

KAMPALA

UGANDA





MS. ISABEL, KAMPALA, UGANDA

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– Ms. Isabel

By Celia Reddick

ABOUT MS. ISABEL

Ms. Isabel is the Head Teacher (principal) of a government-run (public) primary school in Kampala, Uganda, where nearly 50% of students’ families have been affected by conflict and forced migration. Ms. Isabel became a science teacher in 1981, and while she had never aspired to school administration, she became a Head of Department early in her career and then a Head Teacher in 2014. She was appointed to her current school at a time when it was struggling to stem the tide of families leaving urban public schools for the private schools popping up all around the city. Under Ms. Isabel’s leadership, demand for the school has begun to surpass capacity, with many new refugee and immigrant students. The school sees itself as part of a large collection of institutions that supports the diverse, multilingual community living in this neighborhood. The community is made up of Ugandans from around the country, newcomer refugee and immigrant families, and longtime residents from surrounding countries.

CULTIVATING EMPATHY

Ms. Isabel’s leadership of this large, public primary school where so many children have been affected by war and violence is guided by her empathy toward all of her students.

One morning, a young boy knocked on Ms. Isabel’s office door and handed her a newspaper, folded to reveal his face. Ms. Isabel took it gratefully and congratulated him, telling him she wanted to make a copy of the article to hang in the front hall. As he left, Ms. Isabel explained that she wanted to celebrate this student’s achievement. The article was about how this Somali student decided he wanted to become a mechanic and apprenticed himself to someone in the community. She knew that Somalis rarely become mechanics, instead facing employment and educational discrimination in Kampala. Ms. Isabel hoped that by sharing this student’s achievement publicly, she might dispel stereotypes and encourage children to dream in ways that countered the frequent dismissal of their capacities by peers and teachers alike.

RECOGNIZING IDENTITIES

In her leadership, Ms. Isabel centers her students' histories, rights, and needs, and she encourages her teachers to do the same.

Ms. Isabel's approach to multilingualism at school is a key place where she resists the expectation that students should leave behind their diverse cultures for membership in Uganda's economic and education systems. Pointing to the sense of self embedded in being able to practice multilingualism, Ms. Isabel draws on her own experience to shape her approach. She explains, "A child feels proud of his or her own language, and I think he has a right to it...I think the language is part of them. It is part of them. For me, even if you take me [some]where [far away], I can't forget my language. I can't. Even if I'm dying, I will not cry in English."

For Ms. Isabel, language and culture are intimately entwined with children's present wellbeing and with their futures. Knowing that she must enforce an English-only policy in classrooms, handed down to her from the national Ministry of Education and Sports, Ms. Isabel finds ways to symbolically affirm children's multilingualism outside of class. When she first joined the school, Ms. Isabel started an annual Cultural Gala, which she initiated as a way to recognize each of the children and where they come from, celebrating the school's diversity. During this annual event – a brief 'moment in time' in the rhythm of the school – anthems, for example, other than Uganda's are welcomed onto campus.

ACTING WITH RESISTANCE

Ms. Isabel recognizes that national education policies do not always serve the learning needs of her students and she takes discrete actions to support her teachers and her students as they navigate these dilemmas.

Ms. Isabel knows that despite her commitment to affirming children's linguistic diversity, she must also follow English-only policies set at the national level, requiring English at school. This is not an easy balance. To achieve it, Ms. Isabel discourages her teachers from being too public in their embrace of multilingualism in the classroom, although she doesn't ban languages other than English as many Head Teachers at other schools do. In her own grade seven class, she even permits her students to use languages they are more comfortable in to translate words, but she does so discretely.

Ms. Isabel acknowledges the need to enforce English at school because she sees this language as

connected to power her students seek in their present lives and for their futures: to succeed on high-stakes examinations in grade seven; as parents' perceived route to opportunity; and as a language of broader communication, facilitating unity in the diverse student body. As she looks for ways to achieve both an affirmation of students' diversity and assimilation to this language of power, Ms. Isabel continues to focus on children's humanity and the navigational skills they will need for the future.

Learn More about Ms. Isabel and refugee education in Uganda, "[Language Considerations in Refugee Education: languages for opportunity, connection, and roots](#)" and "[Who Can Participate, Where, and How? Connections between Language-in-Education and Social Justice in Policies of Refugee Inclusion.](#)"