VIEWPOINT
A reflection on my academic journey: The struggle to shape my destiny

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Abstract

Based on my personal trajectory, in this paper, I discuss the barriers to access to quality higher education and writing. Access to higher education is very competitive in the Global South, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Being from Eritrea also aggravates this condition, not only because of the presence of few higher education institutions with limited postgraduate programmes, but also the authoritarian government which restricts the movement of its citizens through exit visa. Despite these challenges, some students are able to finish undergraduate studies and travel abroad to undertake postgraduate studies. They become relatively privileged to research, write and give their voice and the voice of others who share the same experiences. However, studying abroad requires adequate academic, financial and visa preparations. It also demands social and cultural adjustments after reaching the destination country.

Keywords: Access , pedagogy, research, higher education, authoritarianism, Eritrea

Introduction

Almost four decades ago, I was born in Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea, at a time when the Eritrean liberation struggle was at its highest stage. At the time, the Ethiopian government was imprisoning and killing Eritreans who were suspected of supporting the Eritrean liberation struggle. Hence, many Eritreans were left without an option but to flee the country or join the armed resistance, in many cases, leaving their family behind. In addition to life events such as divorce and death, these situations also forced many women to become single mothers and children to grow without their fathers. Despite my mother being economically independent, her experience is likely to have been one of struggle, with a new baby, my father in prison and no guarantee that he would be released. When I was three years old, I went to live with my grandparents, an elderly couple living in Keren, the second biggest city, 91 kilometres away from Asmara.

Living with my grandparents had some benefits. I was able to connect with the older generation through their stories and experiences. However, life became harder when I started primary school. Both my grandparents, as many other people of that generation, could not read and write. They were able to send me to school with the required essentials, but they could not support me in my academic activities, particularly homework and other academic assignments. Moreover, there was no other relative to turn to for academic support. We lived the three of us together, with only the occasional visit from my cousins. I joined elementary school at the age of six. In first and second grade, I remember times when I was struggling to complete my homework in the absence of clear instructions from the teachers. In schools, most of the teachers were also not aware of my conditions. My challenges were not unique and many other students faced similar circumstances. However, in contrast with many of them, I am now not only the first university graduate in my family, but also one of the first few PhD holders from my elementary school.

In this article, drawing on my personal experiences, I explore my academic journey within Eritrea and beyond. In particular, I discuss my experiences as a student and staff of the University Asmara (and later the National Board for Higher Education). Moreover, I reflect on my journey and experiences as an international student both in China and the UK.

Accessing the University of Asmara: A dream come true

Until 2003, the University of Asmara was the only higher education institution (HEI) in Eritrea. Up to 1994 about 10 per cent, and from 1995 to 2002 about 19 per cent of the secondary school students who sat for Eritrean Secondary Education Certification Examinations (college entrance examinations) were admitted to the university, at first degree and diploma levels (Leonida 2004). Therefore, getting access and maintaining a position at the university was very competitive. Despite those challenges, like many students, I saw joining the university as my main goal after finishing secondary school.

My academic challenges had gradually improved as I transferred to middle and senior secondary school. I was able to work closely with my friends and classmates, and these elective binds provided a range of support. We shared resources, studied together and helped each other in preparing assignments and exams. Their influence was significant in improving my academic capacity. Furthermore, the support from our teachers, particularly during the preparation for the Eritrean Secondary Education Certification Examinations, was enormous. As a result, in 1998, I scored a mark that allowed me to join the University of Asmara degree program. However, this was not enough, as accessing university education goes beyond joining

the institution. It includes providing quality education that helps students to become independent learners and prepare for the future (hooks 2010). It is through good quality education that learners can achieve their potential and achieve a more sustainable world (Nevin 2008).

