Learning informally: A case for arts in vocational education and training in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This paper advocates for the inclusion of the arts in vocational learning programs in Uganda as an integrated form of holistic learning oriented towards empowerment and entrepreneurship. Using community-based research in the context of vocational education and training, our data emerged from open-ended interviews, focus groups and youth-led radio talk shows with stakeholders from public and private sectors, instructors, artists, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Three significant themes arose from the data collected. First, pathways available to learners to become artists are limited by increasing neoliberal orientations towards education. Second, there is a thriving informal youth-led arts community in northern Uganda empowering young artists to pursue the arts as a livelihood. Third, the arts are socially delegitimated. That is, without ways for learners to generate income from the arts, they are not able to devote their time to learning through the arts, and their artistic endeavors are not recognized as important skills in their communities or in society. Although different, these three themes demonstrate that there is a vibrant space in the informal sector of arts to inform professional practices, that if supported by vocational education and training, have the potential to become important and much needed professional careers in Uganda.

INTRODUCTION

Gulu, the site in northern Uganda where this case study is located, is a vibrant and chaotic city in a period of transition and transformation following 30 years of civil war. As you enter the city you are immediately engulfed in the hustle of market vendors selling everything from fresh fruit to second hand shoes. You find tailors set up with their sewing machines on the side of the streets, artists displaying their painting and crafts for tourists, food vendors selling chapati and chicken, a myriad of small shops selling and repairing electronics. Welders, wood workers, and mechanic shops all line the streets, and there are several larger markets selling agricultural *produce* and household goods. There is a vast informal

economy, with everyone hustling to find money for school fees -- the major expense for all households, and one of the reasons, though not the only one, why there is such a large number of early school leavers making their way into vocational programs (Openjuru, 2010). The result is a vast social skills ecosystem (Wedekind et. al, 2021) interweaving learning and living in informality. The Ugandan government is encouraging the majority youth population (World Bank, 2021 data places 46% of the population under 14 years of age) to seek out self-employment and vocational learning because there is simply very little formal employment available (National Planning Authority, 2013). Ironically, as the government, NGOs and private skilling programs promote critical thinking, creativity, innovation and an entrepreneurial mindset, they are also promoting a technicist training which takes the creativity out of learning by using a banking model of education. This model is teacher centered and leaves little room for adaptation or student involvement in their learning (Freire, 1970). The banking approach also streamlines technical skills in an effort for efficiency, and neglects developing people and their needs.

Yet, in spite of the austere attitude towards learning, if you enter a little deeper into the aspirations and inspirations of youth in Gulu, you find a flourishing community of aspiring DJ's, break dancers, musicians of all kinds, movie makers, painters, fashion designers and theatre performers learning and living informally, some as a side dish, others struggling to make a living. The potential of this community, and the opportunity to support, learn from, and build up this community forms the departure point of this research which is based on a 3-year research study examining viable decent living opportunities through vocational learning in Uganda and South Africa. This article focuses on Gulu and highlights the value and need

for arts in vocational learning and arts as vocational learning. We recognize that arts are missing in many learning programs in Uganda (Openjuru, 2010), however, our focus here is guided by our research in vocational learning.

EDUCATION IN UGANDA

Uganda is one of the five East African Countries. Like many other colonized nations, Uganda continues to use the formal education system introduced by Christian missionaries (Haitch & Miller, 2006). The colonial system of education is a patriarchal system (Coetzee & Du Toit, 2018), intending to maintain hierarchies and produce workers for the elite. It denigrates their cultural values, and removes them from educational experiences that matter personally to them and to the world at large. Mosweunyane (2013) explains that before the introduction of the Eurocentric colonial system of education, Africans educated their children differently, in what is labelled as an Indigenous system of education. This indigenous system of education promotes local and holistic ways of knowing which is consistent with the lived realities of the learners and the environment in which they are living (Hoppers, 2002; Openjuru, 2017). In African Indigenous Education, learning was integrated into everyday life and the well-being of the community. The learning system integrated arts and practice in a holistic pedagogical approach that did not separate culture and practical experience from knowledge and community well-being, both for the present and the future. The Christian missionary system, in an effort to create and maintain social hierarchies, enforced categories and levels of learning that were valued differently, differentiating between disciplines and between formal, informal and non-formal learning.

