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JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Generational, Cultural, and Linguistic Integration for Literacy Learning and Teaching in Uganda: Pedagogical Possibilities, Challenges, and Lessons from one NGO

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ABSTRACT: This qualitative case study focuses on a volunteer-led local NGO in Uganda to examine how integrating generations, cultures, and languages is enhancing literacy learning to help ethnically and linguistically diverse rural communities survive in the prevailing globally competitive neoliberal environment. Immersing the study in the social practices approach to literacy, the authors argue that in light of the currently globalizing world in which information, knowledge, and the emerging Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are crucial for survival, a single approach to literacy learning that over-emphasizes formal literacy for children in an ethno-linguistically diverse nation is counterproductive, because it will only help to undermine efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Findings from data collected through qualitative methods revealed that the NGO's voluntary initiative is not only uniting the rural communities across generations and cultures, but also significantly contributing toward reinforcing the informal literacies and practices they badly need to tackle the diverse challenges facing the present generation. The authors recommend that since rural communities' literacy experiences and practices are unique and diverse, efforts by all stakeholders should be directed toward supporting and sustaining such an innovative informal initiative that promotes learning and application of informal literacy practices of the rural communities so as to bridge the gap among informal, non-formal, and formal education/learning and contribute toward the realization of the SDGs.

Keywords: Culture, generation, globalization, integration, language, literacy, neoliberalism and pedagogy

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Our present generation is living in a globalized world and a neoliberal environment. Globalization refers to an increased economic integration among nations, characterized by the movement of people, ideas, social customs, and products across borders. It is driven by the emerging Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) on the one hand, and neoliberalism on the other (Kliesen, 2007). These two phenomena operate side by side and impact people's lives differently (Treanor, 2004). Whereas many people credit them for having made the world a small village where everyone can freely interact, scholarly evidence suggests that globalization has instead worsened the degree of inequality among the people in the global village (Baldwin & Martin, 1999; Goldberg & Pavcnik, 2007; Lindert & Williamson, 2003). This inequality is exacerbated by the standardization of literacy and education, which mute the diverse voices available to invigorate society.

This paper discusses how one volunteer-led indigenous NGO, the Uganda Rural Literacy and Community Development Association (URLCODA), has tried to innovatively integrate generations, cultures, and languages to enhance literacy learning among ethno-linguistically diverse rural communities in Uganda to enable them to survive in the prevailing globally competitive neoliberal environment. We locate the paper in the New Literacies Studies and social practices approach to literacy (Street, 1995). We argue that the current globalized world is characterized by dependence on the emerging ICTs. In this context the government is over-emphasizing development of school or formal literacy for children in an ethno-culturally and linguistically diverse nation in which many adults are non-literate. This standardization will curtail efforts being directed toward the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), because in real life, there are unique and diverse literacy experiences that may not necessarily be learned within classroom space alone.

Background and Context of the Study

We next present a brief background and context of the literacy and education provision, in which neoliberalism is apparently overshadowing the African traditional concept and spirit for voluntarism in supporting those in need. The International Literacy Data 2011 from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) reported that 796 million adults could not read and write (Grey, 2012). Although these figures suggest the stark reality of the global literacy inequalities, Grey (2012) maintains that they are imprecise and say little about what it means to be literate or to have enough literacy. Unfortunately, such figures tend to influence development interventions in most developing countries, including Uganda. Yet literacy continues to be understood in a more limited and conventional way as a uniform and technical set of skills related to reading and writing that exist autonomously and are taught independent of learners' lives (Grey, 2012). If literacy is to be understood in a more meaningful way, multiple approaches to its study, provision, and learning, grounded in varied historical, theoretical, conceptual, and contextual perspectives as suggested by New Literacy Studies, are needed. We next describe the background and context of literacy with special emphasis on Uganda, where our study was conducted.

Geopolitically, Uganda is located in East Africa and shares borders with Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Republic of South Sudan. It is a relatively small country occupying 236,040 square kilometers (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Its current population is estimated to be 35.7 million (Natukunda, 2013), of which over 80 percent lives in rural areas. Historically, it was colonized by the United Kingdom and attained political independence on

October 9, 1962. The foundation of much of the modern literacy and education work in the country was laid by Christian missionaries (Ssekamwa, 1997).

Socioculturally, Uganda is a multiethnic nation with over 50 constitutionally recognized ethnic groups, each speaking different languages (Government of Uganda, 1995; United Nations Development Programme, 2005). This linguistic plurality complicates issues in choosing the most appropriate language of instruction for teaching and learning literacy in schools.

Socioeconomically, Uganda is one of the world's poorest countries, with 67 percent of the population being vulnerable to poverty (Anguyo, 2013). HIV/AIDS prevalence rates stand at 7.3% (Parliament of Uganda, 2013) while 6.9 million people are non-literate (Bwambale, 2013), adding to the list of challenges facing the population. However, Uganda has made remarkable progress in the area of education in the past few decades. The ruling regime has implemented programmes that are in line with global efforts to realize goals of Education For ALL (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These goals include achieving Functional Adult Literacy (FAL), Universal Primary Education (UPE), Universal Secondary Education (USE), and equal opportunity for girls and women. However, much more attention has been paid to UPE and USE than FAL, programs that have significantly widened access to formal education for children more than for adults.

