

Accessibility in Vernacular Settlements: A Holistic Experience and Sustainability Key

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Cultural heritage protection and inclusive human settlements constitute a sustainable development pillar. Vernacular settlements are architectural ensembles whose idioms limit accessibility adjustments, while location and geomorphology often contribute to settlements' exclusion. Accessibility in the context of Universal Design is a crucial factor for vernacular settlements' sustainability as tourism destinations and living places. Enhancing their accessibility, and thus their functionality, usability, and inclusivity, as well as providing learning opportunities, is expected to improve residents' lives and strengthen people's relationships with heritage and place. At the same time, it offers new options for attracting new groups of visitors and creating new tourism destinations while enhancing existing ones, enabling economic growth benefiting local communities, and thus contributing to heritage, settlements, and cities. The present research aims to contribute to this field by investigating new approaches to Greek vernacular settlement sites, including cities' historical centres, towards rediscovering the visitor experience, including persons with disabilities. The research is in the literature review and situ research stages. The paper presents the research objectives, the methodology and the first results of the literature review that form the interdisciplinary theoretical framework of the study. Finally, we discuss gaps and challenges related to the accessibility, sustainability, and holistic experience for all, including persons with disabilities, in vernacular settlements.

Keywords: accessibility; vernacular settlements; visitor's experience; inclusion; settlements and cities' sustainability



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Introduction

Pandemics and evolving socio-economic and environmental crises have greatly changed human settle-

ments, recognisably impacting architectural heritage environments. The present research focuses, within the context of architectural heritage environments,

on the Granada Convention, 1985 (Council of Europe, 1985) classification as “building groups”. Mainly, it focuses on the vernacular settlements regarding the Greek ones. In Greek building legislation (New Building Code (L.4067/2012), 2012, article n.6), “vernacular settlement” encompasses settlements or parts of them, historic centres or parts of cities, and independent architectural complexes. These coherent architectural ensembles are complicated systems evolving in time and reflecting the socio-economic and environmental changes.

Vernacular settlements form a heterogeneous group with various characters, sizes, and urbanisation levels: historical centres, parts of metropolises, small urban centres, settlements and complexes. They are carriers of collective memory, cultural archives, and educational resources. Their historical value, coherence, authenticity, and continuity in time are generally recognised, attributing a unique identity to each one.

The intrinsic elements constituting vernacular settlements’ idioms contribute to preserving their identity, but on the other hand, they often limit their accessibility and put their sustainability under discussion. Location and geomorphology are historically critical factors for settlements’ accessibility and sustainability. They have often driven small mountainous and island colonies, which faced issues of distance, connection and accessibility, to isolation and economic decline. However, they have also been the fundamental drivers for retaining settlements’ physiognomy. Cities’ historic centres reflect the problems of contemporary urban settings and suffer the consequences of controversial heritage management and inappropriate interventions on monuments and sites, which alter or destroy their character. In cities where the historic setting keeps changing in form and function, the big challenge of heritage continuity and compatibility is to be met by urban heritage management (Bandarin & Van Oers, 2012), whose social dimension entails inclusivity and accessibility. As highlighted in the Charter on the built vernacular heritage by ICOMOS (1999), built vernacular heritage worldwide is deemed extremely vulnerable, facing serious problems of obsolescence and integration due to the contemporary culture ho-

mogenisation and global socio-economic transformation. A new approach structured in heritage protection associated with inclusivity is necessary.

Under the accessibility prism, the vernacular settlements’ unique attributes comprising location, geomorphology, history, place memory and architecture in traditional or historic structures, forms, materials (colours, textures) and construction techniques are considered possible generators of barriers. The barriers to access in general and for persons with disabilities have multiple dimensions. Physical barriers, which are natural and structural, block the approach and transfer of persons with disabilities within spaces. Intellectual barriers inhibit the whole experience of the cultural commodity by people who face sensory, intellectual, or other impairments. In addition, there are attitudinal barriers (e.g. prejudices), organisational (e.g. lack of flexibility in organisations, practices, and procedures) or other circumstances such as social isolation (Oliver, 1990; 2013). Furthermore, particularly in vernacular settlements, distances, height differences, inclinations, standard features, traditional or urban fabric consisting of streets, open spaces and buildings, and some complicated-to-perceive architectural idioms can form different types and levels of barriers to accessibility.