FORMAL, INFORMAL AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

Ngaka et. al (2012) suggest that informal community-engaged learning should be foundational to the development of a formal school curriculum, because such informal learning indicates what is immediately relevant to the lived realities of the communities that should be served by these education systems. Informal learning is needs-driven, based on the interests and values of the community, and its development should naturally support non-formal and formal education (Blaak, Openjuru & Zeelen, 2013). For education to support individuals and communities in meaningful ways, there must be a natural connection between indigenous ways of knowing and living in the world and formal school curricula. In this way, art, which tends to exist as a cultural practice of the community, will find authoritative recognition in the formal school system including vocational education. For example, Achebe & Msiska (2008) note that the performance of traditional wrestling was revered among the Igbo

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people of Nigeria and the best wrestler was a respected figure. Yet such traditional entertainment is not recognized under the formal school system and therefore it has no educational value within the formal school system. However, practitioners of this traditional wrestling would still go on to learn and become wrestlers through the informal Indigenous education system which is still being used to transfer cultural and traditional practices with community, important values for the next generations in Africa. In Uganda, Monk et al. (2020) worked with young informal artists in the community who had left school because it was not meeting their needs. A component of the research was to host an art-based intervention with schools, family and community to communicate why the arts and arts pathways are needed in primary and secondary schools. The intervention was an attempt to merge indigenous learning approaches in the arts into formal curricula.

NEED FOR VALUING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET) FOR INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING

VET Africa 4.0 Research Collective (VETA4, 2021; VET Africa 4.0, forthcoming; McGrath et. al 2020) calls for a transformative approach to education that tackles the negative effects that have arisen from the mass production model of schooling while re-insisting that education is simultaneously a human right and a means towards personal and societal development.

The government of Uganda has placed considerable emphasis in their Vision 2040 (National Planning Authority, 2013) on Vocational Education and Training (VET) as a means to address the high unemployment rate and high early school leaving rate. There is an emphasis on the need to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and critical thinking because the economy does not have enough formal employment opportunities. Muhangi, Monk, and Adrupio (2022) argue that the ongoing environmental crisis and consequent

climate changes add urgency to the need for innovative, adaptive and creative thinkers. VET Africa 4.0 Collective (forthcoming) describe in detail the dynamic nature of informal learning which is taking place in Gulu and Eastern Cape (South Africa) as youth develop networks to seek out the learning they need to meet their livelihood aspirations, in spite of antiquated formal systems that are largely not equipped nor flexible enough to meet their needs.

One of the dynamic components of informal learning that we uncovered in our research, which was glaringly absent from formal VET, is the presence of arts both as potential career pathways and as a means for learning and sharing knowledge. In this paper, we argue that including arts in education is integral to the transformed approach to learning and livelihoods needed for dynamic communities capable of adapting and flourishing. Based on the premise of developing entrepreneurs and critical/creative thinkers, we argue that arts are essential even from the pragmatic, neoliberal and technical perspectives of economic development. Following from this, we argue that by not including arts in programming, formal and non-formal (vocational) education is a process which provides inadequate education and then conveniently blames youth for not succeeding, despite being "trained." This is especially obvious for traditional trades such as carpentry, welding, and fashion design. Indigenous ways of learning and teaching in Uganda integrate dancing, storytelling and problem-solving skills. Indeed, storytelling, and riddles were a fundamental skill aspired to and valued as wisdom in leaders and elders. If the Ugandan government is serious about transforming livelihoods through VET, then it must return to learning approaches like Indigenous pedagogies that include the arts in learning processes in order to engage and develop communities.

