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Decolonizing Beginning Literacy Instruction: Views From Ugandan Teachers

Sara Ann (Sally) Beach, Sr. Rosemary Nyirumbe, David Monk,
Sr. Esther Pia Okecha

Educate a girl and you have educated the whole nation.
(retired primary teachers, Northern Uganda)

Driving across Northern Uganda, we watch rolling hills change to flatter land as we reach and cross the Nile River. Working as part of a peace-building and women's education advocacy team, we visit local villages, where groups of traditional round huts are arranged around a communal firepit (see Figure 1), and women carry jerricans of water from the community well toward home. Children in multi-colored uniforms are playing outside primary schools during break time. These are the traditional communities of the Acoli people, with Acoli being one of several languages spoken in Uganda. When we stop in to visit a kindergarten class, we see many English words displayed around the room (see Figure 2), with sentences to be copied, and students sitting in rows. However, we do not see Acoli-language signs or hear Acoli being spoken. The influence of colonization is one of the issues that our local team member, Sr. Rosemary Nyirumbe (second author), has invited our research team to address as part of developing indigenous literacy programs.

A View From Northern Uganda

Uganda is located in East Central Africa (see Figure 3). In the north, the Acoli are one of the local tribes. They were, and continue to be, organized around traditional kings, or *rwodi*, who provide leadership for several villages. Uganda gained independence in 1962 from Britain. The country endured the dictatorship of Idi Amin during the 1970s and then experienced more than 20 years of conflict when Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebelled against the government. The conflict took place in Northern Uganda between 1986 and 2007, in the area of the Acoli people. This conflict disrupted the lives of many children, who were either abducted

and forced to become child soldiers or relocated to internal displacement camps. A large number of the abductees were girls who were forced to become sex slaves in addition to child soldiers.

Education was disrupted during those times, with limited access to quality education in the camps. Schools and teachers were regularly attacked and groups of girls in schools were abducted. The effects of the conflict linger to this day as formerly abducted girls return to their villages with children of their own. A whole generation of children did not have a quality primary education. They lack proficiency in the literacy practices of power, those in English. The situation is now further exacerbated by the flood of refugees coming into Northern Uganda from the conflict in South Sudan, adding pressure to an already strapped school system (Azia, 2019).

Education in Uganda is modeled on the system put in place by the British. Seven years of Universal Primary Education is followed by either a four- or six-year secondary school experience. However, primary school is not free, even in government schools. In order to attend, students need to buy uniforms and pay school fees that cover school supplies.

To become a primary teacher, a candidate must have passed the primary leaving exam and completed four years of secondary school. After acceptance to teachers college, a candidate completes two years of course work in subjects taught in primary

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Figure 1
A Traditional Group of Round Houses Around a Communal Area



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

schools and teacher education studies and completes practice teaching. Completion leads to a grade 3 certificate, allowing one to teach primary grades. This certificate can be upgraded to a grade 5 certificate by taking two more years at a teachers college and earning a diploma as a generalist or with a specialization in a content area.