Enhancing vernacular settlements’ functionality, usability, and inclusivity by ensuring accessibility will contribute to settlements’ and cities’ sustainability both as living places and as tourism and education destinations. The basis that accessibility facilitates inhabitants’ environment and everyday life can provide new tourism and learning opportunities and can be beneficial in terms of economic potential and contribution to local community development, which are strongly related to cultural heritage (Hampton, 2005). The present research’s perspective falls under this context. It is important to mention that researchers have not significantly investigated the field of accessibility in architectural heritage environments at the Greek national level. The conducted studies primarily focus on monuments, archaeological sites, and museums. Thus, under the current survey of the extent of the relevant investigation at the European and international level, the present research has to confront the issue of

the minimal associated conducted studies as a basis for further development. On the other hand, it faces the challenge of generating innovative research.

Theoretical Framework

Key Theoretical Topics for Accessibility in Vernacular Settlements for a Holistic Experience and Sustainability

Given the lack of a comprehensive framework for issues of accessibility for vernacular settlements in Greece as “building groups” (see Introduction), one major challenge of the current research is to form a theoretical framework that combines different aspects of issues related to persons with disabilities, accessibility in terms of sustainable development, and architectural heritage, as well as theoretical frameworks for built environment and learning and appropriate technologies. The following sections present the vital academic topics defined from the first stage of the present research and specifically from the literature review. These topics form an interdisciplinary, multi-layered theoretical framework necessary to proceed to the following steps of the study.

Persons With Disabilities and Accessibility

Persons with disabilities constitute a heterogeneous population with different types of impairments, while the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) stresses the importance of “recognising further the diversity of persons with disabilities” (UN, 2006, Preamble, section i). Persons with disabilities face different types of socially constructed barriers. Accessibility is a core factor and condition for their equal participation in all aspects of life to fulfil fundamental human rights and freedoms (UN, 2006, Preamble, section v). Based on the “social model of disability”, disability is conceived mainly as a socially created problem versus the “medical model”, which views disability as a problem of the person. A person’s functioning and disability are dynamic interactions between health conditions and contextual factors, including personal and environmental factors (Oliver, 1990; 2013; World Health Organization, 2001, chapters 3.2 and 5.2), which leads to the necessary environmental and organizational modifications as well as attitudes for the full participation of persons with disa-

bilities in all areas of social life. In this context, the UN addresses architectural heritage because all individuals can access cultural commodities (UN, 1948, article 27.1). Persons with disabilities live, travel, and move together with their family, friends, etc., creating consistent groups in visiting destinations with appropriate access and services. (Fletcher, 2006; 2013; Lisney et al., 2013). In this line, CRPD (article 30, “Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport”) stresses the right of persons with disabilities to participate in cultural life “on an equal basis with others”. Accessibility is the primary condition to ensure this right, and it refers to various aspects, activities, services, and places related to cultural life, including monuments and sites. In specific, the CRPD states that States Parties [...] recognise the right of persons with disabilities to have access to cultural life with the appropriate measures so that persons with disabilities “enjoy access to places for cultural performances or services, such as theatres, museums, cinemas, libraries and tourism services, and, as far as possible, enjoy access to monuments and sites of national cultural importance” (UN, 2006, article 30, section c). Furthermore, many others face mobility restrictions for different reasons or in different periods (e.g., elderly, pregnant women, parents with children in strollers, and people with temporary injuries and chronic ailments). As a result, it is crucial to adopt theoretical frameworks and principles that address people’s diverse needs. The present research aligns with the international social agenda and conventions for human rights and persons with disabilities rights (UN, 1948; 2006; Lawson & Beckett, 2021) and extends the investigation of persons with disabilities accessibility in vernacular settlements’ environments.