Critics have pointed out that some of the programmes—such as the UPE, USE, and

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introduction of mother tongue education policy driven by a whole language approach to teaching—have instead contributed toward the deterioration in quality and standards of education in the country. Different reports have identified a variety of critical issues responsible for the decline in literacy levels of children in primary schools, as evidenced by national assessments. The causes include high rates of dropouts among pupils, students' completion of primary school without having acquired the expected literacy abilities, a sheer lack of local reading materials to facilitate teaching and learning of literacy in mother tongue, and the absence of a reading culture among the population (Ngaka & Masagazi, 2015). It is important that various strategies are explored to address such problems in the education system.

One interesting aspect of literacy and education development that Ssekamwa (1997) identifies is that of indigenous educational systems that preceded the missionary and colonial education efforts established by the British. The education system during the pre-colonial era was constructed around tribal approaches with aims, organization, content, methods of teaching, teachers, and places well known to all. Education was not conducted abstractly in schools, but rather in situated daily life around the fireplace, in the fields, through storytelling, and in other settings around which diurnal activities took place. All children participated as learners, and all adults were responsible for instruction.

Rather than being a colonial imposition, however, the involvement of Christian missionaries came at the invitation of Kabaka Mutesa I, the King of

Buganda Kingdom, with English becoming the lingua franca of formal education early in the 20th century. These schools soon monopolized formal educational settings and efforts in Uganda (Meinert, 2009), and now the traditional, accessible approach to education has been discarded. With the current drive to achieve SDGs, it could be useful to revisit the indigenous methods of education that were non-discriminatory in nature. This possibility suggests the need for the current study, which focuses on the assessment of the relevance, pedagogical possibilities, and challenges of URLCODA's intergenerational, cross-cultural, and multilingual learning in non-formal settings.

Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives on Literacy

We next turn our attention to how literacy is conceptualized and what it means in terms of development. The burgeoning body of literature on literacy suggests that the term lacks a universal definition. Historically, the origin of literacy dates back to 8,000 BCE during the ancient civilization in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China (Chrisomalis, 2009). The earliest forms of written communications are believed to have originated between 3500–3000 BCE and involved impressed token markings used to manage trade and agriculture (Schmandt-Besserat, 1978). Traditionally, the notion of literacy has always been understood in terms of an individual's ability to read and write, which tends to raise questions such as these: Read and write in which language? At what level? In what context? These questions have led some people to view literacy as the ability to read and write in the mother tongue Bhola, (1994).

However, the meaning of the term has continued to expand, and many people have alluded to the fact that it has multiple facets, including the ability to use language, numbers, images, and other means to understand and use the dominant symbol systems of a culture as well as access to knowledge through technology (Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky, 2008; Holme, 2004; UNESCO, 2005). Similarly, McCaffery, Merrifield, and Millican (2007) acknowledge that the word "literacy" has taken many meanings and point out that a question like "What is literacy?" often generates four broad responses that relate literacy to skills, tasks, social practices, and critical reflection. UNESCO (2005) further alludes to the same fact and identifies four discrete understandings of the concept to include: (1) literacy as an autonomous set of skills; (2) literacy as applied, practiced, and situated, (3) literacy as a learning process; and (4) literacy as text.

The varied understandings of the term literacy complicate efforts to arrive at a single definition, a view Harris and Hodges (1995) concur with by identifying six factors that make it very hard to get a universal meaning for the term: (1) the concept of literacy as continuum; (2) the dual referents of literacy, individual, and social; (3) the differing historic, geographic, and linguistic interpretations of the term; (4) the distinctly different and yet complementary sets of complex skills and abilities involved in reading and writing; (5) the way literacy develops differently with respect to such factors as age, sex, and education; and (6) literacy's implications for symbolic language behavior at a level of sophistication far beyond that of an ordinary conversation. The above differences and complications are further amplified by the two main ways in which people tend to conceptualize literacy: as social practices of people, also known as social literacies or the ideological model of literacy on the one hand; and as uniform technical skills whose consequences are the same for everyone, also known as the dominant view of literacy or the autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1984). We briefly describe these two models below to help us determine the conceptual framework that we chose to inform this study.

The Autonomous Model of Literacy

The terms "autonomous" and "ideological" come from Street's (1984) investigations into literacy. The autonomous model is one that offers an opportunity to conceptualize literacy in terms of the dominant view, in which literacy is considered as a set of neutral technical skills with uniform consequences. Street argues that the standard view in many fields, from schooling to development programmes, works from the assumption that literacy autonomously will have effects on other social and cognitive practices, and that introducing it to poor "illiterate" people will have the effect of enhancing their cognitive skills, improving their economic prospects, and making them better citizens, regardless of the social and economic conditions that accounted for their "illiteracy" in the first place (Street, 2003).

Those who subscribe to this school of thought conceptualize literacy variously as an autonomous single and neutral technical skill; an individual accomplishment; a facilitator of the development of critical, rational, and context-free thought; and a necessary condition for attaining economic growth and development (see Goody, 2000; Grabill, 2001). In light of the tenets of the autonomous model perspective on literacy, Holme (2004) argues that literacy is about achieving the cognitive as well as the social skills that individuals need, which determines their motivation and ability to understand and use information in order to engage in activities that will lead to an increased standard of living, progress, and civilization. It is possible that UNESCO's Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP) introduced in the 1960s (see Ngaka & Masagazi, 2015) was based on this kind of conceptualization of literacy, as could be the Functional Adult Literacy Programme of Uganda.

However, critics of the autonomous model of literacy argue that conceptualizing literacy in terms of technical skills of reading and writing alone is insufficient (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996; Street, 2003). They point to the experiences from the EWLP implemented by UNESCO in the 1960s, which indicated that a single approach model to literacy provision was too limited, and that the direct socioeconomic returns from literacy could not be proven (UNESCO, 2004). They further claim that the model ignores the social interactions that go on between people and how this engagement influences learning.