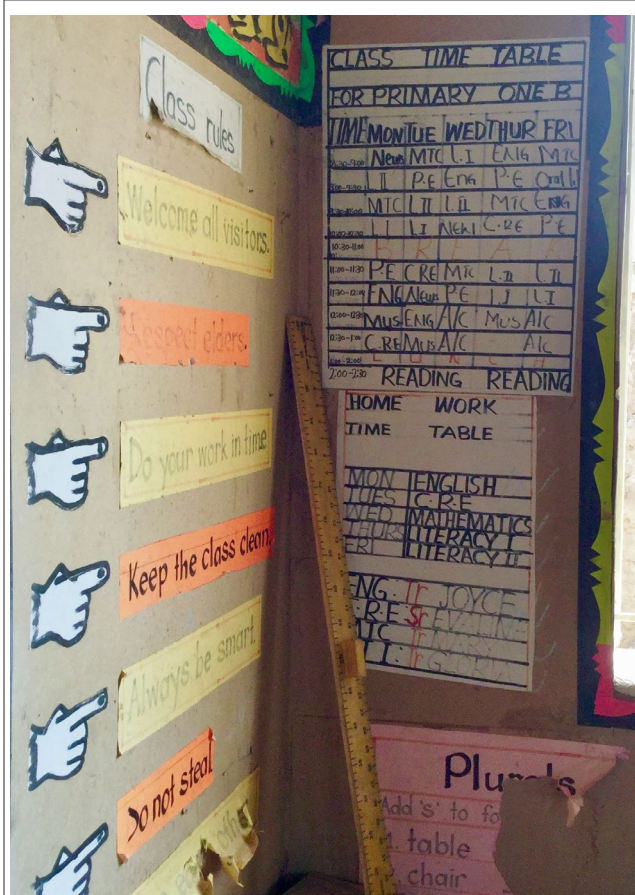
Our Diverse Team

As a research team, the four of us came together in 2018 because of our interest in education for girls and women. Two of us are outsiders to Uganda, although we are heavily invested in decolonizing research and literacy learning. Sally (first author) is White and a literacy education professor and former elementary teacher. She comes from a middle-class background in the United States that she acknowledges is privileged. She believes in hearing people's stories (the past) and situating them in the present before thinking about where to go. David (third author) is a White Canadian who lives and works in Uganda at a local university.

He acknowledges the privilege that he has had from his background, and he is committed to learning new ways of living and understanding the world. He is also committed to standing in solidarity with those who face injustice and to listen and learn from them.

The other two members of our group are Ugandan, although neither are Acoli, the indigenous people of the area. Both Sr. Rosemary and Sr. Esther Pia Okecha (fourth author) are members of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, an African order of religious women who are dedicated to working with the most vulnerable populations. Sr. Rosemary is a doctoral student in education in Oklahoma and director of a vocational school for girls in Northern Uganda. She lived through the conflict in Northern Uganda, rescuing girls who were abducted by the LRA and giving them skills training. She is committed to girls' education and empowerment through literacy. Sr. Esther has been a primary teacher, head teacher, and instructor at teacher training colleges for more than 45 years. She is committed to education and literacy for the most vulnerable children.

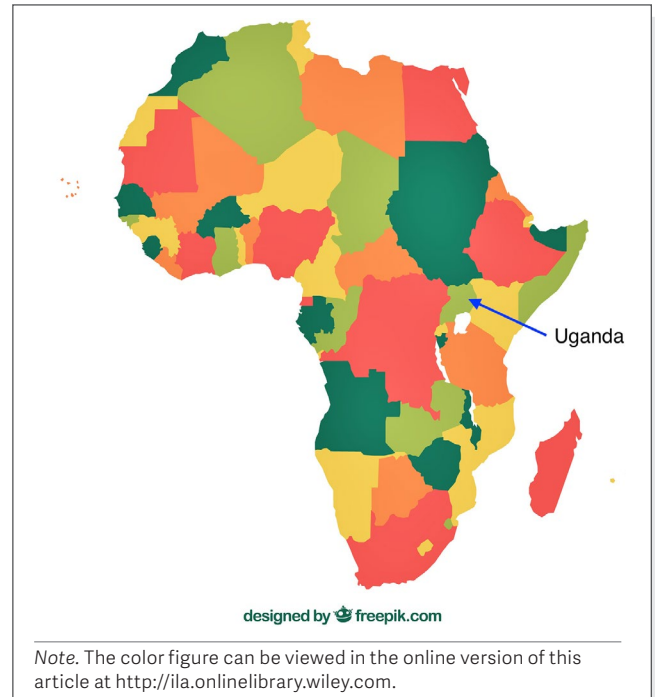
Figure 2
Juxtaposition of Traditional English Requirements
With an Acoli Reading Lesson in a Kindergarten Class



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

We all view literacy from what Street (2001) called an ideological view. In this view, literacy is a set of social practices grounded in context and aligned to culture. A learner becomes literate by participating in literacy practices and interacting with other learners and more expert others in the social or cultural group. This view is opposed to an autonomous view, in which literacy is seen as independent from context and is a universal set of skills. We believe that there are multiple literacies that each person develops and that are built through their participation in different social and cultural groups. These literacies embrace multiple modes, including print, oral language, visual arts, and dance. Learners who participate in different contexts develop a literate identity in each context that is dynamic and

Figure 3
Map of Africa Showing Uganda



grounded in their own views of their competence within that setting (Beach & Ward, 2013).