Furthermore, like any student, I had to work hard to avoid academic dismissal, particularly in the first year of my studies. In fact, I was surprised to see students that I admired in my secondary school struggle and even fail at the University of Asmara. Those students joined the university with very high marks, but they could not sustain the academic practices, such as the academic rigour, of the university. In the Eritrean case, students' first-year results also determine whether they will join the program of their choice or not from their second year onwards. Due to intense competition, many university students are not given a chance in what to study. Instead, they are allocated to degree programs based on available spaces. This pushed many students to join a department that they have no or less interest and, thus, affected their learning by decreasing their motivation, attention and class engagement (Harackiewicz et al. 2016).

Although the University of Asmara had many vital resources and experienced teachers, most of my classes were dominated by teacher-centred pedagogy. Many teachers considered themselves as the ultimate owners of knowledge where students are required to conform to their teachers' perspectives and not challenge or question them. Some teachers got angry when students called them by their names without using their title (Doctor or Professor). While teachers have every right to be respected, such practices risk increasing hierarchical social relations – teachers already have the authority regardless of their academic qualifications. As hooks (2010) notes, teachers who use a teacher-centred pedagogy and, thus, dominate the teaching and learning process, could not help students to acquire the knowledge and skills that provide them with the opportunity to shape their perspectives. On the contrary, such teachers mostly produce loyal citizens that adapt and cope with any hegemonic structure (Freire 2010). Later on, this experience raised social and academic challenges as I moved abroad to study. For example, I had the challenge of calling my professors by their first name although they insisted that they preferred to be called by their first name.

Nonetheless, I also benefited from teachers who were striving to nurture students with the critical thinking skills needed to examine things, apprehend the structures of inequality and contribute to making the world a better place. Some of these teachers used mixed pedagogical practices to enable students to participate in the class interaction. They incorporated interactive methods such as class discussion and collaborative inquiry when the class size, time and resources permitted. However, most of the time, teachers lacked enough resources and time, in particular, to enable such pedagogies, due to large class sizes. This hindered teachers from engaging and recognising all of their students since the time was shared between lecturing and student engagement.

After four years of study and one year of national service, I graduated with Bachelor of Arts degree in Education Administration (with distinction) in July 2003. I saw this as a privilege compared to those who could not join a higher education institution or a program of their interest due to limited spaces, or those who could not finish their study because of academic dismissal and other reasons. Soon after my graduation, in September 2003 I was assigned and later in 2004 recruited as a Graduate Assistant at the University of Asmara based on my academic merit.

Pursuing my graduate study: Desires and challenges

My recruitment at the University of Asmara, in general, and involvement in different academic and administrative activities, in particular, cultivated an undying interest in pursuing my postgraduate study. I deeply felt that I needed further education to strengthen and accelerate my intellectual development as well as acquire further practical experiences. Accordingly, since there was no postgraduate programme in Eritrea, particularly in the field of education, in 2004 I started applying for master's degree programmes to different universities in Africa, Europe, the USA, Canada and Australia and was offered a place with a full or partial scholarship in several institutions. Nevertheless, I could not leave my work and country to pursue my study because of the extended national service and exit visa restriction policy of the government of Eritrea.

Accessing postgraduate programs in the Global North for those of us from the Global South is very challenging. It demands a great deal of academic and financial preparation. It requires certified (verified) academic certificates, letters of recommendation, good grades in international examinations such as TOEFL, GRE or IELTS, and, in many cases, application fees. Despite meeting these requirements and secure scholarships such as the Netherlands Fellowship Programme (NFP), I was still unable to pursue my studies due to the exit visa restriction policy. The visa restriction hindered not only me, but also many other university graduates who secured a full scholarship to study abroad. This 'forced immobility' incites many Eritreans to leave the country illegally by crossing the border to Ethiopia, Sudan or other neighbouring countries with the help of smugglers (Tsegay 2021). They risk their lives to achieve their dreams and, in many cases, become asylum seekers or refugees as they fear for their life upon return after finishing their studies. Although I deferred some of my admissions and scholarship, I was not able to obtain an exit visa until 2013.

