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The Conservative and Dynamic Nature of Indigenous Knowledge: A Case Study from Kenya

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Keywords: indigenous knowledge, local knowledge, Africa, Kenya, Giriama

Abstract: Indigenous knowledge in Africa conserves traditional community heritage and is dynamically adjusted as communities adapt to contemporary realities. This roundtable considers these conservative and dynamic natures as portrayed in a case study from Kenya and poses discussion questions.

Introduction

Indigenous knowledge in Africa is a valuable resource that is disappearing at an alarming rate (Wane, 2000). While many adult educators lament this loss, adult educators also pursue educational initiatives that speed the process. All the while communities in rural Africa focus on using their knowledge to ensure community survival into the next generation. This struggle for survival is particularly intense in environments that offer limited opportunities and little margin for error. This presentation explores the nature of indigenous knowledge and considers this nature in light of research conducted by the author in 2007 with a community of people who live in an opportunity scarce location in rural Kenya.

The Nature of Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge has been described as a bridge between past generations and the contemporary generation that extends to future generations (Avoseh, 2002). This intergenerational communication within African communities (Boateng, 1985) has served to perpetuate these communities for generations. Accordingly, indigenous knowledge can be described as traditional knowledge that conserves valuable community heritage. However, indigenous knowledge is more than traditional knowledge. As this knowledge is intimately connected to people living their daily lives “it has to be constantly reassessed, rediscovered and remade in terms of changing conditions” (Von Kotze, 2002, p. 237). Indigenous knowledge springs from the past but continues to be constructed in the present as it adjusts to ever changing contexts (Maurial, 1999; Mwadime, 1999; Nsamenang, 2004; Semali, 1999). Thus, the nature of indigenous knowledge is conservative in that valuable traditional knowledge is preserved and dynamic in that knowledge is reconstructed in response to contemporary realities.

The Case Study

This study was carried out within a community of the Giriama ethnic group who rely heavily on agriculture for their livelihood and daily use the knowledge passed on to them by their ancestors. However, in their efforts to thrive in contemporary Kenya they adapt this knowledge base even though it results in the loss of ancestral knowledge. This study has documented the conservative and dynamic nature of the community’s indigenous knowledge in crop production practices, food processing practices, gender roles and tools used.

Despite the dynamic nature of this process, many consider the Giriama resistant to modernization and the Kenyan government, as well as international and local non-governmental development organizations, is working to increase the pace of change. Adult education practice and adult educators in a variety of guises are key players in efforts to “develop” the Giriama and for better or worse their efforts shape the knowledge base of Giriama people.

Questions for Discussion

In view of the increased value currently placed on indigenous knowledge, a rethinking of efforts to modernize communities is in order and researchers in the adult education profession are in a unique position to conduct further research towards this end. Questions that researchers may wish to consider as they formulate research on the topic are:

- Is the knowledge described in this study accurately labeled indigenous knowledge or are other terms used in the literature, such as local knowledge, more useful in framing related research?
- Given the tenuous and difficult conditions found in opportunity-scarce contexts, how important is it to preserve indigenous knowledge, particularly if it seems to inhibit the introduction of what appear to be life-enhancing changes?
- Assuming that adult educators wish to encourage both the adaptation of indigenous knowledge for improved lives and the preservation of a community’s indigenous knowledge, what research issues could be investigated that would better equip adult educators to do this?

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