Community Libraries in Uganda as Sites for Negotiating Students’ Identities
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Introduction

Identity and libraries

Identity is an area of increased research interest in the field of education (e.g., Block, 2007), often focusing on student identity (e.g., Moita-Lopes, 2006; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002; Haneda, 2005; Potowski, 2004; Duff, 2002; Toohey, 1998) and teacher identity (e.g., Pavlenko, 2003; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston & Johnson, 2005) within the classroom or teacher training programs. While classrooms are central to students’ identity formation and negotiation, home, community and institutions like libraries play a part in – and are sites for shaping and negotiating students’ identities.

This paper presents data from 14 community libraries in Uganda and discusses avenues for exploring how students’ identities and imagined communities can be interpreted and analyzed through the resources and services that community libraries offer, with particular reference to the issue of language. The guiding question is: how can and do community libraries in Uganda function as sites for the negotiation of student identities and imagined communities, and what are the implications of this for the libraries, donors and student users of the libraries?
Language and education in Sub-Saharan Africa

The question of language is one of the major issues in education in Sub-Saharan Africa (Brock-Utne, 2000; Parry, 1999). There are some 2110 languages spoken in Africa (Ethnologue, n.d.), and only a few Sub-Saharan countries have one language spoken by the vast majority. This abundance of languages, coupled with a colonial history that for the most part promoted the colonial languages, seems to speak in favour of the use of a colonial language as the medium of instruction. However, regarding education, Brock-Utne (2000) posed the question: “in whose language?”, arguing that English, French and Portuguese are colonial languages imposed on students and impede their education as most of them do not speak these language well enough. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) considers learning and speaking one’s mother tongue a linguistic human right – a right that is seriously under attack, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. There are many arguments on either side, and this is a heated debate among teachers, donors and policy makers.

Language, education and identity

The question of the nature of the relationship between the individual and society is ancient. Aristotle called man zoon politikon, which translates something like the social animal. In modern social sciences there have been a number of changes in how the relationship between the individual and society should be understood. In behaviourist theory the individual was seen as learning and developing through outside stimuli. Later models emphasized how the individual is not a passive receiver, but also takes part in constructing his or her understanding of the outside world. In these (and related) models of conceptualizing learning and development the perspective was largely that of the individual. Quantitative research methods were seen as more objective,
congruent with contemporary theories and in line with the research questions that were asked. One area of research that sprung out of this epistemology was research on cognition, often with experiments where unique and identifiable variables were tested, often in test facilities. The purpose was to explore the nature of human psychology, especially in terms relevant for educational and other purposes.

While studies on cognition and psychology are widely recognized as offering an important contribution to social sciences and education, they do not take into consideration the social nature of human beings, or that fact that human action and thought are embedded in social settings. Many researchers have explored and theorized this social side from different disciplines and from different perspectives. In psychology, Vygotsky (1978) argued that speech and thought develop through an interaction with the social surroundings. In linguistics, Bakhtin (1986) critiqued the notion that meaning was tied to the sentence, and proposed instead the utterance as a unit of linguistic (and literary) analysis. Unlike the sentence, the utterance is defined by its social (purposive and interpersonal) properties. Bourdieu (1991) provided an alternative to structuralism by creating a model for analyzing social structures as embodied in human action and thought. Drawing on Bourdieu, particularly the construct *capital*, understood as intangible resources that people acquire over time, Norton (2000; Norton Pierce, 1995) revisited the construct *motivation*, which was heretofore seen as an area of psychology dealing with inner thought processes. Norton critiqued this limited perspective, arguing that what is traditionally seen as a psychological feature also depends on social factors. She suggests the construct *investment* as a way of capturing people’s agency in deciding their involvement in educational settings that would traditionally only look at their motivation (seen as a fixed psychological trait).
The concept of investment is related to an understanding of identity as being variable, socially constructed and intertwined with power relations, in keeping with the socio-cultural paradigm as outlined above. Rather than seeing students as introverted or extroverted, motivated or unmotivated, Norton argues that these traits vary over time, depend on the social context and are tied to power relations. In her study of English learners in Canada, Norton found that all the participants were motivated, but “all the women [participants] felt uncomfortable talking to people in whom they had a particular symbolic or material investment” (Norton Peirce 1995, p. 19). Doctors and teachers, but also countrymen and -women who spoke English, were mentioned as people whom the participants felt inhibited speaking English with.