The Ideological Model of Literacy

Unlike the autonomous model of literacy, the ideological model conceptualizes literacy as social practices of people (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996; Street, 1984). The model recognizes the existence of multiple literacies, in which their meanings and uses are related to the specific sociocultural contexts. Proponents of the model place special emphasis on the social nature of human beings and recognize the role of literacy networks and mediators in facilitating those who lack literacy skills but can depend on the skills of literate others in the community (Baynham, 1995). To them literacy is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. They argue further that literacy does not just reside in people's heads as a set of skills to be learned, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be analyzed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people and contexts.

Despite criticisms leveled against the autonomous model, it continues to remain the dominant view of literacy globally, one that influences economic development thinking most. In many countries, efforts to promote rapid economic growth and development are guided by human capital theory, which is closely associated with the autonomous model of literacy. The desire to invest in human capital forces many countries to lay special

emphasis on the development of skills necessary for increasing production and productivity.

Notwithstanding the differences and complications associated with trying to arrive at a single definition for literacy, the consensus most scholars have arrived at is that the concept of literacy is dynamic and has something to do with the ability, skills, and knowledge of reading and writing; and with how such knowledge is used by individuals to deal with their everyday problems. Hence in this study, we adopted a definition by Venezky (1995) in which literacy is conceptualized as "the minimum ability to read and write in a designated language, as well as a mindset or way of thinking about the use of reading and writing in everyday life" (p. 142).

The Importance of Literacy

A review of literature on literacy is very important in this study for two reasons. First, literacy is a very complex, dynamic, and multidimensional phenomenon (Grey, 2012); and second, it is closely linked to language and culture, which are in turn very critical factors in learning the literacies people need to engage in their daily activities. Although literacy does not necessarily mean absence of poverty, some scholars have found that very poor people often tend to have problems with literacy (Desmond, 2004). Literacy plays a vital role in accessing and using information and knowledge. Its role is even more crucial in the currently globalized world characterized by the emerging ICTs, which in the context of developing countries like Uganda tend to favor people living in major cities and urban areas (Ngaka, 2009). Stromquist (1992) underscores the significance of literacy, not only in the acquisition of other skills, but also more generally in the development of

attitudes. She argues that in a world where communication now depends on the written word—facilitated by ICTs—people who lack the skills and ability to read and write are likely to be condemned to the lowest roles in the society. Literacy is therefore important for recognition in society.

In their 18-month ethnographic study of rural women literacy participants in El Salvador, Purcell-Gates and Waterman (2000) report that the neo-literates claimed to have gained a voice in community meetings, and that several of them were able to engage in sophisticated socio-political analysis. Similarly, Ngaka (2009) reports that women who lacked formal literacy in Uganda who were expected to benefit from the Plan for Modernization of Agriculture tended to pull out of their groups because they felt the intervention was for those who were educated or had formal literacy.

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In general terms, literacy and education also have a positive impact on mothers regarding their children's health, as well as education. Vine (1982; cited in Robinson-Pant, 2001) discusses how high levels of education and literacy affect women's behavior toward their children, and concludes that the literacy attainment of mothers accounts for high child health indicators and educational completion. Similarly, UNICEF (1999) reports that in the Indian state of Kerala, which has already achieved universal literacy, the infant mortality rate is the lowest in the entire technologically developing world. A system that tries to integrate generations, cultures, and languages in a multiethnic nation like Uganda potentially offers a strong opportunity for women to be brought on board. Helping them to learn, acquire, and use

their local literacies in context-specific situations is in line with the findings of Purcell-Gates and Waterman (2000) and UNICEF (1999).

The Intergenerational, Cross-Cultural, and Multilingual Conferences in Uganda

We next provide a brief description of URLCODA's intervention, which supports rural communities' local literacies and practices by valuing local cultures and languages in their interactions during their intergenerational, cross-cultural, and multilingual conferences in Uganda. The intervention provides an integrated approach initiated by URLCODA volunteers to support communities' efforts in building and using their informal literacies and practices in order to improve their livelihoods. URLCODA is a volunteer-led, indigenous NGO that was formed by students with the aim of visiting disadvantaged communities to help them access various social services free of charge, using the concept of virtual voluntarism (see http://www.tualu.org/URLCODA/urlcoda-background.htm).

In 2008, the volunteers started an initiative in which they bring together the elderly, the young, students, academicians, and political, cultural, and opinion leaders in the society to a remote village for a week. During these gatherings, the attendants discuss topical issues of interest to the rural poor in order to help them use their own local languages and informal literacies practices, while accessing and sharing information and knowledge to improve their living conditions. The main idea is to bridge the apparent educational, generational, cultural, and linguistic divides in the society so that the participants can benefit from the free interactions.

The initiative was designed to draw mainly the non-literate people from different parts of Uganda. It was envisaged be an annual event that would run on a rotational basis to cover all the regions of Uganda. It has so far been successfully organized in 2008 and 2009 in the Arua district of Northwestern Uganda; in 2010 in the Kamuli district of Eastern Uganda; in 2011 in the Masindi district of Midwestern Uganda; and in 2014 at St. Joseph's College, Ombaci in the Arua District of Northwestern Uganda. The next conference is scheduled to take place in June, 2016. The venues for the conferences are dependent upon the willingness of the communities to host the event and the village's remoteness to basic social services.

