

Abstract

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 elders¹ 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 Indigenous Knowledge, 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

¹ These are mostly the older members of the community who are also the guardians of IK in the tribes. Currently, they perform or preside over the cultural ceremonies like traditional marriages, installing heirs, and last funeral rites in their clans.

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, 2003; 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.

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 recognize disconnection of the people from their cultures and places because of the colonial formal education system. Since PAR is participatory in nature, it enabled me to work with the co-participants in a collaborative and reciprocal way in and through this 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 utilized 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.