Universal Design

The idea of an “average user” is no longer accepted in architecture, design and other scientific fields (Mace, 1988). In practice, as Mace (1998, p.5) states, “no ‘average’ actually represents the majority because too many people have vastly differing requirements”. To address these diverse requirements, Universal Design is a framework that integrates the understanding and managing of the diverse humanity’s needs and

concerns in the design of environments, products, programs and services to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible (Mace, 1988; Mace et al., 1996). In the case of persons with disabilities, Universal Design is the central concept and framework of the CRPD (UN, 2006). Thus, Universal Design does not refer to persons with disabilities but all people. The reasonable adjustments (UN, 2006, article 2) concern the already spatially configured environments concerning the necessary and appropriate modifications and adjustments in every single case to ensure the exercise of all human rights and the fundamental freedom for persons with disabilities on an equal basis to others. In the present research context, the built environment will be approached via Universal Design, with supplementary specific references to accessibility regarding products and services (Directive (EU) 2019/882 of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2019), including digital technology. In this context, it is necessary to consider the various sub-groups of persons with disabilities' needs, facilitating life for all. It demands an advanced analysis of all possibilities and of the objective space limitations and then the lifting of barriers by determined actions and the guidance of users. The design incorporates assistive devices when there is a demand for them. Furthermore, "Universal design" shall not exclude assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities where this is needed" (UN, 2006, article 2). Issues of protection and conservation of architectural heritage are vital factors in the present research.

Protection and Conservation of Architectural Heritage - Vernacular Architecture

The Amsterdam Declaration on the European Architectural Heritage (Council of Europe, 1975) outlines the need for architectural heritage conservation to become an integral part of urban and regional planning, involving local authorities and citizens and considering social factors. In this frame, architectural heritage includes exceptional-quality buildings, their surroundings, and all areas of towns or villages of historical or cultural interest. So, architectural heritage, entailing monuments, vernacular settlements, and historical centres, has evolved into a cultural com-

modity (Di Stefano, 1979) with cultural and economic value. On this basis, protecting and improving the architectural heritage environment increases its efficiency, with cultural and economic benefits for society. In the Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies (1982, point 16), UNESCO links culture with development, asserting that "making cultural factors an integral part of the strategies designed to achieve it" is essential to ensure balanced development." Also, its Report "Our Creative Diversity" (1995) stresses "the importance of heritage preservation policies as part of economic development". It claims that we have not yet sufficiently considered intangible cultural heritage; we are still not using the heritage in all its aspects as broadly and effectively as we might, nor managing it as sensitively as we should.

UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (2011, point 5) integrates and frames urban heritage conservation strategies within the larger sustainable development goals. It suggests a landscape approach for identifying, conserving, and managing historic areas within their broader urban contexts by considering the inter-relationships of their physical forms, their spatial organisation and connection, their natural features and settings, and their social, cultural and economic values (Weber & Yannas, 2014). Moreover, the vernacular architecture itself is considered a model for sustainable design (Weber & Yannas, 2014) and the lessons that it may teach constitute "indigenous" forms of knowledge (Vellinga, 2015). The Granada Convention's definition of architectural heritage as monuments, groups of buildings and sites (Council of Europe, 1985) renders possible the identification of properties to be protected. ICOMOS (1999) defines vernacular architecture in the Charter on the built vernacular heritage as a manner of building shared by the community within a context composed of its characteristics, which one can recognise as:

1. A manner of building shared by the community.
2. A recognisable local or regional character responsive to the environment.
3. Coherence of style, form and appearance, or traditionally established building types.

4. Traditional expertise in design and construction is transmitted informally.
5. An effective response to functional, social and environmental constraints.

Regarding the non-academic character of the most significant part of vernacular architecture, Amos Rapoport (1969, p.2) claims that this architecture is the “ideal” environment of a people expressed in buildings and settlements, with no designer, artist, or architect. In addition to collective memory, according to Aldo Rossi (1982, p.130), the city is the locus of collective memory associated with objects and places. Therefore, preserving collective memory and tradition is crucial to protecting and preserving elements that carry these values and constitute architectural heritage. Moreover, heritage protection and sustainable development are firmly linked, structuring another component of the present research’s theoretical background.