The events have been organized by URLCODA in partnership with Private Sector Organizations, other Civil Society Organizations, and the Local Governments of the hosting districts. These groups pool resources to transport participants from different regions and feed them in the course of the conference. The conferences are designed to promote free interactions among everyday people, students, academics, policy makers, implementers, and opinion, political, and cultural leaders. Participants in the conferences informally engage in discussions and any other activity of the conference using their local languages, which are interpreted for non-speakers. Makerere University students who hail from different regions have been very useful in translating and taking detailed notes, which are then used for preparing reports after the conferences.

Participants informally engage in a variety of activities, some of which include community health/wellness camps run by volunteer health workers; continuing health /medical education; plenary talks by opinion, cultural, and political leaders; group discussions (see Figure 1) on the selected conference sub themes on topical issues, women's football matches, inter-regional competitions based on traditional or cultural dances, storytelling by the elderly conference participants to the young ones, and groups reading

aloud in local languages.

Figure 1. Participants of 2014 conference in group discussions

Statement of the Problem

Literacy has always been championed as tool for poverty reduction and necessary for economic growth and development by the International Development Agencies (Barton, 2007; Grey, 2012; Robinson-Pant, 2008). For example, the theme for 2014 International Literacy Day was "Literacy and Sustainable Development." The Director-General of UNESCO was quoted as saying that the theme served as "an opportunity to remember a simple truth: literacy not only changes lives, it saves them" (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2015, n. p.). Yet globalization, in which ICTs play important role, and the associated neoliberal policies that now guide service delivery in developing countries, tend to limit access to crucial information and literacy learning opportunities. The emerging ICTs have tended to widen the gap between people, and more so, the younger and older generations, making it increasingly hard for intergenerational transmission of information and knowledge in communities (Ssekamwa, 1997).

This communication gap is probably why 781 million adults world-wide were still unable to read and write in 2014 (UNESCO, 2014). UNESCO has been repeatedly reporting that although the number of illiterate people is shrinking globally,

the female proportion continues to remain steady. Sub-Saharan Africa appears to absorb a very big chunk of that female population. The Ugandan situation, where 6.9 million people are still non-literate (Bwambale, 2013; Mwesigye, 2007), is not any different. Despite this situation, the Ugandan government's literacy promotion efforts focus more on UPE and USE for children than FAL. FAL is supposed to meet the literacy learning needs of adults, a situation that severely undermines the critical role that adults play in complementing children's efforts to learn literacies outside school.

Further, school-oriented literacy does not favor non-literate rural women because of the over-standardization and dependence on English as the medium of instruction. As if to add injury to misery, Uganda is one of the poorest countries in the world (Anguyo, 2013) and is not immune to the inequalities that globalization and neoliberal policies are perpetuating in our world today (Baldwin & Martin, 1999; Goldberg & Pavcnik, 2007; Lindert & Williamson, 2003). Hence, the women who constitute the bulk of the poor and non-literate get cut off because of their lack of purchasing power to survive in the global neoliberal environment.

Neglecting the education of adults who play a crucial role in their children's literacy learning contributes to jeopardizing the struggles to attain an inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. It is therefore crucial that unconventional ways be explored to ensure that SDG No. 4 in the UN (2015), "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all," is possible to achieve. We have conceptualized this study to examine URLCODA's unique efforts to integrate generations, culture, and languages to enhance literacy learning so that the anticipated benefits, pedagogical possibilities, and challenges can be

shared and remedies may be suggested for improvement.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following key questions:

1. How have communities responded to URLCODA's volunteer-led intervention, which has adopted the integration of generations, cultures, and languages for enhancing literacy learning in an ethno-linguistically diverse environment?
2. What unique contribution is URLCODA's intervention making to community and national development?
3. To what extent can URLCODA's intervention offer a viable alternative approach for effective literacy provision?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework we adopted to inform our study is based on ideas derived from sociocultural and New Literacy Studies perspectives on literacy. In these conceptions, literacy is understood to be those social practices embedded in culture and implicated in politics and power relations that influence the construction of the meanings and practices of the reading and writing that people use in their everyday lives (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2000; Perry, 2012; Street, 1984, 1995, 2003). Barton and Hamilton relate the sociocultural perspective as follows:

> Literacy is primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. Literacy does not just reside in people's heads as a set of skills to be learned, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be analyzed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interactions between people. (p. 3)

New Literacies Studies conceptualizes literacy in terms of insufficiency of the technical skills of reading and writing. Past experiences from UNESCO's EWLP implemented in the 1960s indicated that a single literacy approach model was too limited, and that the direct socioeconomic impacts of the literacy project could not be documented (UNESCO, 2004). Scholars such as Prinsloo and Breier (1996) further argue that conceptualizing literacy in terms of the single and neutral technical skills of reading and writing alone tends to ignore the social interactions that go on between people, and how these interactions influence the learning of literacy in people's everyday work. This idea of social interaction makes the NLS model more suitable for our study than the one in which literacy is seen as a set of discrete technical.

In the New Literacies Studies approach, literacy practices are considered as variables that link people, linguistic resources, media objects, and strategies for meaning-making in context-specific circumstances. Such literacy practices vary across broad social contexts, and across social domains within these contexts (Baynham, 1995; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996; Street, 2003). This set of relations explains why the New Literacies Studies approach recognizes the existence of not a single Literacy with Capital L, but multiple literacies, in which their meanings, uses, and practices are related to the specific sociocultural contexts. It thus becomes important to place special emphasis on the social nature of human beings, and on the recognition of the role of literacy networks and mediators in facilitating the communication of those who lack literacy skills but can depend on the skills of literate others. This argument makes the social practices approach to literacy the most plausible model to explain and understand the issues involved in our study.

