How Anti-anti-Ethnocentrism Might Offer a Useful Lens through which to READ Educational Reforms in Uganda as more than Fitting a ‘Square Peg in a Round hole’

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Abstract Numerous research efforts in Africa south of the Sahara have suggested that reforms to improve quality of learning environments through teacher re-training and curriculum reform are bound to fail. Teacher-centred pedagogies which presuppose a universally given ‘order of things’ are more efficient for teaching dogmatic learning of scientific facts and principles, while progressive discovery approaches tended to be more effective in promoting progressive scientific attitudes and skeptical-critical understandings that are not typically African. The discussion is meant to highlight, contrary to rampant ‘reform pessimism’, the liberating nature of recent reforms as they render neo-Kantian notions of a unilinear, formalistic and anti-ethnocentric curriculum de facto problematic. Signs of hope and renewal for the Ugandan girl child in the wake of Covid-19 lockdown are highlighted in support of mindset shift away from ‘purely’ formalistic rules and principles.

Keywords: collective identity, liberalism, cultural relativism, formalism and social constructivism, gessellschaft, and wahlverwandtschaft, connoisseurs of justice and love, citizens of nation states, consumers in a corporate world


1. Introduction

Ugandan schools are grappling with 21st century skills and competences, where above all things, learners are prepared to (later on) constitute their identity on the basis of their active consumption of products offered to them by the leisure, media, and consumer goods industries, cultural-religious, social and political ideologies and so on [1]. Lack of criticality, or passive consumption of knowledge, is to be discouraged. This includes what [2] terms “deep-rooted revelatory philosophies about the nature of truth and how it should be revealed (which) often provide the basis for formalistic educational paradigms, providing long-term patterns for teachers and student behaviours, notably a didactic approach to revelation of knowledge to learners” ([2]: 135). From the perspective of the ‘critical school’, Paulo Freire’s statement on active consumption is clear: “the more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality imposed on them” ([3]: 54]. Education without dogma seems to be better guarantee of a more worthy future for Africa.

Ongoing curriculum reforms in Uganda target enhanced quality of education to produce secondary school learners with employable skills and competitiveness in the job market. In short, the new trends deliberately target the formation of a specific identity of a middle class that “stands for variety against inflexibility, expression against repression, the inter-personal against the inter-positional” [4]. This agenda requires that the “measure of education needs to be broadened to reinstate value for socially connected learning, for innovation, for creativity, for critical understanding, for mutuality in learning processes, for connected and thematic teaching and learning, for ongoing assessment and compiling portfolios in preference to high-stakes testing” [5]. The search for certain, necessary, univocal and indubitable truth is being replaced by acceptance of the ambivalent, and often ambiguous, equivocal, nature of truth.

2. Disembodied Anti-Ethnocentric Learning Environments

Pedagogy has deep roots into modern Enlightenment philosophy and its dualism between mind and body,
intellect and emotions, and especially split between res cogitans (non-material) and res extensa (material). This has, ever since the concept of mind came to be transposed into the concept of ‘reason’, seen to the privileging of the capacity for abstract (mathematical and logical) thinking, or ‘accurate mirroring’ of external reality [6]. ‘Thin’ descriptions and definitions are more privileged (as revelatory of truth) than ‘thick’ descriptions because they are coherent with an emancipatory cultural crusade—a liberation from the backwardness, superstitions and prejudices, vulgar pleasures and local dialects [7]: 97. African communities, just as European before them, were at last going to be free of ‘ethnocentric’ (superstitious) determinations and encumbrances, thanks to a ‘formalistic’ philosophical (Platonist) dream “that it was possible to both justify liberal ideals and specify limits to liberal tolerance by an appeal to transcultural criteria of rationality [6].