The second component that we argue is missing in VET programs is art as a potential career pathway. *The Independent*, a newspaper in Uganda (2021), recognized that the "government of Uganda isn't known for taking art seriously let alone

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appreciating its role in the economic, social and spiritual development of its people." Our research demonstrated that pre-colonization craftsmanship such as metallurgy, carpentry, weaving, and pottery for developing tools and household items, as well as tattoos, bead making, make up, and music for aesthetics and entertainment was an integral career in society (Okelo, 2020). Craftspeople created important innovations that supported flourishing and healthy communities, which are no longer legitimized by formal education or training, but are much needed in educational offerings for Ugandan youth.

LEARNING THE ARTS AND THE ART OF LEARNING COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

In Uganda, art training is an area of knowledge operated mainly by informal practices, in which novice artists learn from a more experienced artist or from self-discovery and explorations of their own talents and networks (*The Independent*, 2021). Most artists learn either through Indigenous communities and/or from their parents

and just by existing in their communities as well as their participation in theater or music groups for dancing, singing and acting. Artists often struggle on their own supporting their private exhibition or self-promotion on the streets. Although some universities in Uganda provide formal education in fine arts, music, dance and drama (Beddie & Halliday-Wynes, 2010), such types of formal programs are still very limited and are not available in Gulu. For instance, Makerere University's School of Liberal Arts is the only school in Uganda with an academic program offering a diploma in music, dance, and drama. It provides such professional opportunities whereas African Indigenous Education often unfolds around campfire, storytelling, riddle solving, poetry singing and dancing in the homestead – engaging community to retain their culture and develop for the future.

METHODOLOGY: VOCATIONAL EDUCATION TRAINING (VET) AFRICA 4.0 (GULU CASE)

We broadly describe in our methodology section the larger three-year research project with four case studies, two in South Africa and two in Uganda, funded by the British Academy and seeking to examine the potential of vocational learning in leading to decent life opportunities. In this article, however, we rely only on the Gulu case for this article, where we worked closely with core stakeholders in an iterative process of community based participatory action research (Monk et al., 2021). Tandon et. al. (2016) explain that community-based research is messy because it values the life experiences and knowledge of the participants. Working closely with the community requires living in the chaos and complexity of everyday life and negotiating the research path as it emerges. The Gulu case was particularly complex because of the large degree of informality in

learning and working and living in Gulu. We therefore pursued several different research areas with different stakeholders, as issues were identified by different stakeholders. Lotz-Sisitka (2004) has written about this chaos in her work with community learning networks in South Africa. The participatory process entangles data collection with data analysis because of the attempts to engage in and offer solutions to the pressing issues identified by community and with community. The research is based in ongoing relationships of action and reflection, and blurs the traditional lines of researcher as academic and participant as non-academic. The goal is to have an interested community of practice come together and solve community issues as they emerge, which we describe in the following sections. In Gulu, a core aim of our research was to bring together networks of people and organizations interested in vocational learning for decent work.

We first engaged in a stakeholder mapping process, which brought together a broad range of stakeholders in a day-long forum to discuss issues in vocational education and training and identified who we should speak with. Data was then collected using open ended interviews, focus groups and youth-led community dialogues, and radio talk shows. Stakeholders from various fields, including local government, university, NGOs, union for people with disabilities, instructors, and the private sector, formed an advisory committee to guide the research. As researchers we also engaged with many of the stakeholders in their programs in teaching and advisory roles. Much of the research we did resulted in further research. For example, speaking with youth involved in agriculture, we learned of a rich informal set of learning networks using social media, so we engaged in a mini case study with them and the rise of backyard farming during COVID-19. This in turn led us to speak with (vulnerable) food vendors selling their agricultural

produce on the streets and in the multitude of outdoor markets where most people are buying their food. Speaking with farmers brought out an issue of having to face notorious middlemen who purchase their produce at low prices and resell it. Middlemen felt that farmers were missing quality in their programs. So we brought together middlemen, farmers, extension officers (tasked with agriculture outreach), and university lecturers in agriculture in a forum to discuss the issue of quality produce and fair prices. We give this example to help understand the iterative process and many dimensions of the research. This forum was an intervention and analysis of the current data, together with the related stakeholders. It was also a forum for us to collect more data, and lead us spiraling into speaking with other government officials and a herbal medicine program based in preserving biodiversity and encouraging environmentally friendly agriculture practices. Another dynamic of the research was engaging in two pilot projects with related stakeholders to try out the potential of virtual reality and environmental incubation centers. In each of these we brought together stakeholders repeatedly to design and test and carry out the pilot. The process was therefore data collection because we were documenting it. However, it could also be conceived of as analysis because it involved the ongoing collective analysis of the pilot team. Or it could be conceived of as dissemination because the pilots themselves were an outcome in that we were acting on the previous learning. The pilots came at the very end of the research funding and actually extended beyond the funding.