Significance of the Study

This study has significance for several reasons. First, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution entitled "Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" with 17 Goals, of which Goal No. 4 focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all (UN, 2015). The realization of this goal and all its outcomes appears to require a multi-pronged approach to literacy and education provision, which the current single focus on formal literacy cannot easily realize. The available literacy on provision of education suggests that there has been an over-concentration on children's education at the expense of the education for adults, creating a gap that our study hopes to fill.

Second, many people are raising concerns regarding the deterioration in children's reading abilities in Uganda's UPE (Ngaka, 2009; Ngaka & Masagazi, 2015), which then carries forward to the USE. Some of the factors outlined for this scenario include children grappling with English as the medium of instruction at their initial stages of education, a lack of local reading materials for implementing the newly introduced local language education policy in primary schools in Uganda, and parents' inability to help their children with their homework because of the lack of literacy.

Third, in our review of literature on education and literacy learning in Uganda, it was hard to find information on innovative approaches that promote the informal learning of literacies among the rural poor, at least in the Ugandan context.

Last, Uganda is a multiethnic nation with diverse cultures and languages (Government of Uganda, 1995). Yet our experiences and literature searches have shown that such innovative and non-discriminative informal, multicultural, and multilingual learning opportunities, which encourage people of different ethnic groups to freely mingle on a regular basis to know each other's culture and languages, are rare. The findings of this study may help to bridge the generational, cultural, and linguistic gap among people and provide greater societal unity.

Method

In this section, we describe the intervention from which we drew our data, the multiple data collection methods we employed, and the processes we went through in the course of organizing and analyzing the data.

The Intervention

Data for this study came from the four conferences we organized over a period of five years from 2008 to 2014. Each year a concept note is prepared about the conference, and a team of ten volunteers is selected to take detailed notes of all the proceedings for the purpose of writing reports that serve as part of the accountability to those who supported the event with resources. Apart from the concept notes, the research team takes additional notes as participant observers in the conference. The research team also asks the volunteers to verbally engage with some randomly selected participants about how the event went, what they liked, what they found bad, what they disliked, and what they would like the organizers to do in the subsequent conferences, and use the information to strengthen their notes. These notes are compiled to produce the final conference reports.

After every conference, the research team usually picks four focus groups of nine members (mostly women) from every region to talk about the conference with a view to establishing its relevancy, the unique contribution it could be making to the groups, the role of voluntarism in running the conferences and providing other services therein, challenges observed, and any other matters of interest to the participants. These groups are

comprised mostly of women because they are the majority in these conferences, which is important because they are the group having the greatest problems in accessing literacy through formal means. In addition to the four focus groups per conference, the research team also interviews the group leaders from the regions to get their perspectives on the conference.

Data Collection

Our study adopted a case study design immersed in a qualitative approach and an interpretive paradigm to collect data, which were used to produce a rich description of the social interactions and processes (Chilisa & Preece, 2005; Mitchell, 1984) in the four conferences that URLCODA has so far organized. We collected the data from documents, conference participants, and the interactions and processes in the course of the conferences. We adopted what Talisayon (2009) calls a mixed methods approach to collect data. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) describe mixed methods as the use of multiple types of qualitative and quantitative data. We employed a mixture of data collection methods and drew some insights from ethnographic perspectives to enhance the data collection.

The specific methods we used included participant observation of the social interactions and processes during the conferences, documentary analysis, the analysis of focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. These four main methods were complemented by a photographic method, which we employed to capture certain images we could not get through other methods. The photographs[1] taken during each of the conferences were kept and used to augment some of the findings from other data sources. We always kept accurate records of all the notes we took in the course of data collection. We followed the rules of

ensuring trustworthiness through such methods as member checks, prolonged engagement, confirmability, and interviewee corroboration (Chilisa & Preece, 2005; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

We also made use of reflexivity journals (Saldana, 2009) as analytic memos, which later helped us to reflect on the patterns, themes, and concepts that were emerging from the data we were collecting (Creswell, 2007). In conducting our participant observations, documentary analysis, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews, we made sure that we adhered to all the protocols involved in negotiating access into the community and other gatekeepers (Campbell, 2012).

Data Reduction

The sheer size and complexity of data sets sometimes makes the analysis of data a daunting task, but collecting large data sets may also yield richer and more useful information (Namey, Guest, Thairu, & Johnson, 2007). However, to get something useful from what Ehrenberg (1981) calls multitudinous amounts of data, we had to engage in data reduction, a process he describes as the transformation of numerical or alphabetical digital information derived empirically or experimentally into a corrected, ordered, and simplified form. We reduced our data by reorganizing the raw data into simple forms in accordance with how our memory works. For example, we employed simple tables, tried to round off certain figures, and placed some figures to be compared in the same columns showing averages (Ehrenberg, 1981). We reduced our raw data to a systematically organized set from which a subset can document representative trends (Smagorinsky, 2008). Doing so helped us to eliminate some data that were of no use in answering to our research questions.

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[1] We secured permission to publish whenever we took a photograph of a particular person.

Data Analysis

We analyzed our data using qualitative research techniques, since we immersed our study in an interpretive research paradigm. The use of an interpretive research paradigm was helpful because it allowed us to employ a mix of qualitative techniques to analyze our data. We used a process that Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to as observer impression or thematic analysis, which entails using an eclectic approach in which data are continually analyzed with a special focus on issues that best matched our research questions. According to Chilisa and Preece (2005), as soon as the data collection process in qualitative research starts, so must data analysis.

We started by coding data into categories and later reduced them into meaningful components. Coding is an interpretive technique that both organizes and interprets the data for both qualitative and quantitative purposes, which required us to read the data over and again and demarcate segments within it at different times throughout the process (Boyatzis, 1998; Chambliss & Schutt, 2010). While going through this process, we gave each data segment a code related to our research questions.