We recognize that for literacy education to be truly empowering for girls, the present system of education needs to be reformed to include cultural ways of knowing. For example, in Acoli culture, proverbs, stories, and work with elders are used to teach virtues of hard work, respect of others, unity within community, and care for others. We also recognized that we needed to decolonize our own thinking about research. As part of this research process, we needed to interview a range of primary (early years) teachers on literacy education for girls and women. In addition, before implementing any beginning literacy program and the professional learning that would precede it, we needed to know what teachers already knew and believed.

We began by decolonizing our own views of research and making explicit our views of what counts as literacy. Like Lavia and Sikes (2010), we needed to continually ask ourselves, "Whose aspirations are we seeking to realize? Whose contexts and priorities are we addressing? In whose service do we work?" (pp. 93–94). We recognized that we needed to understand the indigenous knowledge of the area. Indigenous knowledge is the local knowledge within

a culture and community that has been passed down through community practices, relationships, and rituals (Okwany, 2016). Our thinking needed to change from privileging our expert knowledge to discovering and leveraging local knowledge. We recognized that we would need to draw on the expertise of the local cultural chiefs and elders and present and retired primary teachers. This article is about what the primary teachers told us. We were particularly interested in how they described what counted as literacy learning and teaching, what was the role of their Acoli culture in literacy learning, and the role and challenges of education for girls.

Decolonizing Education

Decolonizing education refers to critiquing and questioning colonizers' views of what counts as knowledge, who gets to determine what is important to learn and how, and the dominance of western ways of education on indigenous peoples (Chilisa, Major, & Khudu-Petersen, 2017; McGregor & Marker, 2018). It means understanding the historical issues in a community and inquiring about a group's perspectives of schooling and teaching (Ndimande, 2018). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) detailed how western education destroyed indigenous peoples' ways of knowing and damaged indigenous languages and cultures, positioning itself as the maker of knowledge, demoting all other ways of knowing.

The impact of colonialism is felt directly in Uganda still, where schooling is in English and is focused on passing exams. In the African context, there are a number of authors who are critical of this imposed education (cf. Conradie & Robeyns, 2013; Jones, 2019; Kabeer, 2005). They suggested that education should help people and groups transcend societal narratives and achieve their ambitions. They argued that a multitude of factors, both overt and covert, in school and out of school, play a role in limiting what girls in particular are capable of aspiring to. In Northern Uganda, the need for empowering learning becomes all the more essential to help rebuild individuals' lives and communities.

Papen (2005) asserted that decolonizing literacy education means that researchers and program planners need to inquire into the everyday discourses and practices around literacy. They need to discover the power relationships around the different literacies in a community. Although Uganda has mandated that students be taught in their mother tongue (defined as the local language of the home)

for the first three years of primary school, not all schools follow the mandate. Many private schools believe in beginning with English, the language of power. Some schools have students with multiple mother tongues, so all instruction is in English. Although that may lead to learning English faster, according to Sr. Esther, it also means that the student does not necessarily become fluent in reading, writing, and even speaking the mother tongue.

Primary Teachers From Acoli Land

Our participants were four retired primary teachers (two men, Saul and Peter, and two women, Joyce and Theresa; all teacher names are pseudonyms), as well as one practicing primary teacher, Anna. These teachers have taught between 21 and 40 years in government primary schools in the region. Both of the men had been head teachers during their careers. All identified as Acoli and were fluent in that language as well as English. The teachers participated in two focus groups in English: one for the female teachers, who all lived in one location, and one for the male teachers, who lived in another location. The topics of discussion included how to teach literacy, cultural ways of knowing and learning, and challenges of education for girls. The focus group discussions were recorded. The teachers also completed a questionnaire about their views on the best way to teach literacy and important aspects of their Acoli ways of knowing. An additional key informant in understanding teacher preparation, changes in education, and literacy teaching methods and challenges was Sr. Esther, who was also interviewed.