As we started to make connections and form a picture of the vast learning ecosystem, we also began to trace pathways of learning by youth as they followed their aspirations. To do this, we developed a "lifegrid" chart, which we used to plot transitions, choices (and the related causes) made

by youth. One of the areas that emerged for us, and which we pursued as a pathway, was the broad category of arts and decent work. Decent work is an elusive and subjective term- and one of the core questions of the research. This was because we noticed that a) many youth were pursuing art careers as a side pathway, and b) there was a large movement of creative ways to recycle waste in tailoring for making earrings, bags, couch coverings, which extended to a whole network of youth in the arts. To generalize loosely here, the youth (who led a community intervention as a component of this research specifically on this topic) felt decent work was a livelihood that offered economic security so that they could feed their families and send their children to school, personal safety, something they valued and which was valued by society.

INTERVIEWS

We recorded a total of 55 general interviews (17 women, 38 men), 26 additional interviews accompanied by a lifegrid which focused on pathways in arts, tailoring, and farming (19 women, 7 men) and 13 focus group discussions with a total of 28 females and 46 males. We asked participants to share their stories, probed deeper around different aspects of VET, and asked them what needed to be done to improve VET from their perspective, and how we could use this research process as an intervention to improve VET.

RADIO TALK SHOWS

In addition, we asked youth to lead community radio shows as a method of collecting data during COVID-19. We invited two or three different youth involved in VET in various capacities to host 9 radio shows on a weekly basis (12 women, and 11 men). We brought together youth involved in vocational education and training, all from the informal and non-formal sphere. The radio

program host was himself a youth and DJ learning informally the art of radio. The youth shared their experiences related to VET and decent work on air to inspire youth, to provide ideas and knowledge about available programs and opportunities and about the intersections of living and learning. The show became oriented towards the arts and community development through the direction of the youth. For example, three youth who we invited to speak about informal agriculture in one of the early weeks discovered that one of them was an aspiring musician (off air), the other two then thought the topic of the radio program was arts, and proceeded to share their own experiences working in the arts. Future programs were designed explicitly to discuss the potential of art and the potential of decent work. The radio shows were recorded and shared with us by the radio station. The two or three youth who shared their experiences each week signed consent forms and participated in short recorded reflection sessions about the show. The public who called into the show were informed that the show was contributing towards research – however, most of them did not reveal their identity. The data collection was also a process of analysis in that the discussants and people calling in were engaged in a reflexive analysis of the arts. The reflections following the radio shows added another layer to the analysis process. Finally, after COVID-19 lockdown restrictions were eased, participants were asked to participate (a number of them were organizers and panelists) in a day workshop about youth livelihoods and decent work. Based on their participation in the research they both decided to orient the workshop towards opportunities in arts, and used arts-based methods of facilitation to engage in reflexive discourse and analysis about decent work.

FINDINGS

It was this community engaged approach to the research that enabled a deeper understanding of the dynamic informal social skills learning ecosystem, and in particular the potentiality of flourishing livelihoods of the vibrant arts community. The process entangles the often-isolated components and participants of traditional research processes as it engages in ongoing cycles of learning and action. As we have discussed above, the data collection, analysis, and dissemination are all interconnected and form the basis for the next questions and interventions. This journal article is but one way that we are sharing the discussion, it is also part of the research and hopefully it will also inspire new reflections, iterations and relationships.

In the following section we document the emergent challenges and potentials identified by youth in arts in Gulu.

