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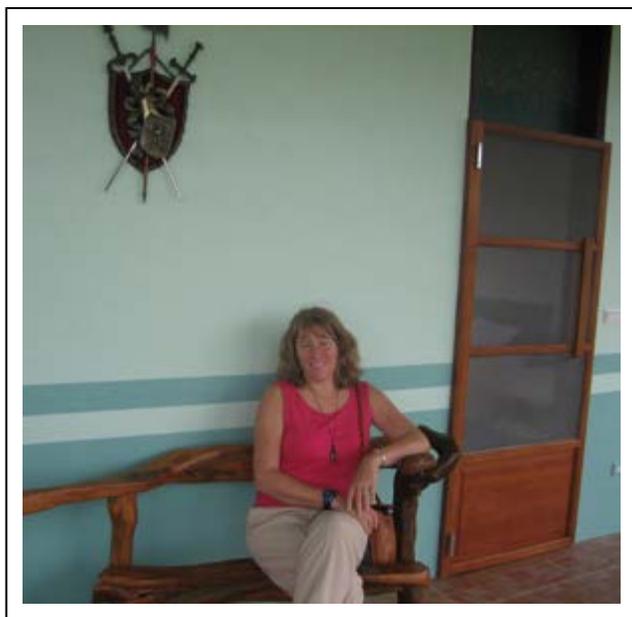
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International Perspectives

Center for International Education

ELEANOR ABRAMS, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Professor Eleanor Abrams traveled to Belize in May to conduct on-going research on indigenous education models and to develop greater ecological literacy among the children in selected locations.



For many rural, multi-generational communities, the development of ecological literacy is crucial to the continuation of their way of life. Knowledge of environmental science can inform their agricultural practices and cultural coherence. However, the development of ecological literacy in schools in these communities depends on students' motivation to learn. Despite considerable research and understanding of motivation from this person-in-context view, best teaching practices don't always lead to enhanced motivation and achievement. For example, children in traditionally under-represented and under-achieving communities continue to fall behind in science. These children often have considerable local knowledge of ecological processes but struggle to translate that existing knowledge into success in school or drop out of school before developing strong ecological literacy. Local knowledge may not be valued in school, and continuing in school may not be valued due to the economic cost to families.

Children may have interest in science but may not want to continue in school because furthering their education would necessitate leaving their community leading to a dis-identification. I wanted to examine socio-cultural processes of motivation to provide insight into the development of academic identity and, specifically, the development of ecological literacy, in children in rural indigenous communities.

I am extremely grateful to the Center for International Education for supporting my travel to Belize. I traveled to San Jose, a small Mayan village in the southwestern part of Belize to explore middle school students' understanding of ecological literacy, their motivation to succeed in school science and their development of an academic identity. This research is part of a larger research effort to collaborate with majority and indigenous researchers from four countries to examine models of Indigenous education in an effort to identify:

- What are commonalities and differences across nations in the congruence or disconnect indigenous early adolescents experience in their identity development as they learn ecology?

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- What are various ecology curricula and pedagogical models in schools with indigenous students that promote identity development, motivation, and academic success?
- What understanding of culture, place and ecological literacy do teachers need to facilitate their students' motivation to learn ecology?

With a colleague, I traveled to San Jose for 10 days and observed classrooms, interviewed 18 seventh and eighth grade students (each student was interviewed 3 times), interviewed the two teachers and the principal, and administered motivation surveys to the entire seventh and eighth grade student body (approximately 47 students). Additionally, many hours were spent in causal conversations with parents, tribal elders and community members of the village about their goals for their children's schooling and future.

Interview questions with the students included questions on the following topics: students' indigenous background and family situation, aspects of learning about the indigenous culture, students' level of ecological knowledge, experience in science class, knowledge of environmental issues, and goals for the future.

Interviews with the teachers and school administrators focused on: teaching experience, teaching strategies, sources of curriculum, the importance of teaching indigenous and majority culture to students, how/if teachers incorporate indigenous knowledge into their teaching, what environmental subjects do they teach, and the positive qualities of the school and areas where improvement is needed.

The support of the Center of International Education was invaluable. The interviews will be transcribed verbatim, and reviewed during the summer and fall. Paper presentations and manuscript preparation will begin in the spring of 2009. In addition, this research is serving as a pilot project for two other NSF (National Science Foundation) grant proposals.

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