Sustainable Development

Heritage protection associated with making cities and human settlements inclusive, which entails the participation and access of all, is considered a pillar for sustainable development. In the context of the United Nations Agenda 2030 sustainable development goals (UN, 2015), for the achievement of the goal of making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (Goal n.11), critical factors are the protection and safeguarding of the world’s cultural and natural heritage (Goal n.11.4) as well as the provision of access to safe, inclusive and accessible public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities (Goal n.11.7). The empowerment of vulnerable people, by removing obstacles and constraints is emphasised (UN, 2015, point 23). Based on the two goals mentioned above, one can develop a new framework to ensure the sustainability of heritage and other cities and settlements. The three dimensions on which sustainable development lies are economic, social, and environmental (UN, 2015, point 2). Regarding the sustainability of cities’ heritage environments, UNESCO’s Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (2011) supports

social and economic processes to facilitate the sustainable development of historic districts. Accessibility is examined in the present research regarding the dimensions mentioned earlier and within the fields of tourism, learning and living places. Regarding learning and education, in the context of the provision of inclusive education, emphasis is laid on providing all people with access to life-long learning opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to participate fully in society (UN 2015, point 25). Finally, participatory, integrated, sustainable human settlement planning and management (Goal n.11.3) is important and strengthens local communities.

Place Branding

In place branding, a popular tourism concept, stakeholders can implement a strategy in vernacular settlements and cities’ heritage environments to give meaning to a place and manage perceptions about it. An integrated brand strategy could be developed based on a settlement’s or city’s core values, attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics (Middleton, 2011). The place is integral to the human experience (Seamon & Sowers, 2008). The relationship between place and space, as components of the environment, can be seen from the perspective of experience (Tuan, 2001). Particularly in tourism, the relationship between architecture, an image of a place and tourists’ perceptions is powerful. This fact is crucial for the implications of architectural heritage management for tourism (Gholitabar et al., 2018). In terms of a strategy, the endeavour is to form a strong relationship between person and place concerning vernacular settlements regarding the feeling of attachment to the site and the identification leading to place satisfaction. The above expects to drive both locals and new visitors -tourists and students- to stay at or to select to visit a particular place of a vernacular settlement. Regarding the terms “place attachment” and “place satisfaction”, Chen and Dwyer’s (2017) survey suggests that, at residents’ level, place satisfaction configures residents’ intention to stay, while place attachment has a strong influence on residents’ participation in tourism planning for a destination. Numerous surveys conducted in the place branding field (e.g., Giuliani & Feldman, 1993; Bro-

cato, 2006; Gustafson, 2014) and regarding the topic of place attachment associated with the issues of environment, cultural context and mobility can contribute to the supplementation of the present research's theoretical framework. Furthermore, besides the built environment, to provide meaningful and accessible learning opportunities and construct an “architectural narrative”, it is equally important to investigate and adopt theoretical frameworks that address the diversity of learners.

Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is based on the concept of Universal Design (Pisha & Coyne, 2001) and combines theories and evidence from different scientific fields (e.g., learning theories, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, etc.) (Riviou et al., 2015; CAST, 2018).

Similar to universal design, education and various learning settings and environments recognise people's diversity and the different ways they learn or prefer to learn, including cultural ones. UDL does not focus on persons with disabilities, although it includes them. It places importance on designing teaching and educational programs by considering learners' diversity and heterogeneity in advance. It has basic principles concerning the “why”, “what”, and “how” of learning, suggesting a set of guidelines for the engagement, representation of information and content, action and expression, respectively. In practice, that means adopting different methods, strategies, tools, etc., which enhance learners' access, participation and understanding, motivate them, and promote their engagement and various ways of expression (Riviou et al., 2015; CAST, 2018). We can implement UDL into different frameworks, settings and learning environments, including the cultural sector (e.g. schools, museums, etc.) (Rappolt-Schlichtmann & Daley, 2013; Riviou et al., 2015; Kanari & Souliotou, 2020). Thus, UDL should be a basic theoretical framework for accessible learning experiences in vernacular settlements alongside specifically designed provisions, means and tools.