With such liberation in view, Kant devised an epistemologically-oriented mode of investigating the world from a ‘neutral’ perspective, aiming at reproducing universal truth. The ‘intellectual self’ was (out of himself, by himself and for himself, thus individually) capable of creating order exclusively on the basis of the ‘facts’, on the one hand, and on the basis of the Kantian ‘eternal laws of reason’, on the other [7]. In seeking to emancipate the modern self from the immaturity and self-tutelage of premodern selves, Kant erased the ‘in-between’, the middle (psychological-idiosyncratic and cultural-linguistic) space between the facts and the rational judgement, such that nothing subjective or intersubjective (embodied) may, during public exchanges, any longer intervene. In effect, therefore, Kant saw to it that one can no longer legitimate ones claim to truth by referring to, for example, the tradition, religious or cultural authorities, local morals and customs, or the doxa of community, that is, the “opinions and beliefs of common understanding” [7]. Formalism has thus a universalistic (anti-ethnocentric) appeal, and the gap it creates in African learning environments, we argue, is what the new educational reforms are attempting to fill. The aim of formalism, we argue, has been to place classroom experiences and problems in a more general and abstract framework (politicization) whereas, the aim of recent reforms is to personalise them much more via moralisation and psychologization. All this is possible through re-embodiment of the African learner, let him or her relate to others (sharing experiences and ideas) through the intermediary of the boy treated as a sign and not as an instrument [1]. A return to some form of Gemeinschaft (ethnocentrism) is evident, more appealing to learners and less appealing to teachers and parents who were brought up within the old Gesellschaft system.

Bernstein referred to the standard neo-Kantian Gesellschaft mode as a kind of ‘visible socialisation’; given its (universalistic) objectifying gaze. We refer to it as anti-ethnocentrism, since it translated into a kind of universalist view of scientific knowledge that has continued to characterise Ugandan curricula and pedagogies insofar as they resist integrating not only personal or psychological traits (liberalism), but also local cultural-linguistic beliefs and moral values (cultural relativism). We refer to what Bernstein calls ‘invisible socialisation’ as anti-anti-ethnocentrism, since it translates into the integration of the ‘deepest aspirations’ of what is called the ‘humanistic modernity’. In 21st century Africa, multiculturalism and pluralism is on the rise due to natural and human-made calamities, like famine, urbanisation, wars and migrations. This demands an anti-anti-ethnocentrism, which while avoiding the old rigid systematising (and fragmentation) of curricula so as to save them from contamination by (lower) cultural-linguistic elements, enables a new conception of civilisation in terms of inclusiveness and tolerance of ambiguity.

Anti-ethnocentric pedagogies are efficient for teaching scientific facts and principles, as [2] testifies. However, they effectively reproduced the ‘abstract’ self-professionally speaking, an atomistic selfhood that is clearly observable and controllable, and eventually gives the nation state technocrats who are easy to substitute or replace with others (since depersonalised, de-particularised), to fit within fixed roles in a total efficient system [1,7]. The modern selves would be identifiable in their use of a public discourse (frontstage) which is formalised clearly separated from the private (backstage). The politisation of discourses, however, ruled out the possibility of genuine self-critical reflection since they privileged the cognitive over and above the emotional [1,8,9]. Pedagogies and examinations were, to use Foucault’s language, constructed anti-ethnocentrically as apparatuses of compulsory objectification rendering the learner atomic, (quantitatively) calculable, and easily comparable to others. “The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalising judgement. It is a normalising gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify, and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates and judges them” [[10]: 175].

In Uganda, Covid-19 would have been an opportunity to switch to a reformed pedagogy since the new curriculum model is therapeutical, preparing the learner to deal with ambivalences and ambiguities. The new pedagogies thus seek to integrate the social and emotional well-being of both teachers and learners [11,12,13]. There is a concern with ways to help educators manage their social and emotional well-being during catastrophic and daily events. However, especially with regard to new assessment approaches that incorporate social and emotional learning, there is in Ugandan schools’ cases where formalism seems to be recalcitrant to reforms. As the head of secondary curriculum at NCDC claims: “Most schools are defiant to the new curriculum because the training of teachers was affected by the Covid-induced lockdown that began in March 2020” [[14]:30]. So, teachers are currently reported to be failing to implement the new grading system, but continuing with issuing ordinary report cards. An NCDC official the defiance is due to the fact that “As we rolled out the new curriculum and trained over 20,000 teachers, Covid-19 came, schools were closed for quite a long time (two years) and teachers adopted different things: and when schools were reopened, they (teachers) had forgotten all they had been taught and needed a lot of support” [[14]: 30].

Another reason given (by a head teacher) for this is: “You cannot convince parents paying fees that their children have performed well using the new grading
system which they have not been sensitised about. Instead, we gave them (students) exams for accountability purposes”.