In April 2013, as part of the cooperation between the governments of Eritrea and the People's Republic of China on human resource development, I was allowed to study in China. After exploring my options in Chinese universities, I applied to Beijing Normal University.

Back to college: Completing my Master's and Doctoral studies

In September 2013, I joined Beijing Normal University. Although I had the opportunity of taking some in-service short courses in my organisation, I waited for ten years after my undergraduate graduation to access my master's studies. My master's studies exposed me to new scholars and perspectives. I started to read Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Sondra Hale and many other critical educators, and I felt that they were speaking to me and reflecting on my previous experiences.

Freire (2010), through his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, helped me to realise (or perhaps further) many of my questions and doubts on the socioeconomic, political and educational system of Eritrea. As indicated in the next section, the democratic process of the country has been disrupted for the last two decades (United Nations Human Rights Council 2015 & 2016). Despite the voices from inside and outside of Eritrea to rectify the problems, no significant change has been achieved so far as the pleas have been falling on the deaf ears of the government of Eritrea. On the contrary, these pleas have been causing another misery (detention, torture and migration) due to the intolerant nature of the government. I vividly remember being in complete agreement when I read Hale's (2007) argument that naming our problems is not enough because we may still feel powerless to do anything about it. The time

was a moment of reflection in which I was able to connect my classes with my lived experiences and the things that were happening around me – both within and outside of my country. Such academic experience, in addition to my academic achievement, motivated me to pursue my doctoral studies. After applying to four universities, I was offered a place with full scholarships in China and the United Kingdom (UK).

However, studying abroad (China and the UK) was not without challenges. Acquiring a visa, particularly to the UK, was very difficult. Despite holding a full scholarship, my student visa application to the UK was first rejected, which forced me to defer my admission and scholarship and reapply for the visa after a year. On top of the wasted time, this incurred significant expenses to repeat my medical check-up, sit for the ILETS examination and pay for the visa application again. This alone is likely to hinder access to postgraduate programs in the Global North for prospective students from the Global South. In addition to the despair about getting the visa, not many universities offer the opportunity to defer a scholarship and not many students get the money to reapply for a visa. Moreover, considerable differences between Eritrean, Chinese and British cultures and pedagogies brought some challenges. Soon after I arrived in China and started my studies, I realised that I had to understand the socio-cultural conditions of the country in order to be sensitive to the people's cultural values and traditions and, thus, acquire culturally appropriate skills such as culturally appropriate communication techniques (Tsegay et al. 2018). The same was true with the UK.

At first, I used to forget to say 'please' and 'thank you' while asking/getting services, which are very important phrases in UK social relations. I was forgetting to say 'please' and 'thank you', not because I was rude or ungrateful but I grew up in a place where saying these phrases is not expected, particularly while asking/getting services. I had also never experienced anyone in China demanding I say 'please' and 'thank you' or getting offended because I failed to say so. Moreover, the local context and culture of teaching and learning framed my experiences. It affected the way students and staff spoke, behaved, taught and learnt. For instance, I remember getting confused in a class when a professor in the UK asked about the 'X factor' of our PhD thesis. After a reply from two students, I understood that she meant the 'main contribution' of our thesis by the character of students' responses and confirmation of the professor to the ideas. Then, I had to google it to confirm its context and meaning, a common thing that I do after hearing an unfamiliar word or phrase.

My previous learning experiences had made me a very disciplined individual who did not speak out of turn and never without the teacher's permission. As noted above, I had little experience of independent learning having been used to much more authoritarian teaching and vertical relationships with teachers. At first, this hindered me from sharing my ideas in class as students were simply speaking while I waited, raising my hand, to be given a chance by the teacher. In my early days, I also found the 'student-centred' pedagogical practice challenging because it requires students to be proactive and to take responsibility for their learning. Through time, I was able to fit into the teaching-learning process and use my prior educational and work experiences to make an impact among my classmates. Based on my academic and lived experiences, I developed my master's and doctoral thesis focusing on the nexus of globalisation, migration and higher education. While completing my thesis, I also published some articles in different peer-reviewed journals.