In coding the different data segments we relied Saldana (2009)'s questioning method, asking:

1. What were the conference participants, volunteer rapporteurs, guest speakers, organizers, and spectators doing during the conferences?
2. What were they trying to accomplish in the course of the week as the conference was going on?
3. How were they carrying out the activities to achieve what they set to achieve?
4. What specific means or strategies or ways were they using to reach their set goals and objectives?
5. How did the conference participants, volunteer rapporteurs, invited speakers, organizers, and spectators talk about the conference, and what did they understand what was going on as far as the interactions between the different individuals and groups were concerned?
6. What assumptions were they making about the things that were going on in the course of the conference?
7. What assumptions did we bring into the study as far as the social interactions between the various groups are concerned?
8. What did we see going on in the conference venues, groups, speakers, etc.?
9. What did we learn from the detailed notes and photographs we took in the course of the data collection?
10. Why did we arrive at some conclusions we drew about the conference, etc.?

Through this process we were able to summarize the frequencies of the codes, discuss the emerging similarities and differences in related codes across distinct sources, and compare the relationships between one or more codes to guide us in drawing our final conclusions.

In analyzing the data, we followed the six steps in thematic analysis described in Boyatzis (1998), Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), Virginia and Clarke (2006), and Chambliss and Schutt (2010). These procedures included:

1. familiarizing ourselves with our coded data sets to determine patterns that were emerging;
2. engaging in data reduction, which entailed collapsing the massive forms of data into labels and creating code categories for ease of analysis;
3. combining codes to make themes that accurately depicted data;
4. determining how the themes were supported by the data and related to the social literacies or a New Literacies Studies approach or theoretical perspectives we adopted to guide our study;

5. defining themes emerging from the data in terms of aspects we tried to capture; and

6. writing the report with a focus on which themes were contributing toward understanding what was going on within the data through member checks, which led us to what Chilisa and Preece (2005) call a thick description of the phenomenon of interest to us in the conferences.

Findings

Three key themes emerged from our analysis: (1) community's response to URLCODA's intervention; (2) the unique contribution of URLCODA's intervention to community and national development; and (3) the role of voluntarism in community based service provision.

Community's Response to the Intervention

From the participant observations recorded, there was representation from communities in all the three regions of Uganda where the annual conferences were held: the Northwestern region, Eastern region, and Midwestern region. These communities demonstrated exceptionally high interest in participating in the week-long events. This engagement was evident in the number of people who turned up for the events and the associated excitement that typically characterized their interactions, as depicted in Figure 2. The first two conferences that took place in Agobia Village and the Northwestern region of Uganda in 2008 and 2009 respectively registered over 400 participants. Subsequent conferences in Eastern and Midwestern regions registered similar numbers of registrants.

Figure 2. Some of the events in the 2009 conference at Agobia Village, Arua District

The Contribution of the Intervention

The voluntary intervention by URLCODA made enormous contribution toward complementing community and national development efforts in the country. Evidence from focus group discussions, key informant interviews, participant observations, and documentary analysis revealed that URLCODA's efforts were positively affecting people in different spheres of life that would in the long run contribute to community and national development. Four key areas were observed and cited by focus group discussion participants and key informant interviewees as having positive effects on the populations. We describe each in the following summaries.

Unity of the people. These conferences aim to bring together non-literate members of the community from different regions of Uganda, with the basic aim of enabling them to interact freely among themselves and with pupils, secondary school and University students, academicians, researchers, development workers, and political, cultural, and opinion leaders of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. These interactions expose them to different ethnic groups, individuals, cultures, and languages in Uganda. In so doing, the participants share experiences, information, and knowledge and get to know one another. This freedom drives away the fears people have previously harbored about other people's ways of life, and helps them learn other people's languages and cultures, thereby bringing about unity and social cohesion within the different ethnic groups. This congregation is illustrated in Figures 3 and 4, where people of different sociocultural backgrounds sit together, talk to one another, and share meals and stories about their home cultures.

Figure 3. Participants in a plenary session

Figure 4. A participant entertaining guest speakers

For example, we came across one woman from the Northwestern region of Uganda who attended a conference in Eastern Uganda. She was surprised to find that the stories she had heard that some people in the Eastern Uganda were cannibals were false, because she got an opportunity to directly interact with the people who came from that particular ethnic group, finding them to the very nice people. She also told us that she was able to return to her district after picking some vocabulary in languages she never thought she would ever speak and know. She reported making many friends during the conference.

Experience and skills acquisition. One of the beauties of these conferences is the opportunity it offers the multidisciplinary team of experienced volunteers taking time off their official duties and coming to serve the disadvantaged communities. This experience gives them a chance to mingle with students, politicians, academics, and others in a multicultural and multilingual setting deliberately created to enhance learning through engaging in informal activities. This setting provides the students the opportunity to develop their social, personal, and intercultural skills for use later when they get into the labor market after completing their various training programmes from different institutions of higher education. Figures 5 and 6 depict nursing students interacting with medical doctors, and Figure 7 shows Makerere University

students giving computer lessons to the rural women, some of who had never touched or seen computers in their lives.

Figure 5. Two qualified medical doctors taking a rest after a hectic day

Figure 6. Nursing students from one of the Missionary Hospitals getting an opportunity to work with the doctors in a multilingual & multicultural setting and gain experience in community service.