3. Reform Pessimism, Anti-ethnocentrism and the Cultural Imperialist Thesis

In Uganda, the traditional teacher has enjoyed an ‘absolute confidence’ in his or her judgements of taste, and had no qualms of conscience about moulding society in terms of his/her ‘special’ knowledge. This positional role is perhaps difficult to let go, just as the purportedly epistemic (privileged) nature of the truth conveyed. Thus, as Guthrie shows, teaching and learning practices in sub-Saharan Africa are still largely ‘routine’ or ‘mechanical’: “Little variation existed in the routine classroom practices that typified formalistic teaching in the school. Classes moved as a whole from one activity to another. Teachers usually started lessons with re-capitulation of the previous lesson, followed lecturing and brief notes written on the board. Few questions came from the students, who generally sat quietly, and student-student interaction was conspicuously absent except in occasional small group-discussions. The lessons usually ended with recapitulation by teachers or quizzing of the students [2].

Anti-ethnocentrism served as a tool for modern nation-state functionaries, including teachers, to promote social integration (convergence), and a supra-communal homogeneity, and assimilation into a dominant ‘national’ culture (gesellschaft) in place of localised ethnic gemeinschaft forms. What the two share in common is a dogmatic, uncritical attitude in regard to an external (supra-communal, transcendent, divine or rational) source of legitimisation of truth. Thus, as Guthrie testifies, African “students saw knowledge as external, a commodity possessed by the school and teachers, and found in textbooks. If they wanted to pass the examinations, they had to get it from these textbooks” [2]: 127. [2] refers to a famous analysis based the prevalence of teacher-centred pedagogies in Africa on a ‘philosophy of knowledge’ (epistemology) and worldview (cosmology) deeply embedded in the wider culture of Botswana and mindsets of teachers and learners. “Children were exposed to this from earliest childhood, and it was part of the culture they brought to the classroom, so that teachers and students shared the same educational philosophy” [2]: 129. The pressure to impose 21st century (depoliticised, and psychologically and socialised) soft skills amounts to a denial of ‘cultural relativism’ [2]: 124. Thus, reform pessimists will front the cultural-imperialist thesis according to which globalisation comes down to a cultural homogenisation and universalisation at the cost of cultural diversity and the existing ethnocultural identities [2,15]. Thus, educational reform pessimists support writers who have attacked the World Bank global approach to educational policy over more than three decades as “being ideologically driven, insensitive to local contexts and treating education as independent of international dynamics and national and local economics and cultures” [2]: 126. Just like the Hegelian dialectic assumed, all peoples from whatever geographical or historical backgrounds are teleologically converging toward a cosmopolitan ideal end point, namely, a (popular, humanistic) democratic society [2,16]. This explains why Beeby’s model of four progressive teacher training stages is prejudiced in favour of such convergence: placing learner-centred (horizontal, democratic, embodied) pedagogies at the top, and rote learning and teacher-centred (hierarchical, positional, disembodied) at the bottom.

4. Reform Optimism and Cosmopolitanism without Emancipatory Ideals

Reform optimists downplay the kind of cosmopolitanism which Kant sought to achieve via anti-ethnocentrism, and the identity-formation of a transcendental selfhood, a public trustee. However, they urge that there is one which can be achieved via anti-anti-ethnocentrism, and through a willingness to engage open conversations. Instead of obedient and willing subjects of the state (passive consumers), teachers are like Bourdieu’s new intellectuals or new petit bourgeois, equipped with such skills as would yield skilful and eager (active) consumers [17]: 17. This is discernible for example, within Uganda’s National Teachers Policy: “In order to prepare learners who will thrive in the increasingly digital, information driven, dynamic and globalized workplace, teachers ought to adopt and implement the 21st century teaching skills which include: (a) Learner-centered teaching and learning methods (such as differentiated instruction, project-based learning and authentic assessment). (b) Soft skills such as communication, digital literacy, team work, empathy, problem solving and creativity, mindfulness, moral values, etcetera. (c) Integration of ICT and other technologies in teaching and learning. (d) Holistic learning which imparts learners with the knowledge and competence to know, be, do and live with each other. (e) Gender equity, sustainability and inclusiveness” [17]: 60.