PATHWAYS TO ARTISTS DEVELOPING THEIR SKILLS AND TALENTS

Despite many artists creating spaces to exhibit their work, Uganda society and policy does not tend to support artists or see their work as 'legitimate' employment, as evidenced in the lack of support for the arts (*The Independent,* 2021). Thus artists of all kinds remain largely working in the informal sector, hustling to get by. A musician, for example, will create a space to sell their music but they will also have to sell other artifacts such as clothing. We saw this as the case with most artists we spoke with: They are often pursuing arts as either a part time job, or they are pursuing multiple arts-based endeavors without a great deal of sustainability or security. Most saw it as pursuing their passion, and were looking to develop potential career pathways.

Learning of the arts in non-formal spaces follows diverse pathways, with the potential artists identifying an interest or talent and then learning from mentors, community members and practice.

> Despite the perception that most art is based on talent, many fine arts are trainable and they can be improved through a setting that encourages the learners' growth in a variety of ways. However, often fledgling artists are pressured or pushed into formal education and to view their arts practices as merely a hobby or entertainment.

Upcoming artists become inspired when they join spaces where the arts are being created; they desire to join artistic communities and belong to the community. As one artist who aspired to filmmaking commented, "A certain group of filmmakers originated from Kenya but in Uganda their member was [name]. They came to our school and briefed us about film as an art and I picked interest in it." The learning processes for these artists follow different routes, mainly through community spaces where a professional or an employer has a makeshift school or they learn from someone already doing the art.

Despite the many informal spaces of learning the arts, professional spaces that train some of these arts with basic skill and offer credentialing are limited; this requires the budding artist to search for more learning or for employers to create spaces that upskill creativity not taught in the formal settings or vocational spaces. As one fashion design employer commented, "I think what inspired me, like I said I have two branches, I have a factory and I have a school.

What inspired me to open the school was me coming to the realization that the tailoring schools that were around Gulu were not giving the key or relevant information to the people they were training. I know they were doing their best but at the end of the day when you look at the quality of the education the girls were getting, to me it wasn't something sufficient enough because when you look at building a career in tailoring, you are probably thinking that this is what I am going to do for the rest of my life and you need quality education to do that. So what inspired me most to start a school is being able to provide the right type of skills and knowledge to the people pursuing their careers in this field."

For this type of arts learning, the learning is usually done through training from a friend or a person within the community that is doing that art in particular, a type of informal apprenticeship where there is a lack of learning spaces for particular types of arts learning in formal spaces. A craft creator noted, "I just saw it and I got interested in learning it. She was a neighbor of mine. So I just went to see her in the next door. Then I found her doing the things so I asked her to show me how to do it then I just did it."

Despite the perception that most art is based on talent, many fine arts are trainable and they can be improved through a setting that encourages the learners' growth in a variety of ways. However, often fledgling artists are pressured or pushed into formal education and to view their arts practices as merely a hobby or entertainment. One artist shared "I would say my own solo music career began this year but I've been a songwriter for quite a while. I feel that while I was in school I couldn't balance the two, that is to say [if] I leave school and focus on my musical career that is like shooting two birds with one stone so I feel like I should first concentrate in my school. So now that

I finished high school successfully and especially during my vacation I began my musical career as well."

The lack of societal valuing of diverse forms of artistic work causes individuals to put their artistic learning on the back burner while they pursue formal education or to eschew formal education and hope that the informal route for learning arts will eventually lead to employment in their chosen field. Unfortunately, that happens all too infrequently.

UNEMPLOYMENT AND INFORMAL TRAINING IN THE ARTS

One of the major constraining factors in the arts is that it is not considered legitimate employment. Many of the artists interviewed complained that they did not get support from their families and

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social communities as they attempted to develop their arts skills, despite their passion, desire, and talent. Often these artists depend on tourism to sell their work, as one responded explained, "Fine art thing is really not something that is stable especially right now during Covid Corona thing like the shop is closed at the moment and we do not have a market because most of our customers always come from outside the country.", However, this is not highly lucrative as it is not promoted by the local communities and is often unnoticed.