Figure 7. Makerere University Students giving instructions to rural women wanting to learn computer skills

In Figure 7, women play with computers and university students move around to provide instructional support to the women struggling to touch and play with a mouse for the first time. Such opportunities are rare or nonexistent in some of the rural areas. The opportunity for old rural women to spend a week in a boarding secondary school and try to play the roles that their children are accustomed to produced pride in the older participants, one who whom was heard saying, "I never thought I could ever step into a classroom or even sleep in a room where students sleep."

Community-public-private partnerships. Another interesting dimension of URLCODA's conferences concerns subsequent partnerships among the local governments, other civil society organizations, and the Private Sector Organizations through their sharing of resources. A typical example is illustrated in Figure 8. The bus in the photograph belongs to a private company, which transported participants from one part of the country to the venue and back for this volunteer initiative. This arrangement is now developing community-private-public partnerships in supporting locally- initiated development interventions.

Figure 8. A bus belonging to a private company

Research, education, and dissemination policies and programmes. Another positive aspect of the conferences was that it enabled people from the communities to interact directly with district and national political, cultural, and opinion leaders and academics. This intermingling created an opportunity for the poor to engage with such people to express their problems and needs. Figures 9 and 10 show the Ugandan Minister of Health, who came to open the conference, getting an opportunity to address and interact with the community members.

The participants complained to him about the poor state of their health center, and he was able to pledge construction of some facilities, including brand new maternity wards for women. Such opportunities are rare to come by, and it has been possible through the efforts of the volunteers. Political leaders are brought down to witness for themselves some of the challenges local people are facing and respond to their demands accordingly. This mixing of social classes also provides an opportunity for academics to engage in community-oriented action research and translate their findings to interventions that can go a long

way to address some of the problems facing the local communities.

Figure 9. Minister of Health in Uganda addresses some of the conference participants in January 2010 at Namasagali Health Centre III, Kamuli District in Eastern Uganda

Figure 10. Minister of Health in Uganda mixes with conference participants

Voluntarism and Community-Based Service Provision

Data from the focus group discussions and key informant interviews revealed mixed views on the relevance of voluntarism in community-based service provision, viability, and sustainability. When the focus group participants were asked

whether they appreciated the services that URLCODA volunteers were offering to the communities, all of them answered affirmatively. However, when they were asked whether the volunteers could replicate these services on larger scale and longer term basis, the majority of them (90%) indicated that it would not be possible. Although responses from all the 16 informants were in agreement with the responses from the focus group discussion participants regarding the issue of relevance, only four of them (25%) said it would be possible for such as arrangement to continue on a long-term basis. The remaining 12 (75%) said that it would be too hard to achieve. One informant from the Eastern region said,

> My friend, in these difficult times, everyone is now for himself. How do you expect somebody to continue laboring like this and do something for free without taking back something? It is rather impossible in my view. I only think they are able to do it now because it happens once in a year. I am sure they would not do it if it was continuous throughout the year.

In one of the key informant interviews conducted in a village in Northwestern Uganda, another woman laughed and sarcastically used a Biblical expression:

> The days when God dropped stuff from above free for people are gone. I am tempted to think these volunteers have come to deceive us, and I know they will not be able continue with this services. If we were not able to see the FAL classes of the government and only heard about them when we hear government has a lot of money, how can some people who are working for free like this think they will be able to do it for a long time?

The two remarks were in line with the most common words that were recorded during the focus group discussions: "impossible," "doubtful," and "not all." The data suggest that though voluntarism in community-based service provision is valuable and highly appreciated, its sustainability in the prevailing socioeconomic and political context is questionable.

Discussion

Just as in many other organizations, URLCODA experiences multiple challenges, which if not well attended to could cripple the operations of the Agency. Contrary to the initial assumption and expectations of some people that no one would be interested in participating in such an informal and often despised form of learning, the volunteer organizers recorded overwhelming interest from the local communities across the country. This enthusiasm was unexpected and a huge surprise to the volunteer organizers, because in one of the live radio talk shows, some people from elite circumstances called and said that such an intervention was a waste of time and resources because of a lack of anticipated interest among the impoverished population, who they believed would not spend a week in an unknown place under the guise of learning.

Instead, the communities exhibited an overwhelming interest in the initiative. Their participation could possibly be attributed to lack of opportunities for informal learning in the rural areas. Theoretically, the unschooled local people in the various districts in Uganda were supposed to be participating in the Functional Adult Literacy programmes implemented through the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development of the Government of Uganda. However, it appears that the classes are non-functional and are not taking place in most districts, thereby creating a vacuum for the rural people to learn new skills and use their informally learned literacies. We then attributed

the increases interest to the outline of the activities of URLCODA's events outlines during the live radio talk shows. These announcements seemed to have presented alternative learning opportunity that communities were prepared to take up, suggesting that there is an unmet need among the communities across the country. The excitement depicted in many of the figures we have presented indicates the interest shown in the conferences.

During the conferences, URLCODA networked with resourceful partners—such as the Local Governments and district and national political leaders, Community Based Organizations, Faith Based Organizations, and Private Sector Organizations—to pool resources to aid its multidisciplinary team of volunteers to provide free services to the poor. According to Hon. Kamilo Sabo, the Patron of URLCODA, these partnerships emerged from the volunteers' commitment to dedicating time annually to provide free service to disadvantaged sections of the Ugandan population. Indeed the initiative has helped thousands of ordinary Ugandans receive basic social services. Notably the idea of the community health and wellness camps has enabled many poor people to have access to free medical/health care services they could not otherwise receive and be able to access qualified medical doctors and other paramedical/health workers without having to struggle to pay.