In Uganda, reforms are geared toward a form of “learning (that) is not confined to the achievement of academic goals alone”, but that “should be promoted in a range of contexts both within and outside the classroom”. This contextualisation and embodiment is “compressed in 6 Cs namely: Curiosity; Concentration; Creativity; Confidence; Collaboration; and Competence which are the qualities that Government seeks to impart in learners” [17]: 6. There is a clear emphasis on blurring of the boundaries (Cartesian dualisms) between mind and body, ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ skills, such that the learning environments are no longer de-contextualised. With the reduction of contrasts, of sharp opposition between the cognitive and emotional, the regulative and the creative, the managerial and the activist, epistemology and care ethics, philosophy and poetry/art, so there is increasing informalisation so that the learner discloses him or herself holistically. An inclusive mindset due to “stronger emphasis on gender equality within schools”, “incorporation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)”, and “integration of students with special needs” in the education system. Such
developments require re-examination of the role of teachers, their preparation and work” ([17]: 6).

Reform pessimists, in retaining oppositional, binary, Cartesian thinking, think that the main focus of educational reform is a replacement of formalism with practical engagement, mind with body— with the consequence that reforms have failed to improve educational standards” ([2]: 125). Whereas, by contrast, the optimists reject any perspective that pretends to capture the ‘way things really are anyway’, and therefore, do not anymore see ‘objectification’ and control of the natural and social reality (system-building) as more important than reconfirming bonds of solidarity, blurring the boundaries between the school and community, the institutional and every day. Moreover, Harvard researchers like [18] have taught them to no longer view intellectualist ‘test scores’ as guarantors of success in life. The optimist will easily appreciate the holistic rationale of reforms in Uganda, as suggested by cosmopolitan goals of UNESCO:

“The [17] is also intended to promote consistent outstanding standards in learning and teaching. It recognises that what happens in classrooms is fundamental in helping learners acquire the skills and habits of the mind to be successful learners not only at school but throughout their lives generally. This is in line with UNESCO’s four pillars of education namely: (a) Learning to know: to provide the cognitive tools required to better comprehend the world and its complexities, and to provide an appropriate and adequate foundation for future learning; (b) Learning to do: to provide the skills that would enable individuals to effectively participate in the global economy and society; (c) Learning to be: to provide self-analytical and social skills to enable individuals to develop to their fullest potential psycho-socially, affectively as well as physically, for an all-round ‘complete person’; and (d) Learning to live together: to expose individuals to the values implicit within human rights, democratic principles, intercultural understanding and respect and peace at all levels of society and human relationships to enable individuals and societies to live in peace and harmony” ([17]: 6-7)

5. Social-contractual and Paternalistic Relations in Traditional Learning Environments

Sometimes [2]’s anti-ethnocentric, formalist teacher sounds like “the modern individual, who is free de jure, (and) enters into relations with others on a rational-contractual basis”, “Teacher dominance was a mutually constructed, negotiated product resulting from students and teachers exercising power on each other within the constraints of set by their context. Students contributed to teacher-centredness through their expectations of teacher behaviour and actually had considerable informal power over teachers’ reputations. The students particularly defined teacher competence as deriving from their subject knowledge and their ability to impart it efficiently. Teacher were aware of their reputation and actively avoided teaching acts that might get them labelled as incompetent by students. Students silence in class was not a sign of laziness, deviance or powerlessness, but was rational behaviour communicating their expectation that teachers would tell them the required knowledge was actually a form of countervailing power ([2]: 128).

Learners’ silence is not necessarily a product of teachers’ inherent desire for social control, but a mutually constructed, negotiated product resulting from a ‘social-contractual’ relation. It is also related to a tradition of a ‘benevolent paternalism’ with the teacher looking at learners as vulnerable and helpless. The teacher’s position is justified in paternalistic terms as a selfless guide to what is ‘culturally worthwhile’ (rational). This argument would repel every attack on the monopoly of the teacher. Likewise, since the Hobbesian contract was based on an unquestioned presupposition of a chaotic (irrational) social world, society is reproduced that is urgently in need of a ‘redeemer’. In the ‘State of Nature’ (which he also called the ‘Natural Right of Liberty’), particular ethnocentric groupings will have competing ends, be suspicious of each other, and inevitably a ‘war of all against all’ will prevail. Dreams of human grandeur would not be realisable [19]. To this warre of every man against every man … nothing can be Unjust. The notion of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice, have no place. Only a ‘social contract’ where all surrender their personal rights to a ‘sovereign’ can unambiguously ensure Right and Justice. Ugandan teachers, paternalism would suggest, do not want to dominate, but are forced by the condition of learners themselves who are presumed to be unable to freely (rationally) engage with an often unconstrained, chaotic, ambivalent and ambiguous natural world. A regime of jurisdiction and veridiction comes to be justified as a central part of the teacher’s professional practice, placing at the margins particularistic and personal concerns, interests, difficulties and fears of the learner [20]. The teacher, playing the role of a Platonic Guardian to regulate the teaching and learning process in the learners’ interest, is (wrongly) convinced that learners are unable to identify their own interests unaided. Within such imperialistic discourse, the learner is thus objectified product of organisation, authority, and responsibility [20].