Language is one of the most central elements of someone’s identity (e.g., Guardado, 2010), and, like identity, is connected to power: different languages and language varieties have different status and value in different contexts, and these vary over time. In Sub-Saharan Africa the question of language is central to educational debate, although it is more often seen in pragmatic and societal terms (such as availability of materials, importance of a unifying and international language) than in psychological or interpersonal terms. What different languages and different uses of languages in education mean to students, and what role these have in shaping students’ identities, is less explored. Another understudied area is how language relates to the students’ sense of belonging, their identity and their imagined communities (Anderson, 1991). In the context of language Norton and Toohey (2011) elaborate on this construct, as well as imagined identities, and stress the centrality of language in many students’ imagined identities, since “[a]n imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and a learner’s investment in the target language can be understood within this context” (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 415).
While heated debates and simplified positions may seem to favour one language (English or the vernacular language), a more fruitful avenue of investigation is how different languages are used and perceived in different educational (and other) settings, and how they interact and how the relation between the is perceived.

**Review of the literature on language and identity**

In a recent study from Uganda, Tembe and Norton (2011) studied parents’ and other stakeholders’ knowledge of the new curriculum that introduced the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in lower primary. Their findings support a previous study (Muthwii, 2002, as cited in Tembe & Norton, 2011) indicating that people suspect policies on mother tongue to be politically, rather than socio-linguistically, motivated. Through interviews the authors also explored the participants’ own use of language, as well as their opinions about language in instruction. The authors found an ambivalence towards the language policy as expressed in the curriculum: the local language was important for their and their children’s identity, and tied to home culture, while English was strategically important and tied to school and professional and academic success in life. The participants also raised concerns of a potential conflict between the language of exams (English, at the end of primary school) and the language of instruction (the local language, in lower primary). The language of wider communication, or area language, Luganda, was mentioned as a possible language of instruction since it had been used as this previously and had a more established orthography and materials (e.g., there is a daily newspaper in Luganda). Summing up, three languages (or languages at three levels) were of concern, and were considered important for different reasons and in different contexts: the local language, the language of wider communication/area language and an international language.
Kendrick, Jones, Mutonyi and Norton (2006) investigated how Ugandan girls’ drawings and use of cameras and drama could improve their teachers’ understanding of how they learn and use English. The participants in lower primary drew pictures of their own reading in the present an in the imagined future. Their drawings mainly depicted out-of-school reading of English reading materials. Somewhat older girls were given cameras, and were asked to write journals and talk about the experience of taking photos and using the manual and camera. The girls saw this as an opportunity to learn operating a camera (which, one girl suggested, could give them a job as a photographer), learning photographic techniques (artistic skills) or opened doors for learning about other technologies (confidence), and improve and practice their English skills by using the manual and participating in discussions and other activities (language development).

Norton and Williams (2012) studied an eGranary at a library in Uganda – a hard disk filled with educational and other electronic resources. The study was grounded in Blommaert’s and Wallerstein’s (as cited in Norton & Williams, 2012) theorizing of time and space; how the two are connected and how they can be seen as a scale moving from momentary and local (or situated) to timeless and translocal (or widespread). When something (ideas, people, objects) moves in time and space, their meanings also change. Based on this framework, together with Norton’s (2000; Norton Pierce, 1995) constructs of identity and investment, the authors argued that students were invested in the eGranary because it opens a range of present and future identities for them.

English is a global language, and the national language of Uganda, along with a number of former British colonies. In urban areas of former British colonies, particularly among the middle class and in higher education and other institutions, English is often widely used. As such, English is the prevalent, or even de facto, language in certain areas and domains in many former
British colonies. To the extent this is the case, it can be problematic to speak of English as a “foreign” or imposed language (Ramanathan, 2006). But English remains a language among many in most former British colonies, and for many people English is hardly a part of their lives, and many rural students only encounter it in school. Pennycook (2007) discusses the global spread of English and how it is appropriated in the context of hip-hop culture. He critiques the one-sided view of the spread of English as linguistic and cultural imperialism, and instead points out how hop-hop culture, particularly through the value of “keepin’ it real” (Pennycook 2007, p. 103), is appropriated to fit the local culture and used to express local concerns. The hip-hoper Too Phat uses mainly English, but also Malay. English has gained a prominent place in Malaysia, to the extent one can talk of a language shift (Pennycook 2007, p. 107). Inasmuch as English is a “Malaysian language”, the argument of linguistic imperialism becomes even more problematic. Regarding the “cultural imperialism” that American hip-hop culture might be seen to represent, Pennycook (2007) argues that “Too Phat may be using a global language, but they are also using a particular register that is local, generational, cultural, and distinctive” (p. 105). The article also describes a similar adaption of hip-hop in the Netherlands, Tanzania and other countries.