Literacy, Culture, and Equity

What Counted as Literacy

The primary teachers and Sr. Esther shared a hybrid view of what counted as literacy. All of them emphasized the skills that were necessary to learn to read and write, noting the need to learn the alphabet first and then move to blending sounds into syllables (in Acoli) or sounds into words (in English). Saul explained that we should "introduce to learners how to write letters, give time for learners to imitate the good way of writing letters and words, attend to the learners closely when practicing reading." This focus on the skills of reading and writing indicates an autonomous view of literacy.

All of the teachers, however, also made statements that indicated that literacy also had an

ideological component. Sr. Esther argued for inclusion and diversity in students' reading materials:

It is important to have people who look like them [in reading materials] and with topics that are familiar. It reminds them that they can also be smart.... If [materials] have White people, they should be having stories that have lessons for the children or that children can learn something about the world.

All of the teachers and Sr. Esther strongly believed in the importance of beginning with mother-tongue literacy and, in fact, in using the mother tongue in all early primary teaching. Peter stated, "Children need to be conversant with their own language thoroughly." Sr. Esther stated, "The best thing is to start with the mother tongue. The children will learn well [content and the language] so the brain is fixed." Both groups of teachers spoke about the importance of using discussion, collaboration, and storytelling to teach. These teachers demonstrated the power struggle around the literacy of English and the literacy practices of the community as well as the marginalization of indigenous languages.

Role of the Acoli Culture

All of the teachers believed in the importance of students learning about their culture and through their cultural ways of knowing and teaching. Everyone supported teaching in the local language. Joyce stated, "The learner should first understand the importance of tradition." In the focus group of female teachers, Anna was adamant that "the culture needs to be revisited and brought back." All of them emphasized that the loss of ways of being in the Acoli culture was leading to children's loss of identity, life skills, and community, supporting Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2018) critique. Although they all discussed the role of elders (i.e., grandparents, cultural elders, parents) in teaching through stories, proverbs, and cultural work, none explicitly discussed how schools or literacy instruction could play a part in passing on or revitalizing cultural ways of knowing and practices.

Girls' Education

All of the teachers felt that it was easier now for girls to attend school because of government policies mandating equity in education. However, they all felt that girls were still the last priority in a family, especially when there were financial issues involved. The reasons the teachers gave for putting girls last were primarily around cultural biases against educating

women. Culturally, the role of girls is domestic work in the home and to become prepared for marriage, they said. The female teachers mentioned that there was a general belief that an educated girl would leave home, leaving the family elders alone and uncared for, whereas an educated boy would stay home and take care of the extended family. In addition, Theresa stated that she had heard some men say that "educated women are bigheaded and don't respect men."

Both the male and female teachers felt that educating girls was very important. They agreed that educating a woman benefited the whole community; Peter stated, "Girls help everyone, but males are more individualistic." The female teachers also felt that educated women are more creative and caring and that educating girls would help stop the violence against women. The male teachers acknowledged that the cultural leaders, although they see education as important, have not openly come out in favor of education for girls. In fact, culturally, they are not on any chief's council, but the male teachers believe that their viewpoint is needed.

Implications for Global Literacy Learning

We learned, like Papen (2005), how important it is to all educators to understand the views of the populations with whom they work. These conversations with teachers are informing how we create the literacy program we are developing to include Acoli culture and language and how we will support teacher learning. We strongly believe in the power of education, and of literacy, to transform society in a way that honors indigenous cultures, ways of knowing, languages, and experiences. We suggest, and are implementing ourselves, the following for educators globally:

- Honor the culture and language of the learners. Have them or their families teach you. Listen, learn, be humble.
- Reach out to parents to discover which literacy practices are privileged in home and community. Incorporate them into instructional activities.
- Explore the knowledge that learners bring with them to the educational setting. Where did it come from (e.g., stories, proverbs, apprenticeship to elders)?
- Inquire into differences between gender roles in the community. Try to disrupt them in the classroom (e.g., avoid always having girls

reading stories about families and boys reading informational books about science or leadership).

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