“The teachers all viewed schooling as a vocational route to employment mediated by the school examination system and the possibility of higher education. They perceived that imparting and delivery of curriculum knowledge and keeping order in class was their main responsibilities so that students gained knowledge needed to pass exams. The student’s role was perceived as receiving the teacher’s knowledge” ([2]: 127). As transmitters of unbiased knowledge, which is imprinted onto learners’ mind understood as John Locke’s wax tablet (tabula rasa), their authority was absolute. The assumption that Ugandan teacher-learner relations reflect a closeness to local African forms of socialisation, where what [2] termed a ‘positional identity’ is reproduced might be right. You have something not very different from the primary socialisation in the African family, which does not view the learner’s apparent passivity (docility) as negative. Moreover, a positional family is characterised by a strong role segregation and a formal division of responsibility and power in function of age, gender, and status [4]. The rules and norms are explicitly formulated
from above on the basis of ‘positional’ appeals. As Bernstein states: the learner who is regulated in ‘visible socialisation’ is “explicitly linked to others who hold a similar universal or particular status” (“boys do not cry”). Thus, Foucault suggested that knowledge, power, and the body as interrelated in the achievement of subjugation.

6. Examinations and Traditional Learning Environments

In the old paradigm, as Guthrie notes, “clear discipline provided greater control and more student attention, the likelihood of more rote learning and higher examination scores … in the new paradigm, progressive styles of teaching may not be appropriate markers of quality in developing countries” [2]. In progressive styles of teaching, knowledge is seen as intimate and subjective. The classroom is not a place of orderly rectilinear progress (assembly line) in a neat and tidy setting. Education is a process of engaging, experiencing, satirical protest against colonial intolerance, and suspicion against the deceptions of rectilinear thought, and promotion of a personally-appropriated choosing and acting. This is said to be un-African, but phenomenologists (since Husserl) have shown us the impossibility of an impersonal, (prejudice-free) formal starting point for new knowledge. When phenomena appear, they can only appear (in many various ways) to a subject. This is because, as Edmund Husserl discovered, the immediate experience is not the closedness of consciousness (Descartes), but rather, the intentionality of our consciousness. Just as in Vygotsky, a school culture is needed where passive, uncritical consumption of knowledge is ruled out. Actively engaged, the learner is meant to relate foreign beliefs, ideas and experiences to what he or she already knows, such that meaningfulness and purposefulness from particular cultural-linguistic backgrounds becomes key to learning [16].

From a phenomenological perspective, classroom conversations cannot lead to memorisation alone, but also poetic imaginations, innovations (hybridisation) and transformation of current beliefs and desires. “The educator has an inviting relationship where the learner is invited to take part in the dialogue of creating new meaning. The educator and learner are both parts of the meaning-making process. Dialogue is the heart of a curriculum giving it authenticity”. According to Omolewa, collaborative, meaning-driven, playful, and interactive pedagogies are not new to Africans, since their traditional education was already an intricate combination of the spiritual, imaginative, cognitive, ethical, emotional, and bodily growth. He suggests that “The teachers’ role might have to change from being a transmitter of knowledge to a mediator and facilitator of learning. The expectation of the student would need to change from a passive receiver of knowledge to an autonomous learner, reflective thinker and problem solver, who is actively involved in his/her own learning and construction of knowledge [2]. However, by now, according to Guthrie, traditional informal and non-formal methods are often ill-adapted to (a pervasive) formalist paradigm. Formalism and decontextualization or disembodiment favours easy substitutability of the modern professional, such that teachers who may lack ‘local knowledge’ on which to build curricula and who may not be familiar with local culture of the ethnos, if they are teaching outside their own ethnos. Therefore, according to Guthrie, a classical Kantian discourse which does not draw its power of persuasion from (contingent) personal characteristics of the speaker (his or her ethos) or by taking advantage of the emotions of the community or ethnos (pathos) is preferable in Africa [2,7].