Comparing community libraries in Uganda

Community libraries

Community libraries in Africa are usually defined by their function and their establishment. Dent and Yannotta (2005) state that “they are created by and for a local population and usually are not supported with government funds” (p. 40). Stilwell (1989) is of a similar opinion, claiming that “solutions, and resources, should not be imposed from outside” (p. 261). Fairer-Wessels and Machet (as cited in Mostert 1998, p. 74) stress how community libraries are more directly
targeting the information needs of the local population than public libraries. While much of the literature describes what community libraries (in Africa) should do or can do, there is a need for a more objective definition to distinguish community libraries from public libraries, but also to distinguish them from information or resource centres and similar institutions, as well as private collections open to the public. Another question is whether a community library must have a building – what about mobile libraries and book boxes? This present study uses the term “community libraries” in opposition to publically funded and operated libraries, and all the libraries in the study have a building and use the term “library” to describe themselves.

**Purpose of the study**

While there is some literature on community libraries in Africa, there is little description of the national or regional development of this phenomenon (Stilwell’s [1989] article on South Africa is an exception). Comparative and nation-wide studies are also absent in the literature; empirical research tends to focus on individual libraries, particularly in South Africa and Uganda (Sissao, Compaoré & Kevane, 2010, is an exception).

This study compares 14 community libraries with the purpose of identifying commonalities and differences, and it attempts to identify characteristics that can help explain why some libraries are more successful than others. This exposition will inform a discussion on the connection between libraries and languages, as well as how libraries can be seen as sites where student users negotiate their identities and imagined communities.
Selection

Uganda community library association organizes more than 100 community libraries, which includes all the community libraries in the country known to the organization (board member Kate Parry, personal communication). There are huge differences between these libraries, including the fact that about half of them do not have a building, and some don’t even have any books (but join the organization hoping to get started). This study reports on the findings of a multiple case study including 14 community libraries in Uganda. The sample is not representative, but chosen to shed light on differences and similarities, as well as in an attempt to explore tendencies across different libraries.

Data collection

Visits to the libraries were conducted between September and December 2011, and included observations and interviews with the librarian or another person in charge at each the library. The researcher estimated the number of books in each category and measured the size of the building, while the other data were provided by the participants. Arguably the most important aspect of a library – who the users are, how and why they use the library – is much harder to record, and data on this is hard to validate, especially across libraries, as “use” means different things at different libraries. Rather than recording statistics, the use of libraries was documented through interviews and observations. A quantitative method of recording might give a veneer of accuracy and objectivity, but because many libraries do not have good recording routines it can hard to obtain reliable and valid data, especially when the intention is to compare libraries.
Presenting the libraries

A summary of the findings is presented in table 1 (a detailed overview of the libraries is provided in appendix A).

Table 1. A summary of the findings.

| Year the library was initiated (mean): 2003 | Have computers: 43% |
| Year operating from a building (mean): 2005 | Computers for users on average: 2.9 (mean: 0) |
| Located in a rural area: 64% | Internet access: 43% |
| Located in a compound: 36% | Books in African languages on average: 95 (mean: 4) |
| Affiliated with an organization: 79% | African books in English on average: 338 (mean: 65) |
| Affiliated with a school: 50% | Western books in English on average: 1475 (mean: 900) |
| Local initiative only: 64% | Obligatory fees: 29% |
| Local, or local and foreign initiative: 93% | Have received donations: 79% |
| Average number of librarians: 2.2 (mean: 2) | Have outreach activities: 43% |
| Have an administrator: 86% | Organize adult literacy class: 29% |
| Average building size: 71m2 (mean: 55m2) | Other regular events: 36% |
| Have electricity: 79% |

Analysis

While there were no predefined categories of analysis, the knowledge and familiarity that the researcher had with community libraries in Uganda guided the categories of data collection,
which gave some direction for the analysis. But the final choice of themes, and particularly the analysis of each theme, were informed by the data.