Secondly, the integrated approach to service delivery is also helping students to apply the theoretical knowledge they get from class and lecture rooms to practical real life situations, thereby enabling them to accumulate experiences that they can document and show later when looking for jobs in currently competitive job market. This experience is also very useful for Makerere University, because field experiences have now become a requirement in the training of students. It can be difficult to get Agencies to make field placements, and this intervention supplements efforts in that direction.

Considering the prevailing neoliberal environment in which goods and services are put into the market place for those able to purchase access, the services that URLCODA volunteers extend free of charge to the rural poor through their annual events are valuable and worth supporting. What they are able to do in a span of short time without paid staff is certainly more than what they would do if they had funding to sustain full time staff. It also helps other organizations to invest funds to support efforts of the volunteers to reach the poor in remote areas of the country.

Voluntarism is a concept with deep roots into African customs and traditions. That acculturation to selfless assistance explains why most of the members of focus group discussions agreed that volunteering was valuable, though they tended to disagree on its scale and sustainability in community-based service provision. That doubt is understandable, because volunteering in the context of technically underdeveloped nations in the present century has practically no place in the society, as the current government policies are market driven and have tended to create a spirit of individualism in people. That condition explains why when an intervention is designed to introduce something to be done on voluntary basis, most people quickly ask what they will gain from their involvement, which is unfortunate. This problem means that voluntarism cannot adequately fill the service delivery gap created by neoliberal policies such as liberalization and privatization, and becomes a viable alternative strategy for community-based service provision for the poor in technologically developing countries like Uganda. However, we feel that we cannot completely do away with our traditional ways of voluntarily helping one another, and that communities should try to encourage the spirit of voluntarism alongside individualism.

Most NGOs in technologically developing countries depend of handouts from the donor community and face multiple challenges. Following the history of most NGOs in technologically developing countries, it is common knowledge that they face multiple challenges, and URLCODA cannot be an exception. Indeed, our study found that URLCODS is faced with multiplicity of challenges ranging from internal to external and from social to political ones. Some of the main ones identified include:

1. Resource and Sustainability Constraints: URLCODA lacks sustained external funding and purely depends on the free time of its volunteers, who are busy elsewhere and do not have the time to engage fulltime in executing its programmes. The one week a year service to the community means the volunteers have time constraints along with financial limitations. This constraint severely limits the operations of the Agency. Experience has shown that organizations with little or no funding struggle to survive, and this lack of capacity puts their continued existence into questionable position. Limitations in funds worsens issues of sustainability and is therefore a challenge that requires urgent attention.

2. Politics: Another challenge that affects organizations is the political environment in which they operate. Most often programmes that tend to empower people through critical and emancipatory literacies in pseudo-democratic environments suffer interference from the governments, who always show suspicion toward such programmes. This perspective affects the operations of the Agency in that certain activities may not be carried out without government's clearance, thereby causing delays and sometimes indefinite postponements and suspensions. For example, URLCODA used to organize its annual conferences in December–January and in 2011. This schedule could not be secured in 2011 because presidential and parliamentary elections were held in that

period, and the volunteers were made to shift the conference date to April.

3. Interpretational Bottlenecks: Integrating cultures and languages in a non-formal literacy learning means there is a need for skilled interpreters, who are rare to find. Although university students have been volunteering to provide interpretations, they are equally constrained by time when sessions are going on. Using many languages also means that the days allocated for the conference are not enough to cover everything on the programme and finish all the activities planned for the week as scheduled.

4. Apathy: Interest in voluntary work is fast dying out. The present generation detests voluntary work because in the current global neoliberal environment, there is nothing for nothing, so the majority of the poor people are preoccupied with looking for something for their survival, thereby leaving little or no time for volunteering.

Based on the evidence from the findings presented above, the flowing conclusions were drawn:

1. What URLCODA volunteers are doing is impacting the local communities positively. However, there is a huge unmet need among the largely non-literate and poor rural population across the country in terms of their literacy learning levels, for which urgent action is needed on the part of concerned authorities and stakeholders.
2. Whereas the volunteers have been able to do much with less, there are serious resource-related and sustainability constraints that need to be addressed if the volunteers are to continue doing what they have been doing for the disadvantaged sections of the Ugandan communities.
3. Whereas voluntarism is deeply rooted in African culture and traditions and is highly cherished by the community for the benefit of the poor, it does not have

a place in the present society because of the effect of neoliberal policies, which have tended to perpetuate individualism in the community. However, this orientation should not block opportunities for volunteers from developed countries, who sometimes come to technologically developing countries to offer voluntary services.

4. Although it is not a good idea to dismiss the concept and practice of voluntarism as a community-based service provision strategy, it is unconceivable in light of the prevailing socioeconomic, political, and legal conditions in which voluntarism cannot thrive alone.

In view of the study findings and conclusions presented above, the following recommendations were made:

1. There is an urgent need to find out what is happening to the FAL classes in the various districts, since government has now employed community development officers at sub-county levels.

2. There is a need to maintain and strengthen the existing partnerships and to develop new ones to ensure continual access to resources that can help the volunteers deliver services to the poor. Secondly, there should be deliberate training of the volunteers in research and resource mobilization skills in order to engage in grant writing to attract donor funding as well as big research grants that can be used to continue to provide services to the poor.

3. There is a need to encourage communities not to abolish the practice of voluntarism completely. It should be allowed to supplement private initiatives in the important role it plays in helping to reach the poor with a variety of services that they would otherwise not have access to.

4. There is a need to promote voluntarism alongside private enterprises. Efforts should be made to forge local and global partnerships to complement voluntary efforts in community-based service provision.

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