The ‘I’ reproduced in Guthrie’s formalistic learning environments cannot be considered a concrete person, but is an ‘abstract self’, situatable and quotable within a specific discursive field. He fits within a totalitarian system, rather uneasy with the ‘unfamiliar’, whereas, within new curricula and pedagogies, one sees a commitment to widening of acquaintance with the different. At the ethical level, boundary drawing is replaced by a commitment to mutual love and compassion for the victims of 20th century totalitarian or colonial systems. One thus creates learning environments that come across as relaxed and informal, that encourage personal expression, creativity and choice., and where no explicit hierarchy or authority is present. At the level of science, there is the expectation of great benefits from the cross-fertilisation (hybridisation) of various disciplines or cultural artifacts. Reality is re-described as being constituted by a web of interrelations in which the patterns renew themselves in a creative way. Honest science, thus, consists in allowing interrelatedness and variety to take place, just as in natural ecosystems, in the human lifeworld too. Poly morphic existence is better than monotonous uniformity (and the preoccupation with measuring and testing), and this characterises a holistic development even of the human brain.

Thus Ugandan teacher training and re-training will require nothing less than a paradigm shift. The failure to adopt constructivist philosophy has exacerbated an already rampant privileging of the left brain by the traditional examination system. Whereas holistic and relevant assessment demands that teachers go beyond the measurement of a single intelligence or what is easily quantifiable or (susceptible to visible socialisation) or controllable [21]. In traditional Ugandan assessment models, intelligence is generally assumed to be a ‘unitary construct’, and learners differed in how intelligent they were, and this difference is determined by examinations. As a given, IQ is, from early on in one’s life, relatively stable and inflexible, not be altered. Intelligence has been understood in dominant terms of a visible, objectifiable, quantifiable outcome serving as accountability to clients (especially parents) of schools. This is coherent with the (philosophical) assumption that human thought is a stable and predictable representation of an essence that can be objectively known. However, [22] has claimed that a word for intelligence in a society of sailors would probably be navigational ability. So, he re-defined intelligence as “the ability to solve problems or to fashion products, that are valued in one or more cultural or community settings” [22]: 7. At the moment, Ugandan examinations are meant to cohere with the requirements of an objective, public sphere (gesellschaft-organisation of society) or formal sector even as the informal employs more graduates. “Before the new curriculum was rolled out, the performance of learners was presented in percentages of
between 0 and 100 for lower and upper limits respectively. However, this has since changed to a competence-based approach. The new curriculum phases out beginning of term (BoT), weekly, monthly, and end of term examinations, and laid ground for the students’ assessment to only be done at the end of the year” [14]:30. In spite of lessened exam-orientation, Ugandan teachers continue to pay their respects to an identity formation that creates an atomistic individual who knows his/her place in a functionally differentiated whole. Individuality of this kind is a top-down product: “individuals are differentiated according the demand of the system, and individuation becomes a disciplinary mechanism” [[23]: 161]. This individual fitted well within politically patronised, centralistic and bureaucratic state where one needed to standardise production and consumption. However, as the informal sector employs more young people, identity formation has to change to include (linguistic and bodily) ‘self-expression of the learner’, ‘sensitivity for own unique giftedness, strengths or talents’ (and weaknesses), ‘doing what one is passionate (or self-driven) about’, empathic engagement and problems-solving through collaborative team-work.

In regard to paradigm shift, [[22]: 19] expanded our imagination in regard to intelligence when he explained that “in my own work, I have spurned formal testing completely. Instead, I have sought to document the existence of different human intelligences”. Coherent with the drive not to place diverse experiences within standardised, even abstract (communalist) frameworks, the obsession with traditional examinations is coming to appear as misplaced. When a teacher no longer feels the urge to homogenise and standardise production and consumption of knowledge (as in a service-oriented context), he or she starts to notice divergent personal desires of learners [[24]:13] First of all, by privileging ‘mental’ abilities in the left brain (linguistic, logical and mathematical thinking), IQ tests have been partial and thus unfair to learners, ignoring the role of a holistic mental development. Second, examinations, insofar as they reflect positivist obsessions with the quantitatively given, ignore the complex and ambivalent, open and adaptive nature of the human brain.