Interpretation and Storytelling

As the research aims to form a strategy for developing a new “architectural narrative” to perceive the iden-

tity of the vernacular settlements, the frameworks of interpretation and storytelling are essential for the survey. With compelling storytelling, stakeholders deem that the place above branding can build a sense of belonging for residents and visitors. At the same time, the site narrative can contribute to both social and economic development. Regarding storytelling and culture, the narrative approach to dissemination, mainly for historical and cultural contexts, is considered a powerful means to enhance learning through emotional impact (Palombini, 2017). Based on this, we need an initial approach to the museum field that generates heritage experiences. We need to approach the interpretation of things and their typologies and cultural dimensions, as well as the polysemy of the museum objects (Nakou, 2001).

The Research

The research investigates accessibility as the means for the perception of heritage and as a strategy tool for sustainability. It lies on the notion that via ensuring accessibility, persons with disabilities can discover and perceive vernacular settlements' identity and can experience the cultural commodity of architectural heritage in situ. In this context, accessibility is explored not simply as a technical provision but as a means for all to perceive the ensemble's unique identity and have a holistic architectural heritage experience via a new narrative. Furthermore, combining issues of heritage protection, functionality, inclusivity and providing learning experiences for all contributes to settlements' and cities' sustainability, enhancing locals' lives and strengthening local communities and economies.

Aim and Objectives of the Research

The research aims to contribute to the sustainability of heritage, settlements, and cities by investigating new approaches to Greek vernacular settlement sites. We can achieve the above by forming a strategy and a set of principles for a new “architectural narrative” based on physically, intellectually, and digitally accessible routes within the context of place branding.

Implementing the abovementioned strategy associated with relevant in situ interventions aims to be highly beneficial in tourism, learning and living

places. Regarding tourism, enhancing the access and perception of heritage is expected to offer the tourism market new prospects by attracting new groups of visitors and entrepreneurs, creating new tourism destinations for all and improving the existing ones in terms of the built environment and services. In the field of learning, the objective is the provision of new learning opportunities for all. These opportunities can increase the level of knowledge for residents, tourists, and students, which can largely contribute to heritage preservation via cultural awareness, maintaining heritage as an archive and educating the next generation. As for living places, accessibility facilitates and enhances the inhabitants' everyday environment and life, simultaneously offering prospects for local market development. The aim is to increase the incentives to stay and live in vernacular settlements rather than to move to big urban centres and live in historic centres of cities rather than in newer districts, which will have social, economic, and environmental benefits for local communities and places. Regarding in situ interventions, the research aims to present ways for addressing mobility and perception difficulties of different types and levels and for reducing or even eliminating barriers via design. Particularly, interventions resulting from the integral design combining traditional or historical elements with advanced design should provide the channels for having the architectural heritage experience. We must emphasise that the criterion of heritage protection always prevails. The in situ interventions and adjustments associated with providing means for digital access are under investigation. There are architectural synthesis and design issues regarding embodying elements (constructions, special equipment, standardised elements, assistive technology -applications, and digital models) into the existing heritage environment. The objective is the creative and effective integration of the idiom elements (location, geomorphology, history, place memory and architecture, in terms of distances, height differences, inclinations, traditional structures, forms, materials and construction techniques) and new appropriate elements for access and perception, into traditional or historical settings and the included buildings. Moreover, directions configured through the above investigation can

form supplementary regulations to the Greek legislation for architectural heritage and accessibility.

The primary defined research objectives are to investigate the following:

- The ways and means, via mainly Universal design, for structuring the in situ experience of vernacular settlements for persons with disabilities.
- How the enabling of access and perception of architectural heritage by persons with disabilities can contribute to heritage sustainability as well as to vernacular settlements' and cities' sustainability.
- The processes and tools for accessibility measurement and evaluation.
- The codification of the vernacular settlement's architectural environment in terms of form, structure, and function.
- The integration and embodiment, via integral design, of accessibility elements (standards, constructions, technology) in traditional or historic environments; and
- The configuration of directions in structure and implementation of Greek legislation for accessibility and architectural heritage.