Conducting research: The absence of a democratic state

Over the past half-decade, besides completing my master's and doctoral thesis, I carried out research studies to enhance people's understanding of various issues. While conducting research, I noticed that certain issues, such as the sensitivity of the topic under study, the research context and positionality, to be great challenges in conducting the study. I am aware that, as a researcher, I need to follow certain ethical guidelines such as those outlined in the Belmont Report to protect the rights and safety of my participants and myself (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research 1978). However, I found that these ethical guidelines are not adequate and/or their application is not fully certain in some areas (see also Campbell 2010). In particular, it is not easy to protect the safety and security of researchers in countries with dictatorial regimes like Eritrea.

The ethical frameworks that higher education institutions use to manage risk in conducting research tend to put the onus on the researchers to protect both themselves and their participants from any potential harm that could be caused as a result of their studies. This doesn't mean that researchers are not exposed to great danger because of their studies. Some governments do not allow research in certain areas which they call 'a matter of political and/or social sensitivities or a threat to national security'. Others do not want to see any criticism against their policies. Since 2001, the Eritrean government has imprisoned many high government officials and journalists and froze the constitution which had been ratified in 1997. The political situation of Eritrea, especially the absence of the rule of law, caused violations of human rights including religious persecution and imprisonment of individuals without due process. In fact, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea stated that Eritreans are being ruled by fear, not by law (United Nations Human Rights Council 2015 & 2016). In such cases, like many other researchers, I did not feel safe to freely collect my data on any topic of my choice and critically analyse it to protect myself and my research participants. Hence, for my master's thesis, I had to conduct my research into a topic which was deemed less sensitive and had less connection with the government, in particular (see Tsegay 2016).

Many of these concerns, however, would have been absent if Eritrea had been a democratic state that abides by the rule of law, which is also essential for all aspects of society and education. A democratic state is important in ensuring and promoting human rights and freedom which greatly affects research (Misiaszek Jones & Torres 2011). In its absence, it is difficult to respect persons and, thus, further socio-economic, political and environmental justice. If anyone dares to cross the line placed by an authoritarian government (the Eritrean government in my case), the fate is very clear – they are cast as an 'enemy of the state' and end up in prison without due process or escape and become a refugee. At first, with the hope to return to Eritrea, I had the challenge of fully documenting the voices of my participants without jeopardising my life and theirs. Mostly, I avoided researching sensitive topics. Nonetheless, I was also afraid that part of me that trusts in social justice and holds hope could perish for the sake of protecting my life and my participants. Hence, I did not want to leave any topic due to its sensitivity or criticism to the government as far as it addresses issues of social justice. I decided not to cut any transcription from my data because the participants' stories are accounts of their experiences, views and values, and represent their talking voices that they wanted me, as a researcher, to know. This made me focus on researching issues of social justice even at the risk of not returning to what I call home.

Conclusion

Being from the Global South, particularly Eritrea, not only affects one's access to quality education, but it also limits one's opportunity for studying abroad due to factors related to lack of finance, visa restrictions and recognition of academic qualifications. Eritrea is one of the countries with the lowest tertiary education gross enrolment ratio (GER 3.4 per cent) in the region – with 3.9 per cent for men and 2.8 per cent for women (UNESCO 2021). This is very low compared to the average GER in sub-Saharan Africa which is about 9 per cent (World Bank 2020). In addition, Eritrea is not a democratic state and requires its citizens to obtain exit visas to travel to other countries and detains anyone caught leaving the country without one (United States Department of State, 2018). Despite these challenges, I could say that my marginalisation was my privilege. I was able to finish my doctoral studies, which few of my classmates in Eritrea could achieve. Furthermore, I am privileged to write and give my voice and, perhaps, the voice of others like me.

Acknowledgements

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