Theme 1: Location

Most of the libraries (64%) are in rural areas, or in a trading centre (21%), which are smaller than towns, so they would normally also be considered rural. This reflects the country as a whole, as 87 per cent of Ugandans live in rural areas (UNICEF, n.d.). But “rural” can mean very different things in terms of population density. Parts of the country are very fertile and are densely populated, and most libraries are found in the more densely populated areas of the country. But there appears to be considerable differences in “catchment areas” between the libraries; although many are rural, some are “more rural” than others, that is, some are located in trading centres, near cities or in fertile, densely populated areas, while others in areas with a more dispersed population. Related to this is whether the library is situated within the compound of a family or an organization. This is the case for more than one third (36%) of the libraries. Having to enter someone’s home (or the compound of an organisation) to go to the library appears to be a deterrent for some users. Recognizing this, one family was in the process of building a new library on a well-travelled road in the area outside their compound. A library on a street is both more visible, and is likely to be more inviting to casual visitors and passers-by.

Theme 2: Resources

The resources a library holds are key to its success: Books and other materials, staff, facilities, electricity and computers are part of what constitutes a library. But a wide selection of books does not mean that many books are read. Equally important, if not more, is the question of
quality, appropriateness and organisation. Although these factors are elusive and not directly addressed by this study, the number of books in the three categories recorded does give some foundation for discussion. About one third of the libraries had no African books, neither in English nor an African language. Although English is widely seen as important, and local languages are sometimes relegated to the home (Tembe & Norton, 2008, 2011), books in the local language do enjoy some popularity in some libraries, particularly with the primary school children.

Proper building space does not only give space for books, but also opens up for the possibility to arrange adult literacy courses (29%) or other events and activities such as meetings and workshops (36%).

Most of the libraries (79%) in the study have received foreign support such as computers, grants to improve or erect building, install a solar panel, buy local books and pay electric bills and salaries. Several of these receive support on a monthly basis to pay salaries and electric bills, or are supported through a foreign organization. There is a fairly strong correlation between outside support and a significant collection of resources, as well as usership. The best-stocked, best-equipped and most used libraries depend on regular foreign support. Raising money is a key concern for many libraries, but hardly any libraries do this, other than through user fees. Five of the libraries have user fees (daily, monthly or yearly), but with one or two exceptions they generate very little money, and possibly deter users, leading to the question of the viability of this policy. The most notable exception is an urban library that is very popular as a reading space, particularly during school holidays, where the large library building is not enough, and up to two hundred students are accommodated in makeshift tents in the yard. This seems to indicate that in urban areas there can be purchasing power to pay for library services, particularly a space to read.
With the exception of one urban library, the librarians do not have any relevant education other than – in a few cases – a short workshop or similar training in librarianship. One should be careful about interpreting this as a weakness. The community libraries in question differ from large, public libraries with computerized holdings, and their tasks are ipso facto quite different. Alemna (1995, p. 42) points out that for a community librarian the relationship with the users is central, and, I would add, knowing the community is more important than knowing the Dewey Decimal System.

**Theme Three: Organization**

Most of the libraries were initiated by a member of the local community who wanted to help improve literacy and schooling. Five libraries also had support from abroad in setting up the library, either by an individual or an organisation. The only library that came about solely through “foreign initiative” was part of a larger school and development project, and was built a few years after the development project started. All but three of the libraries were part of a larger organization, in most cases some kind of development organization, but a small photocopying shop and a local language association are also represented, showing the diversity in these affiliations. Two of the libraries had close ties to a secondary school; one was partly built to meet the needs of the students, the other had a secondary school built to make more use of the library (and meet public demand for a secondary school)! The last unaffiliated library was at the time of fieldwork developing a farming scheme to promote the growing of vegetables for better nutrition. It appears that the libraries see themselves as a part of something larger; literacy is one of many building blocks in building a developed society.
The number of years a library has operated seems to be an indicator of success. At the face of it this may not be surprising, but it does merit further discussion. Many community libraries, especially those of local initiative only, tend to start out with few or no books, and often no building. But over time some grow, and receive donated books mediated by the National Library of Uganda, personal donations or otherwise. Some libraries move from a book box in a school to a proper building. More than half (57%) of the libraries in this study got a building after the library was “initiated”, the arithmetic mean being two years (i.e., on average, half the libraries erected a building around two years after setting up a library of some kind). Contrary to what one might expect this does not correlate with foreign co-initiative; three of the four libraries in that category erected a building after the library was “initiated”.

