

THESIS SYNOPSIS

Intersections of Indigenous Knowledge and place-based education: possibilities for new visions of sustainability education in Uganda

Kevin Lubuulwa Kezabu 

Faculty of Education and Arts, Uganda Christian University, Mukono, Uganda
Corresponding author. E-mail: kkezabu@ucu.ac.ug

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This doctoral research pursued the intersection of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) and place-based education in Ugandan secondary schools. Particular interest was placed on how teachers use place-based education pedagogies to influence their own as well as their learners' reconnection to their communities, cultures and places towards a more sustainable future. Even though the role of community elders of guardianship and instruction of IK has been weakened by the formal education system (Semali, 1999; Smith & Sobel, 2010), this research also explored how community elders can contribute to place-based education in their communities. In so doing, this research was guided by three questions:

1. How can IK, practices and values intersect with place-based education in Ugandan secondary schools?
2. How can teachers use place-based education pedagogies to influence their learners to reconnect to their community/culture and places in Ugandan secondary schools?
3. How can community elders contribute to place-based education in their communities in Uganda?

The impetus for this research stemmed from the issue where Uganda's formal education contributes to the people's disconnection from their communities and from their cultures. This is primarily due to the examination driven curriculum; the foreign orientation of the formal education system and the subjugation of IK from the curriculum. For example, Uganda is still using the colonial-inherited education system with English as the medium of instruction and assessment. This has left the Indigenous languages on the peripheries of the formal education curriculum with no importance placed on IK. Researchers (see Gruenewald, 2003a; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Thiele, 2013) have found alienation of the people from their cultures and places as one of the leading causes of the profound lack of care for the environment.

To explicate the nature of places and their relationship with the inhabitants, this study is grounded in critical place inquiry. The critical paradigm is concerned with issues of social justice and marginalisation (Scotland, 2012). In an era where places are viewed in terms of 'occupying, exploiting and profiting' (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 629), critical place inquiry acknowledges places to be living entities that deserve to be treated with respect and care. Gruenewald (2003b, p. 624)

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affirms that ‘a theory of place that is concerned with the quality of the human-world relationships must first acknowledge that places themselves have something to say’. Gruenewald emphasises the need for humans to listen to their places thereby underlining the dialogical obligation between humans and the natural environment. Gruenewald (2003b) accentuates that critical place inquiry calls for attentiveness to places.

This research employed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology which provided the co-participants (i.e., teachers, elders and community members) with the skills to critically recognise disconnection of the people from their cultures and places because of the colonial formal education system. Since PAR is participatory in nature, it enabled the student researcher to work with the co-participants in a collaborative and reciprocal way in and through the research project. In this respect, the co-participants were engaged as full members of the research team and the investigation was based directly on their understanding of their own actions and experiences (Marshall & MacIntosh, 2007) in the Ugandan formal education setting. Following the planning, action, observation and reflection cycle of PAR, the co-participants planned and utilised three learning activities to integrate IK into the formal education setting. These included learning about the traditional concept of community service; visiting and learning about the sacred places; and learning about the Indigenous plants and their medicinal values. Data collection methods included group discussions, group interviews, sharing of samples of students’ work, sharing of co-participants’ diary entries and listening to the community elders’ personal and historical narratives.

In the analysis of the PAR cycles of this project, several themes and ideas became apparent including transformative practice, collective responsibility, kinship with nature, respect of the elders’ voices as voices of the land, diversity and pluralism and creating a more just and inclusive curriculum. The findings revealed that IK, practices and values were embedded with place-based education in Ugandan secondary schools through the co-participants’ involvement with the students in the IK learning activities. In addition, the Ugandan teachers’ use of place-based education pedagogies influenced learners to reconnect to their community and cultures. This was evident in the teachers’ reports, improved class attendance and improved participation during these place-based lessons. Further, these findings revealed that community elders can contribute in a meaningful way to place-based education in their communities. This was achieved through the sharing of their cultural and historical narratives about sacred places with the teachers and students. In addition, the elders attended participating schools and facilitated the teachers’ and students’ learning about Indigenous plants around the school grounds.

The study found that collaboration between teachers, teachers and community elders, as well as between the schools and the communities is key for successful implementation of place-based education in the Ugandan educational setting. Finally, for place-based education to be successful in the Ugandan formal education system, teachers’ participation in the improvement of their own practice as well as the curriculum is vital.

Supervisors:

Jennifer McMahon
University of Tasmania

David Kember
University of Tasmania

Allen Hill
ARA Institute of Canterbury-Aotearoa, New Zealand

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Kevin Lubuulwa Kezabu is currently an adjunct lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Arts at Uganda Christian University where she is involved with supervision of Masters and Doctoral theses. Kevin’s PhD study which she completed in 2018 started the journey of collaboration between teachers and elders in an understanding of creating a just and inclusive Ugandan secondary school education curriculum. Kevin currently lives in Launceston, Tasmania where she is supporting her family to meet some required milestones. When she is not reading students’ theses or looking after family, Kevin is growing fruit trees in her backyard.

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