Additionally, copyright laws in Uganda are loosely written, implemented and enforced, so artists are not protected when their work is infringed upon.

Unemployment is one of the reasons that individuals enter informal training in the arts pathway. Getting into the arts was something participants expressed as a part-time position that would end as soon they got a 'real job.' But as soon as the benefits in the arts were noticed most decided that was what they wanted to do full time, despite being discouraged by their families and the communities at large.

There is considerably more government support for science-based learning so the arts are ignored and underfunded, and there is no clear pathway to formal higher learning (Okello, 2016; Monk et. al. 2020). Some of these young artists maintain their passion and quietly but defiantly continue to pursue their arts learning, despite low or nonexistent income and limited options for future employment in these areas. As one young artist who had been compelled to attend university by his family rather than pursue his passion for singing said, "Okay from my family they don't know quite a lot yet since I am an upcoming artist. I would say my ideas that I have produced I've only come out this year and from home mostly, they do not know that I'm a musician. They just hear those rumors from other people. When they ask me I tell them I don't know I am fine with everything that I'm Doing. We will see if I'm a serious artist or not and if I am not I will stop."

INCOME GENERATION

The hopeful defiance described above is not possible for every artist. Some learn the arts as a way to earn an income as a job; formal (white collar) jobs are highly sought after but not often attained. Academic credentialing for the arts is, however, very difficult to realize in Uganda. A

parent who was interviewed in the youth-led radio show commented: "For the youths and those that failed to study, if possible, they have to find a way. And as I speak I am so proud that I have children who have graduated from the Gulu University who found hardship in obtaining a job, but now have come to volunteer and learn handwork. That is talking about that's why I am proud now.

Because some youth have dropped out of school they feel the only way they could support themselves is by learning an art skill informally for sustainability. This usually happens in the limited vocational education spaces or in makeshift schools that are created in the community by those that wish to train others in a particular skill. For example, one participant shared, "I didn't complete my education. I want to sustain life. Used to make my own dresses and so not wasting money on having to buy dresses. Mother suggested fashion design. Mother paid fees."

There are little or no formal qualification requirements needed to do training in the arts; the most important thing that most areas of training require is your ability to read and write. As one fashion designer stated:" The qualification requirement for the school is that you will just have to know how to read and write. And we have two programs, there are fashion and design entrepreneurship programs that takes place daily during the week."

Literacy is required because most training centers have an element of entrepreneurship training that requires such skills to enable them to make an income in the art form, however this is for those art forms that are trained in the informal or formal spaces like fashion and design: "I lead the fashion house, making clothes with tailors who have come to train. Some of them had

trained with different schools but have come to continue learning while having the job experience, and also taking other people who want to do apprenticeship with us or people who have already trained with other schools but would like to get more guidance on how to start earning from tailoring."

Some people working in the arts see an opportunity to do recycling and environmental waste management by turning waste into art and making an income out of it. Their creativity enables them to see the possibility of training others and also measuring environmental protection. An environmental artist noted, "We have seen, so if we keep on converting waste to become something good which makes something you would have thrown becomes something good. Because if I make I can sell at 30,000 shillings from the t-shirt that you would have thrown, so I get many out of it. I also make earrings from kitenge that are in small pieces so I change them to earrings and those pieces of kitenge and other cloths I can convert them into flowers and sell them. And if they take long and get old I think of something else to make out of that is good."

These ideas can be a source of earning or income generation. Another entrepreneurial artist saw the opportunity from unwanted cloth: "My cousins at home would still undermine [my ideas], saying 'tailor tomorrow you should sew my cloth. So I would just laugh at them and sometimes they would bring me their pillow cases to make so it was not easy for me because also my fellow youths from my former school would gossip about me that I have nothing just doing tailoring. But I didn't give up. So when my sister saw that she bought me materials and from there I started making clothes and putting them on display."

Despite the ability to earn an income, some in the arts don't find it enough to sustain their livelihood and usually need something like a second job or a career of sorts to fund or walk side in side with their art, as one filmmaker described, "First of all, it got me where I am at the moment. Right now I'm working with [the restaurant] Elephante and it's helping me put food on my table. So the only thing is just if I get maybe other sources then I need to expand and do other things in support of what I am doing."