The data indicate that a library that has been operating for some time has a larger collection and more volunteers. What is important about this is that it indicates that libraries need time to grow and to gain confidence and connections that lead to support. This is not to say that all libraries grow in a linear fashion. In fact, one thing that is missing from the data is the failed libraries – those that started but were later shut down. The only UgCLA member library that has closed (as far as the organization is aware of) is a library in a school compound on the outskirts of Kampala. As it was based on foreign initiative, it does lead to speculation about the importance of local initiative and support.

**Theme Four: Use and users**

So far the focus has been on the *input* – the prerequisites for actual use. But it is really the use of a library, especially how a library is used and how it benefits the users, that is the truly interesting question, since it is the use and benefit – not the collection – that determines the success of a
library. But because “use”, and even more so “benefit” are elusive, hard to quantify and hard to identify, many studies stop before getting so far as to discuss the benefits, or impact, of a library (Williams & Wavell, 2001a, b). It is beyond the scope of this study to approach the question of benefit directly, but since there is so little literature on community libraries in Africa it is important to provide a description of who the users are and what they do at the library, which can be seen as a first stepping stone to future research on more tangible benefits of using the library.

In addition to browsing the shelves and borrowing books, secondary students in some places use the library as a reading space, especially for reading their own notes (which they use in lieu of textbooks). Outreach activities, such as mobile libraries and school visits, function as an extension of the library, although they are not always carried out on a regular basis. By the same token some libraries are used for organizing adult literacy classes (29%) or other events on a regular basis, such as meetings (36%). In addition, Book Week is celebrated on schools and libraries across the country early in the school year, and some libraries take part in this celebration.

The vast majority of library users are primary and secondary students, to the point where the relative absence of adults, especially other than teachers is rather conspicuous. In Uganda, reading is closely associated with education, and during my stay I repeatedly heard that once students finish school or university, they stop reading.

**Discussion**

**The contestation of language and identity**

Tembe and Norton (2011) described three levels on which languages were used and for which they were conceived of as relevant: local, regional and international. The participants connected
one language to each of these levels. At the same time, however, there was a tendency to associate school language with the national and international language (or in some cases the regional language), while the local language was associated with the home, which, to some extent, was seen as a distinct sphere from school. The implications of such a view is that the local language does not belong to the school domain; it has no place there. This view is reflected in the curriculum; the local language is only taught for the first few years, and only in rural areas, serving the function of a tool for transition, not a tool for personal and cultural development and enrichment. Libraries may further this divide by not offering, or downplaying, books in the local language. By only, or primarily, offering Western books in English, they support the divide between home and school, and weaken the status and potential of the local language as a medium for developing children’s personal and cultural identities relating to the local language and culture.

However important, language is only one of the many facets that constitute someone’s identity. In education, the pedagogy that the teacher uses, the resources available and the larger educational structure (such as exams) are central to students’ identities, especially their identities as students. Although they didn’t frame it in this way, pedagogy was central to Kendrick and associates (2006) study of Ugandan girls’ use of artistic media to express themselves and their identities. With the teacher-oriented, resource-poor and cramming-dominated education that is prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa, the use of photography and drama not only increased and provided new ways of learning English, it also influenced these students’ identities and their imagined communities. This can be interpreted along the lines of Norton and Williams’ (2012) elaboration of placed resources, and how the meaning and significance of resources change as they move in time and space. In a Western school, the use of a camera might be a fun activity in a
class one day, but is unlikely to have the same impact on students as it did in Kendrick and associates’ (2006) study. The use of cameras (including the manual), writing of journals, meetings and discussions were, at least to some degree, authentic literacy events (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson & Degener, 2004); they served a purpose of their own, as opposed to only serving the purpose of learning English.