Method of the Research

To verify the hypothesis above and to realise the set goals, we used qualitative and quantitative research methodologies (Creswell, 2015). The research method involves:

- A settlement's classification by accessibility level.
- Developing a typology.
- Evaluating recognised interventions.
- Interviewing stakeholders and persons with disabilities.
- Conducting case studies and proposal tools.

Thus, the methodology will occur in different stages and with the use of various research instruments:

- Literature review comprised of three axes as follows: (1a) the thematic axe concerning the research's individual questions fields, in regards to the theoretical framework and with the emphasis

led on strategies, good practices and connections and interactions between the investigated areas, (1b) the national accessibility and architectural heritage legislation and (1c) listing of the Greek vernacular settlements and of the realised case-by-case and authorised by councils relevant accessibility interventions;

- In situ research in Greek vernacular settlements as well as in Greek archaeological sites where numerous accessibility interventions have appeared.
- Development of accessibility measuring processes and tools and evaluation criteri.
- Conduction of questionnaires and interviews with stakeholders, including persons with disabilities, regarding the fields of tourism, learning and living place.
- Classification, by accessibility level, of the Greek vernacular settlements and the realised relevant interventions and development of typologies and evaluation.
- Organization and analysis of information.
- Configuration of general directions and tools for accessibility in vernacular settlements' environments and assessment of them with accessibility experts in various fields.
- Implementation of the above directions and conduction of case studies.
- Testing the applied directions with a focus group of users, including persons with disabilities.
- Extraction and evaluation of results; and
- Codification of accessibility provisions and generation of conclusions and proposals.

The Greek Context, Accessibility and Vernacular Settlements' Issues and Challenges

The literature review is the first stage of the present research. We have defined the theoretical frameworks (see Theoretical Framework section). This literature review clearly shows that the accessibility approach in vernacular settlements towards sustainability and a holistic experience for all is multidimensional, multi-layered, and interdisciplinary. Furthermore, the literature review and the Greek context revealed some gaps, issues, and challenges.

We must stress that the fundamental concept of the accessibility chain is missing. A significant gap recorded via the literature review concerns addressing and managing Greek environments of high architectural value, such as the vernacular settlements. Generally, there are difficulties in implementing the existing Greek building legislation, attributed to the special features of these environments and the fact that Greek legislation has a quite general character and does not include regulations aiming exclusively at the environments mentioned earlier. The lack of special regulations to give directions for accessibility interventions and adjustments into such environments has led to case-by-case interventions (on buildings and in public spaces) authorised by councils, which constitute fragmentary constructions. With these case-by-case interventions, we recorded an intention to interpret accessibility legislation. The result is the generation of new accessibility "vocabularies" for in situ adjustments. However, the role of standards and standardisation is crucial, and a standard "vocabulary" practice is deemed the basis for training persons with different types of disabilities. To bridge this gap, the present research, through investigating the axes of protection of architectural heritage and ensuring accessibility, aspires to propose directions and tools for a holistic approach and the perception of the identity of vernacular settlements, supplementing the national legislation.

Firstly, there are regulations for the listed buildings, with a few references to accessibility issues. Secondly, there is a reasonably developed context for accessibility in public spaces generally and not specifically in heritage environments, which needs to be updated. Moreover, a critical point of the existing legislation is that it does not address vernacular settlements as complicated architectural ensembles but primarily as buildings and public spaces. However, the vernacular settlements are much more than a sum of buildings and open spaces. So, developing the context of regulation for a holistic approach to vernacular settlements is essential.

Another issue is that legislation and realised interventions tend to emphasise mobility impairment while overlooking other types of impairment, inevita-

bly leading to these groups' exclusion. Available Greek population statistics (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2002) show that 18.2% of the population has various chronic health problems or types of disabilities leading to mobility limitations, which is a considerable percentage and brings to the surface the issue that inclusion and involvement of all should be a priority.

