

Harnessing the success of Ekisaakaate Kya Nnaabagereka: a Transformative model for youth empowerment and alcohol prevention in Uganda.

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Introduction:

Twelve years ago, I was asked to join the Ekisaakaate Kya Nnaabagereka as the head of trainers. Whereas, it was a humbling ask, I had apprehension about the mark a social scientist would make on a cultural programme. A few months into the role, I realized that it was more of a life skill training and mentorship programme rooted in the Kiganda culture than an exclusively cultural programme. I also observed that the ekisaakaate was diverse, with about 30% of participants being coming from many ethnicities in Uganda.

At the Ekisaakaate kya Nnabagereka we are aware that you won't with your child every time they need to make a decision or choice. It is against this background that give them tools they will need to make that decision in an adult's absence. Our conviction is that this is what our forefathers used to do and its what we should be aiming at achieving even in this fast-running world.

In terms of organizing of the Ekisaakaate programme, the Nnabagereka Development Foundation uses two principles; age, content and quantity appropriateness. This is very critical for us and should be critical for this forum as we discuss policies under the theme: **alcohol control policies for holistic development**. While here, we should ask ourselves, what is the appropriate age, what is the appropriate content and what is the appropriate quality. **Make reference to the dress code expected at the Ekisaakaate** to link the appropriateness.

The Ekisaakaate just like the Buganda Kingdom, coin phrases that become a rallying call and reference point for all the people within the Kingdom. In Buganda Kingdom, it's common to hear people say *emwanyi terimba (you cannot go wrong with coffee)*, using this phrase has seen many people in the Kingdom return to coffee farming. Likewise, in the Ekisaakaate, we use the motto: See, Look, and Act (Do), (Laba, Yiga, Kola). With this motto at the back of everyone's mind, the basaakaate (Participants in the Ekisaakaate) are guided on the critical elements of their stay at the camp. Whenever there is a gathering of participants in the Ekisaakaate, one way of drawing their attention is calling them that...*abasaakaate*, their expected response is... *Ffe suubi ly'eggwanga epya era eddamu (We are the hope of a healthy and new generation)*.... Using this phrase, we are inculcating a sense of purpose to these participants. Another phrase that is often used in response to a call to *abasaakaate*, this is often when they are gathered in groups

Background:

Lately every time one talks about Ekisaakaate, one envisions a mentorship camp where children and young people are molded into holistic individuals. However, this has not always been the case. Up until 2007, the Ekisaakaate meant an enclosure or perimeter fence around a homestead. The current additional meaning has been brought to the fore by the works of the Nnaabagereka, under the Nnaabagereka Development Foundation and the concerted effort to bring about behavioral change among children and young people. This is in line with the Foundation's vision of ***an equitable, inclusive and peaceful world grounded by human virtues*** and our mission of ***leveraging culture to improve the quality of life of children, youth and women.***

Traditionally, young men would go to court of leaders within the Kingdom, and whilst here, they would undergo leadership apprenticeship. It is this concept that the Nnaabagereka, adapted for the children and young people's mentorship programme. Whereas, at the time it was a programme limited for boys, the current programme takes on both boys and girls.

The Advent of the Ekisaakaate kya Nnaabagereka

The Ekisaakaate was borne out of an outcry in Uganda about moral degeneration in society, especially with in the younger generations. The degeneration is often attributed to weak social support systems and a lack of cultural orientation. This *Ekisaakaate* illustrates how the Buganda kingdom has restored a traditional system to promote cultural values amongst youth, albeit now living in a 'modern' context. In the last 18 years, the Ekisaakaate has impacted 41,500 children and young adults. This has been through the camp that has been organized every January, since 2007, with the exception of 2021 and 2022, the six (6) diaspora engagements, and the various special interest group camps that have been organized over the years with the different partners like World Vision, Mildmay Uganda, Baylor, Ministry of Labor, gender and social development among others.

Over the years, we have seen more cultural institutions adapting the approach with a similar purpose of contributing to behavioral change of a population of interest. In the **Obwakyabazinga Bwa Busoga** they have the *Kigango kya Busoga*, while **Bunyoro Kitara** has the *Akasaka*.