Under the circumstances, particularly financial constraints and limited availability of materials in local languages, coupled with the relative abundance of donated English language materials, the libraries are fairly good at offering books in local languages, and thus providing a foundation for students’ negotiation of identities and imagined communities that are not unilaterally geared away from “the local” (geographically, personally, linguistically, culturally) towards “the distant”. By offering both, the libraries invite students to explore and negotiate hybrid, multiple identities that embrace, rather than reject, “the local” or “the distant”, and, hopefully, play a part in bridging and surpassing these dichotomies.

Norton’s (2000; Norton Pierce 1995) construct of investment can be useful in analyzing how students may position themselves vis-à-vis libraries in negotiating their identities. This lead to the question: are the students invested in the materials and practices of the libraries – do the libraries appeal to them, through their resources, organization, activities and location? Stranger-Johannessen (2009) argued that the library in his case study was underutilized in some ways, and related this mainly to factors external to the students, and often out of the control of the library. But there is room for libraries to become more attractive to users, and several of the libraries do more than simply providing books and reading space: meetings, debates outreach services and other activities can be expected to make more students (and others) familiar with the library,
broaden their view of what a library is and can be, and, perhaps, make them more invested in the library as a space for learning and personal development.

Libraries have been likened with an oasis (Haycook 2006, p. 495), and this metaphor is particularly apt for Africa. Although one should be cautious with extolling community libraries as a panacea, they often represent what can be considered a placed resource – both the library as such (the building, the institution) and the books and other resources it offers. Community libraries as we know them do not have a long tradition in Sub-Saharan Africa (Ethiopia has a long library tradition, but they were not “community” libraries [Ourgay, 1991]).

Libraries, particularly the resources they offer, should not be taken at “face value”, that is, their functions should not be automatically equated with their functions in the West. Storybook reading is not a universal phenomenon (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004), and one cannot assume that storybooks in a library in Africa will serve the same function as they do in a Western library. The fact that most books at the libraries in this study were donations from the US and the UK means not only that they were in English, but also that they portray cultures quite different from the ones in Uganda. Most libraries had African books in English or books in African languages (64% and 57%, respectively), but the selection was in many cases limited. The collection of books a community library in Uganda has depends more on foreign donations than anything else, including donation of foreign books, and money to buy local books. This places a responsibility with the donors, as donating Western textbooks and storybooks is not a “neutral” act, a mere “contribution to fighting illiteracy”. English is an important language in Uganda, and a language that children have to learn, but when donors solely provide books in English, and with a Western content, they also provide a certain linguistic and cultural ideology. The board of one of the libraries in this study is very much aware of this, and has continuously bought books in the local
language (Parry, 2011, p. 335), as well as limited the number and kind of donated Western books they receive (Kate Parry, personal communication). This example also indicates that the responsibility lies not only with the donors, but also with the library, in considering the implicit ideology of their establishment. This especially concerns decisions regarding collection, but also how books are displayed and promoted.

Several of the libraries were initiated solely or partly by foreigners, but this does not seem to have adversely affected the materials collection or the connection with the local community. In any event, at some level the libraries do depend on foreign support, particularly through donations. Parry (2011) raises the question whether community libraries in Africa can be seen as a form of linguistic imperialism, but concludes that, with some reservations, there is limited risk of that. There is, however, a need for foreign stakeholders to be aware of their role, including implicit agendas and vested interests, and consider how these align with the interests and desires of the local community in general, and how their actions and policies affect students and students’ identities in particular.

Pennycook (2007) and Ramanathan (2006) discuss how English is appropriated and vernacularized in postcolonial societies, arguing that English is taken up, adapted, and in some cases mixed with, or used alongside, vernacular languages. One of Pennycook’s main points is that the spread of English does not equate linguistic and cultural imperialism, it should rather be seen as a fluid spread of ideas and culture on a global level, where global (in this case American) ideas, culture and language are weaved into the local cultures. This is an important point regarding a subculture (hip hop) that is based a philosophy of “keepin’ it real”. Although this is interpreted in different ways, the way Pennycook (2007) presents it, this very philosophy is almost an antidote against the cultural imperialism that critics (particularly Phillipson, as cited in
Pennycook, 2007) have accused the spread of American culture and English language for. The weakness of Pennycook’s argument – if one were to extrapolate from the spread of hip hop culture to the spread of American/Western culture in general – is that most (sub)cultures do not insist on “keepin’ it real”. As an argument against cultural and linguistic imperialism, the example of hip-hop serves as an exception rather than an expression of the general tendency. This is not to say that cultural and linguistic imperialism is a fact, or that culture is not adapted and appropriated when it travels. Pennycook’s argument does have some validity in that broad generalizations (such as those of linguistic and cultural imperialism) are usually not universally valid. With regards to libraries it is not a question of English or local language materials, but how they are balanced and how they are promoted.