The artists are often faced with the challenge of having a product that people most don't want to purchase, or purchase at a price they demand without consideration of the hard work input by the artist. Particularly during the pandemic people are not interested in purchasing works of art and, as one artist commented, they are struggling to support themselves with basic needs: "Fine art is really not something that is stable, especially right now during Covid, Corona. Things like the shop is closed at the moment and we do not have a market because most of our customers always come from outside the country. And even when you are to do it right now nobody will buy you things and you'll end up selling your things cheaply or giving your things as a free gift."

In the above findings, youth have told us that with greater integration of the arts, and greater support in developing career trajectories and professional arts as a sector, there is enormous potential for livelihoods. Integrating arts formally as a sector in the economy and strengthening arts for the development of better craftsmanship, innovation and generally more cohesive and healthy communities is vital. The recognition and development of the power of the arts in vocational education training naturally supports both non-formal and formal education in local communities, regionally and nationally.

DISCUSSION

Based on the stories collected during the research, we suggest that if multiple arts pathways to vocational education training are to be recognized, there needs to be diverse ways to provide evidence of skill, capacity, and talent. Rather than only relying on formal qualifications (i.e., certificates) as evidence of skill and talent, employers need to recognize the demonstration and application of skills and talents. As the participants noted, it is their skill and demonstrable capabilities that enables them to succeed, not necessarily formal education. Access into post-secondary institutions, as well as recognition that formal learning is not as meaningful as non-formal learning and apprenticeship, reveals the need for changing perceptions and values of diverse ways of gaining expertise.

There are many opportunities for the arts to flourish in vocational learning programs. We have documented here some of the challenges, mostly related to absence of formal art programs and in relation to negative perceptions of the arts. In our broader research data examining vocational education and training in Gulu, we found that many stakeholders and employers felt that quality workers in vocational fields were not there, and we found an associated stigma and resulting poor working conditions for the vocational field (VET Africa 4.0 Collective, forthcoming). Here we would like to posit that inclusion of arts in formal VET programs could bring an element of pride and professionalism and quality craftsmanship to vocational programs and to the labor market recognizing, for example, the difference between tailoring programs and fashion design programs.

Also, integrating arts learning into VET programs can lead to environmental practices and niche markets for vocations. We see in the informal spaces a large recycling movement with artists

both saving money on materials, and finding new uses for the materials. This would be practical for welders or carpenters as well, both from an economic perspective and from a much-needed environmental perspective. Similarly, finding solutions to the environmental crisis provides a burgeoning business opportunity which could be led by vocational learning programs.

Beyond creativity, integrating arts also emerged as an important coping and flourishing mechanism. Promoting self-expression is seen as a form of self-empowerment and coping with trauma. This is particularly relevant for northern Uganda, which is recovering from 30 years of civil war, and has high dropout rates from school, and low levels of employment.

Finally, and more directly discussed in this article, we demonstrate that there is a vibrant space in the informal sector of arts that, if supported, could become translated into important and much needed sectors in society. Pathways for digital arts such as marketing, website design, movies and entertainment industry, music, and dance, tourism and crafts are all important potential sectors that could be built and invested in more formal and professional learning programs and pathways.

CONCLUSION

The arts were traditionally included in the holistic precolonial learning programs. Dance and storytelling were important forms of learning, and design thinking was promoted in experiential programs where craftsmanship such as pottery and blacksmithing and jewelry-making were highly valued. Unfortunately, along with these vibrant learning programs, the arts have been sidelined in industrial and neoliberal market-based education. Bringing the arts back into learning programs, both as a pathway and as

a method of instruction, will be an essential component of dealing with unemployment and the significant additional life challenges caused by the environmental crisis. While this is true of broader learning programs, we highlight the arts here in the vocational sector and point out the very practical applications and opportunities. As the government increasingly invests in vocational learning and self-employment, we see the cost of not including arts as being too high to ignore.

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