The literature review and first stage of in situ research in Greek vernacular settlements has revealed the heterogeneity of the settlements, which, in combination with the heterogeneity of the group of persons with disabilities, creates a multi-parametric research problem. Dealing with the limitations of the Greek settlements' place idioms (location, geomorphology, architecture, history, place memory) for addressing the various needs of persons with disabilities and within the context of accessibility legislation undoubtedly constitutes a big challenge. The relationship between heritage and technology regarding special equipment and digitalisation is a big issue. The first stage of the in situ research revealed analytical problems of transfer, approach, access, entrance, routes, horizontal and vertical circulation, crossing and stops, orientation, perception of landmarks, ways of escape, signage for all, function, services, urban equipment and mainly the accessibility chain. In the Greek context and regarding relevant issues about monuments, a methodology for accessibility and perceptibility improvement interventions has been built, applied and tested at the Byzantine monuments of Thessaloniki by a research group of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Naniopoulos & Tsalis, 2017). This methodology relies on existing accessibility evaluation methodologies, such as the Checklist for Buildings and Facilities of the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) (1992). The city-level assistance tool also constitutes the Disability Inclusion Evaluation Tool (DIETool) (Rebernik, 2020). Hence, we must stress that in some cases, settlements, or parts of them cannot be subject to in situ improvement adjustments or can only be limited ones. In these cases, other means, such as digital accessibility, should be investigated as the primary means for accessing and perceiving architectural heritage. The issues mentioned above stress the importance of developing a strategy

for an architectural narrative for the access and perception of vernacular settlements' identities; this is also deemed an educational challenge and a challenge regarding tourism boosting. Particularly in education, the association of the architectural and, precisely, the technical part with the academic part constitutes a challenging concept and research procedure.

The lack of facilities -and infrastructure in general- for conservation and sustainability is a characteristic of the Greek reality. Focusing on buildings as a fundamental element of vernacular settlements and historic centres of cities, it is a fact that numerous Greek-listed and traditional buildings are abandoned or even collapsing. The prospect of contributing to these buildings' sustainability by enhancing their accessibility and functionality within the heritage preservation context, particularly their reuse, is challenging.

Another major issue in the Greek context is the insufficiency of information regarding accessibility for persons with disabilities, particularly regarding architectural heritage. Difficulties also exist in getting official data from ministries, public organisations, and museum sites. We generalised the problem of the dissemination of relevant information. Accessibility chain and participation of all parts -built environment, services, products- is indispensable. The need for cooperation and participatory processes becomes even more significant in contemporary times when cities and settlements face threats to their sustainability due to crises like pandemics and wars. These crises pose risks to the sustainability of architectural heritage. Additionally, in the same context, there are difficulties in synergies and collaborations at scientific and various operators' levels, which hinder the participation of all stakeholders in processes regarding accessible heritage and tourism and other accessibility fields.

Conclusions and Suggestions

The promotion of accessibility, including the enhancement of functionality and perceptibility in architectural heritage environments, is expected to have a tremendous social and economic impact. Ensuring accessibility and perceptibility generally, particularly in vernacular settlements, is a heritage valorisation

practice. It adds value to these heritage environments, benefiting mainly local communities and other revitalising vernacular settlements and cities. Therefore, it constitutes a sustainability driver regarding heritage, settlements, and towns, with great benefits for tourism, education and residence. Its contribution to sustainability reflects and strengthens the regional cultural identity, enhancing tourism destinations and visitors' experience, stimulating economic growth at the local level, offering opportunities for new learning experiences, and providing better living places for the local population, improving people's quality of life. Empowering the relationship between people, heritage and place and enhancing relevant interactions by improving places' functionality and inclusivity generates people's involvement as locals, visitors, and entrepreneurs. This involvement is the basis for the preservation of heritage and sustainability. It can be illustrated in inclusive and participatory design, in the participation of persons with disabilities and stakeholders in tourism and other processes regarding architectural heritage, and the activation of service carriers and relevant synergies at scientific and operator levels. Stakeholders can find a new context for innovative and creative anthropocentric solutions regarding vernacular settlements in tourism, education, and residence.