7. Comments on New Ugandan Learning Environments

Educational reforms in Uganda have promoted classroom situations that come across as relaxed and informal, that encourage personal expression, creativity, and choice, and where no explicit hierarchy or authority is present. During school practice, some student-teacher would consider these hitherto ‘unfamiliar’ environments ‘rather noisy and ‘disorderly’. We would, during conferencing, urge them to observe how, at the same time (due to their nature as a species of invisible socialisation), the possibility of total control that embraces all aspects of life (cognitive and emotional, cultural/moral and psychological/ idiosyncratic, spiritual and bodily) is in-built. In this way, we thought that they would appreciate how such learning environments invite (or oblige) the learner to open himself/herself in the affective and emotional proximity of ‘small conversational communities’, Wenger’s communities of practice, or ‘study and research groups’ [25,26]. In this seeking out of the others, a conversion to a certain form of African gemeinschaft (communalism) becomes visible, but then “more … on the basis of Wahlerwandschaft (affinity, shared interests and concerns) than on the basis of inherited or ascribed characteristics [27]. Many student-teachers, having had an experience of these at university, were comfortable with the new curriculum.

Instead of the usual construal of active participation in terms of ‘question and answer’ style of engaging, we experienced significant adoption of change in sitting arrangement, group discussions, and reports of findings. Most of our student teachers were availed with text books, story books, and most of them improvised teaching aids using local materials. Student reception of new pedagogies were generally positive, since they were allowed to participate more intimately in their own growth. And this has been reflected in New Vision surveys.

Subjects have been reduced to 12 from 15 subjects. Learning starts from 8.00 am and much of it is participative, including learners engaging discussions in groups, composing own notes and meanings, and sharing knowledge. A student teacher who was incredulous claimed. “At first, I could not believe that learners could work out these issues on their own, but they have always surprised me with the quality of work they can reproduce!” After 3.00 pm, learners go for research in the library or academic clubs to acquire a skill (e.g. performing art, religion, sports, farming, and other vocational skills that are not part of the Ugandan citizenry (Mamdani, ). This narrowness of imagination has deprived the country of potential entrepreneurs and implementers. Now, theory-based examinations (reflecting a top-down communication process and strongly decontextualised discourses) are being increasingly replaced by competence-based examinations involving first, a description of a problem (in the natural or social environment) that confronted or challenged you to be solved; second, what you did, how and why you did it thus, and; third, the learning outcomes, lessons already learned. Examinations mirror a strongly contextualised discourse no longer distanced from the materiality of everyday life [[23]: 49].

Lessons learnt in relation to Covid-19, for example: “The lack of social and emotional support in education and the outcomes are becoming clearer every day. Instead of viewing this as a problem, we need to understand this as an opportunity to rethink and reinvent teacher preparation [11]. This competence-based mode will point out the practical requirement for intensive re-training of teachers. We need to prepare our educators to understand themselves and learn to make positive changes within, then learn to do the same with their students. In Uganda’s rural and hard to reach areas, after the long lockdown, the presence of ‘caring’ senior female teachers have been instrumental in attracting girls back to school as they can monitor different bodily changes. In a 2022 study by of John Paul II Justice and Peace Centre entitled Covid-19
Pandemic: Bottleneck to the Education of the Teenage Girls in Uganda, only 52 out of 157 girls returned to at Oryang Primary School. According to the director of the research centre: “Although the government provided a fortnight-training for teachers and headteachers shortly before the schools reopened, it is revealed that some of the schools were not prepared for handling teenage mothers and expectant ones” [[28]:33].