**Libraries and imagined communities**

Inasmuch as community libraries are a part of students’ lives, they will be sites where students’ identities and imagined communities are negotiated. Many students look ahead, wondering what the future will bring, and study hard to advance in life and achieve their goals. English is widely seen as one of the keys to a successful future: an education, a well-paid job and life in the city, perhaps even abroad. Although there are differences, these are ideas that many students in Uganda aspire for. These are, in many cases, their imagined communities. Norton and Williams (2012) discussed how access to the eGranary widened the students’ imagined communities. The eGranary put becoming a doctor or similarly well-educated person on the horizon – at least it made it seem more realistic that it had before they were familiar with the eGranary. Although this study does not offer any direct statements from student users of libraries, it is reasonable to expect that libraries provide similar avenues for students to widen their imagined communities.
Four of the libraries have Internet access for users (and two have access for the librarian), and another two computers for users. Computers and Internet are not just tools for accessing information, they are also a strong symbol of technology, particularly educational technology, particularly in communities where computers are virtually absent. Kendrick and associates’ (2006) study showed how more varied use of English language materials helped students learn English better, and libraries can be expected to have similar effects.

Stranger-Johannessen (2009) used the term “modern, public space” (p. 99) to describe how the library itself – the building – served as a space for students to develop their identities: As one student said: “I can come to the library with so many people without fearing anyone. I tell the librarian what I want. Before I couldn’t. ... I’m not shy now, I’m confident” (Stranger-Johannessen, 2009, p. 78). By virtue of representing something from many students’ imagined communities – something urban, technological and educational, the library has a potential of contributing to developing students’ imagined communities, as well as helping them on the way to reaching those imagined communities through improved language and technology skills and familiarity with a “modern, public space”.

**Conclusion**

When talking about student identities in Africa, it may be tempting to turn to simplistic, generalizing dichotomies of “modern” vs. “traditional”, “urban” vs. “rural”, “local” vs. “global”. At one level these terms can be fruitful in an analysis, but like most dichotomies describing the real world they are also severely limited. The real world does not exist as dichotomies; the boundaries are typically not that clear. But these dichotomous categories are present in student and public discourse, and are likely to be central to students’ explicit and implicit negotiation of
identities, and how they envision their future selves – their imagined communities. Libraries are not neutral sites providing educational materials and other material and immaterial resources – they are also sites that influence, and sites where student identities are negotiated. The libraries, then, including the donors and other stakeholders, have a responsibility: are libraries a place that leads students towards the “modern”, “urban” and “global”, or do they also invite students to reflect, expand and build and their own language and culture?

The “scramble for modernity” found in discourses in and about Uganda (often explicitly, such as “the need to become part the international community) it not neutral. Furthermore, the presence or absence of such discourses has implications for students’ identities and imagined communities. If excessive (or exclusive) emphasis is placed on “modernity”, English, education (implicitly education in English), jobs and economic progress, something is left out. The challenge for libraries, including their donors and benefactors, is to be cognizant of the discourses they are part of creating, and how they take part in shaping, and function as sites for students’ identities and imagined communities through their resources, activities and ideologies: what materials are donated or procured, what activities are organized, and how this is done and on what grounds? Treating libraries as a neutral supplement to school is at best naïve, at worst a way of furthering the linguistic and cultural imperialism that Parry (2011) and Phillipson (as cited in Pennycook, 2007) talked about. Conversely, libraries have a potential for taking an active part in fostering multiple, hybrid and diverse identities, expanding students’ horizons of imagined communities and breaking down dichotomies that themselves currently appear to adversely affect students, particularly with regards to language.
References


