seemed to influence a range of their experiences at school. (Payneandy, 2021, p. 171)

He was effectively reading and naming the world with the students, not only for them, in a more nuanced and realistic manner. He saw how agency played out and manifested in a variety of ways and how the oppressed could become the oppressor (Freire, 1968/2000). His own consciousness about how his masculinity played out was acknowledged and surfaced in how he related to me, how he came to negotiate and claim power and authorship in his own doctoral journey.

Noshmee

Noshmee has a Master's in Engineering. She hails from a scientific background, so I was a trifle surprised when her proposal landed on my table. Why was she making such a radical choice? I was not keen on taking her in knowing how arduous the shift would be for someone so entrenched in a positivist perspective, or so I thought. I was surprised with the interest in gender until I heard her own learning experience at university. However, I realized

earlier on that she was determined to earn her doctorate because for her it meant moving on in her career. Her interactions with me were minimal in the first year. We were operating on a cohort model which meant that the entire group of doctoral candidates met every six weeks. She rarely attended the cohort meetings perhaps not seeing the value of hearing about and discussing each other's work in the form of a culture circle, which is "created an attempt to provide pedagogical spaces in which students can develop their voices in a human environment of respect and affirmations" (Chaib, 2010, p. 43). This model of doctoral engagement was meant to stimulate intellectual curiosity and exploration by challenging a candidate's perspective (and naming) of the phenomenon.

But Noshmee, it appeared, constructed her PhD as a solo act. She disappeared completely during the third year and reappeared at the last cohort seminar with her full thesis which she wanted me to endorse for submission. It was the turning point, an episode of conflict and coming to terms with what it really meant to be earning a PhD. Her data was too thin, and we asked her to go back to the field to really talk to her participants, to take a deeper interest and interrogate how they apprehended their figured world. She nearly quitted, but eventually, because of her own career ambitions, came back determined to *swallow the pill* with the supervisors. She brought back transcripts from her interviews, and she read literature that contested her original stance on gender regimes bringing in intersectionality in her work. She became interested in how the female participants related to male classmates, how they named the various ways they saw masculinities being enacted and embedded in academia.

She questioned how they also embraced these masculine characteristics and why they did so.

Noshmee had read the participants as vulnerable and the university spaces as neutral zones. Based on how she had named her experience with male classmates and their enactment of dominant masculinity as a student shaped how she constructed her study and what she chose to see, or alternately, overlook. Her last year writing the thesis was an exercise in intersubjectivity, of writing and naming the world *with* participants rather than *for* them. Her own experience of being set aside as a woman doing engineering emerged and was connected to being *the other*. The most evident learning came when she integrated a substantial reflection in her thesis about male participants who chose to enact masculinity differently. She wrote:

In the construction of this subordinate masculinity, these male students engaged in performances of compliance with the dominant male students; they failed to get involved in class discussions or join the other male students in their dominant performance. In this way, their quiet compliance was a way of resistance to the aggressive and hegemonic masculinity. (Baguant, 2021, p. 177)

She set out to name the world for women and constructed men as a category, the other. Her understanding of the world was binary, clean, and unproblematic. Her doctoral experience gave her a new vocabulary for naming the world, one which is more inviting of the many perspectives, one of careful and surprising deconstruction.

Doctoral Learning as Renaming the World

The designation of a *supervisor* says much about how we construct our role as overseeing students learning and making sure they read the world in ways which are appropriate. But how does engaging with them in the process of decoding and naming the world influence my own understanding of the world and my place in it? How did Venoo's and Noshmee's work addressing inequality and discrimination dialogue with my own experience of the same as a female from an ethnic minority in academia?

I realize that conscientization is always a reciprocal activity, that naming the world within the space of doctoral supervision is collective and personal at the same time, that one cannot name or rename one part of the world without having the more daunting task to rename the rest of it. Fear can be incapacitating but can also trigger desire for disruption and transformation. Doctoral studies make the world suddenly, silently bigger, more replete with possibilities as we construct our actions to change it. We are no longer part of a community, a country. We are part of a bigger global space with its global problems, but we are part of the solution too. This is for me a substantial part of being a global citizen.

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