The Ekisaakaate Kya Nnabagereka

The Ekisaakaate is a valuable tool in addressing social behavioral issues especially among children and young adults. Every end of Ekisaakaate we conduct an evaluation, with the aim of getting feedback from the participants (*basaakaate*) and their parents. Many times, parents wonder how we manage to influence behaviour in between 5 – 14 days. The secret to this is the multi-pronged approach that we use to influence the *basaakaate*'s behavior.

Selection of host school

Since inception, we set out to create an environment that enables behavior change among the participants. This starts from selecting the host school. Whereas, there are many schools that apply to host the camp every year, there is a strict criterion that we use to select the host school. This is very important since we want an environment that is secure and will enable us reinforce the desired behaviour.

Selecting role models

We go through a process of rigorously selecting trainers. Our focus is on the moral standing of the individual, their competency in a specific area of interest and their passion and knowledge of working with children and young people. These then ensure that they are positive role models and mentors supporting the *basaakaate* to build confidence and self-esteem.

Structuring if a day in the Ekisaakaate

The morning starts with the what and why, and afternoon we do the how.

Basaakaate at the center of learning

The *basaakaate* (participants in the Ekisaakaate) are at the center of the exchange of ideas and skills. Putting the children and young people at the center of our programming enables them to develop essential life skills, build resilience, and avoid divergent behavior. Through the Ekisaakaate participants are challenged, we promote work in teams and foster a sense of accomplishment.

Use of Obuntubulamu

Since 2016, the Foundation has anchored its programming in revival of ethics and values (*Obuntubulamu*). This is done to indigenise our approaches which leads to ownership of the programme. Indeed, one of the parents observed whenever anybody came short of their expected behaviour, or it took one to do what is required of them was the question....*ekyo kya buntubulamu (Is that ethical)?*

Every interface a learning opportunity

Every interface in the Ekisaakaate is designed to be a learning opportunity, starting from the dormitory, the refectory, the sports arena and all learning spaces. This approach reinforces the desired behaviour.

Fostering resilience

In designing the training programme, we include a couple of challenges most of which are meant to be accomplished in groups. By pushing through the challenging assignments, the basaakaate develop resilience and coping skills.

Partnership with individuals and Institution

E.g. counsellors, NDA, URA, artists, and eminent persons.

Routine Exercises

Engaging in regular physical activity is essential for health, mental well-being and stress management, which if not addressed will trigger alcohol abuse.

Post Ekisaakaate Kya Nnabagereka Support

Parents as reinforcers of the learnt behaviour

Over the years, the *basaakaate* kept on requesting that a programme is designed specifically for their parents. This was drawn from the realization that many times, after attending the camp, the *basaakaate* went back home, and whilst there, the environment was not very supportive in regards to maintaining the skills developed. We therefore introduced a one-day parent engagement, through which we shared the children's experiences and also discussed with the parents how they can enhance nurturing of holistic individuals. Using our experience with the parents, we developed the OSA parenting approach. **Dr. Haim Ginott says in his parenting book "Between parent and Child," that "Children are like wet cement, whatever falls on them makes an impression,"**

Alumni Association

e.g. in the diaspora they have been able to establish associations for positive behavior reinforcement and even support some communities in Uganda. Indeed, the Ekisaakaate Kya Nnabagereka, is headed by one of the first UK alumni.

Post camp counselling and support

Basing on the Ekisaakaate's model we can deduce that for any behavior change programme we should be able to:

- i. Integrated education programs raise awareness about the risks and consequences of a particular behaviour e.g. alcohol abuse.
- ii. The basaakaate learn healthy coping mechanisms, such as exercise, mindfulness, and creative expression.
- iii. When you promote positive peer relationships, you reduce the likelihood of peer pressure to engage in a bad behaviour e.g. substance abuse.
- iv. The Ekisaakaate mentors and counselors provide ongoing support and guidance, helping participants navigate challenges and make informed choices.

Conclusion

By providing a structured environment, mentorship, and education, the ekisaakaate empowers young people to develop essential life skills, build resilience, and avoid the pitfalls of alcohol abuse. As communities continue to seek innovative solutions to these challenges, the ekisaakaate offers a valuable tool in promoting positive youth development and substance abuse prevention.

The secret to happiness is courage, and the secret to courage is telling the truth

"The harm caused by alcohol is not just personal, it is societal"
Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)