8. Anti-anti-Ethnocentrism, Teacher Symbolism and Expansion of Imagination

Uganda’s National Teachers Policy demands that: “All teachers will be required to consistently and continuously keep up-to-date with new knowledge, skills and teaching practices. Teachers will be required to attend refresher courses to upgrade on their qualifications hence broadening skills with the aim of improving performance” [[17]: 55]. continuing professional development is meant to ensure that teachers are no longer merely examining themselves as connoisseurs of justice (convergence), but also of compassion (inclusivity, divergence), a feature that blurs the former boundaries (and hierarchical relationships) between expert knowledge (episteme) and ordinary common-sense knowledge (doxa), ideas and emotions, mental and bodily. The new curriculum reforms address the need for connoisseurs of diversity, especially in a changing classroom environment where you have a conversation among like minds where curricula are valued as extensions of everyday life. This is all easily said, since inclusivity is a constant task. For while lots of Ugandan teachers are still unable to imagine themselves in the shoes of each of their students, from a legal point of view, they at least ensure that (a minimal) procedural justice is dispensed to the learners. [2] takes pride in the fact that the formalities are in place, in a continent where many schools lack teachers, low school budget allocation for teaching aids, and a dogmatic mindset, one should expect that success is determined by exam performance rather than development of personal talents, abilities, skills and competencies that [11] are promoting. There is legal-rational light enough (accountability) for most of Ugandan teachers to do their routine teaching, and to do it right. However, Ugandan reform optimists would think that, by now, such minimalism needs transcending, given the pace at which change is occurring on the African continent. The teacher, standing at the front of classrooms, holds a modern view (e.g. superiority and universality of Western knowledge). Students, sitting in their rows of desks, hold a postmodern view (e.g. validity of particular, local beliefs, customs and practices as promoted on FM Radios).

Covid-19 challenges have taught us that learner-centred teaching environments are better tools because there is a difference between relations that are purely legal, and those that are touched by love and compassion [6]. If we have a slow learner do the same (formalistic) exams as the rest, there is a way in which interactions between teachers and learners ‘happen in the dark’, for if we had watched the child grow up, had travelled the road he or she had travelled, we might have had difficulty reconciling the demands of love and justice. Before Covid-19, it has been well for Ugandan society that in most cases, the remoteness (due to hierarchies and dualisms) justified teachers’ ignorance and thus permitted us to avoid such dilemmas (between justice and love). In the public sphere: “Most of the time, justice has to be enough” [6]. However, Covid-19 emerges in an era where hierarchies (and sharp contrasts) between the global and local, the public and private, the intellectual and emotional, increasingly become more ambiguous and ambivalent, and therefore, a shift to open texts is inevitable. These developments require ‘active’ audience groups able to make meanings out of the global that are useful to them in making sense of their own social experiences and therefore of themselves [23]. All this means that retraining (in view of curricula reforms) recasts the teacher from a different mould, from inaccessibility to familiarity. The aim is to have teachers and learners exist within a common universe of experiences.

9. Conclusions and Implications

Uganda has ended the world’s longest school closure, ordering millions of students back to the classroom after a gap of nearly two years. Some 15 million pupils have not attended school in Uganda since March 2020 when classrooms were shuttered as Covid-19 swept the world. Figures from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) indicate that about 354, 736 teenage pregnancies in Uganda were registered in 2020 while 196, 499 were recorded in the six months of 2021. Under these circumstances, Ugandan (and other African countries like Sierra Leone) schools have been directed to allow pregnant students continue with education. However, conservative religious leaders have openly opposed such inclusivity in terms of ‘moral licentiousness’. In the meantime, women activists (against teenage pregnancies and school inclusiveness) have pointed that rejection of pregnant girls is a form of ‘secondary victimisation’, and that perpetrators of this injustice are going to be prosecuted in courts of law. This calls for deliberate stakeholder engagement so that no child, especially the girl child, is left behind while stakeholders focus on who is right and who is wrong. Social-cultural beliefs and practices could fuel gender inequality, disfavouring girls’ education. The cultural background disfavour girls, since the ordinary parent see the girl-child as a source of dowry than as an educated, independent citizen. Given the (contrastive, confrontational and non-conversational) gap between the school (frontstage) and the local communities (backstage), many rural children and parents do not understand going to school as emancipatory.

School leadership is a key requirement to keep girls in school and ensuring that they learn, achieve and thrive. This is critical for creating school culture, systems and safe spaces which are not based on the notions of wrong and right but rather on the equality and equity for all. In this way, even the girls who have got pregnant will get an opportunity to get back to school and learn. School leadership is also key in mobilising other stakeholders such as teachers and parents. This is also in line with the
new policy: “In the process of determining the best teachers, consideration will be put on; academic excellence of learners, moral and social value possession by learner and teacher, leadership, teamwork, creativity and innovation among other parameters as stipulated under the 21st century teaching skills and competences”

References