All the Greek vernacular settlements must offer a holistic experience. Developing a strategy for an architectural narrative associated with ergonomic and high-esthetic solutions can form the context for in situ interventions that ensure accessibility, quality, and safety for all. Within this frame, one will utilise and appropriately adjust according to the present research's concept, the existing accessibility and perception measuring, evaluation methodology and tools. The proposed accessibility strategy anticipates stimulating the cooperation of stakeholders to expand the accessibility improvement actions in other fields, such as archaeological sites and museums. The conducted case studies can also set a basis for discussion for other vernacular settlements and historic centres of cities. To this end, the codification of accessibility provisions and the generation of research conclusions and proposals are necessary. Based on the

Greek Ministry of Environment and Energy's archive of vernacular settlements and listed buildings (2022), the literature review and first stage of in situ research in Greek vernacular settlements revealed the heterogeneity of the vernacular settlements, which, when combined with the previously unknown heterogeneity of the group of people with disabilities, formed a multi-parametric research problem. Capitalising and preserving architectural history while emphasising vernacular settlements and guaranteeing accessibility and perceptibility is a novel method that contributes to tourism, education, habitation, and sustainability.

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Education and Heritage: Teaching the Tourism Curriculum from a Community Sustainability Perspective in South Africa's Rural and Township Schools

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Tourism is one elective subject in South Africa's school curriculum. Through Tourism, learners learn about the activities, services and industries that deliver a travel experience to individuals or groups. The subject is also charged with studying the expectations and behaviour of tourists and tourism's economic, social, and environmental impact on South Africa, which relates to sustainable and responsible tourism. Teaching the Tourism as a subject appears to be a valuable and practical platform for schools, teachers, and other relevant stakeholders to contribute meaningfully and innovatively to sustainable development, policy framework, local community involvement and participation and in supporting and promoting local tourism as a platform to support social cohesion and economic development, as per the vision, mission, and objectives of the World Heritage Tourism. This paper aims to explore the schools' roles in forging a partnership and relationship with local communities in the generation and preservation of knowledge about local heritage sites located, near schools. It further explores the implementation of a tourism curriculum in this regard, emphasising on the interplay between education, heritage, and sustainable community development. The study is premised in the Community-Based Education, Cultural Heritage Education and Sustainable Development Theories. Through surveys, reviews of existing literature and analysis of case studies, this paper highlights the benefits and challenges of such educational initiatives and proposes strategies for effective curriculum delivery. The results suggest that teachers regard Tourism as a bridge that connects schools and communities and an approach to transform how heritage sites are perceived, particularly in rural and township communities.

Keywords: Tourism, heritage, community, sustainability, education, teachers



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Introduction

Education plays an important role in giving a voice and agency to students and transforming communities. Teachers are at the centre of this process, and they are believed to be the custodians of agency, which

they are expected to pass on to their students. Agency is defined as the ability to operate autonomously in determining social constraints of social structure and temporal-relational contexts. Agency is a key element in influencing change (Pantić, 2015; 2017). This paper

investigates how the Tourism subject teachers particularly in rural and township schools can teach the subjects to reinforce the view of creating relationships with local communities, with the aim of preserving heritage and creating a sustainable tourism future.

The Tourism subject has an important role in South Africa's education, in endowing schools with the ability to construct and preserve sustainable heritage sites as well as forging socially cohesive communities, through the curriculum. Tourism education is perceived as "*the way tourism destinations prepare the human resources to be able to work professionally in the development of the tourism sectors*," (Bellos et al., 2021, p. 1). This implies that tourism development depicts a better quality of life for the tourists and the local community at the destination. Similarly, in the South African context, education is perceived as a transformative tool, particularly after the collapse of apartheid. This system used education as a tool to suppress rural and township education in favour of urban education, which predominantly promoted white supremacy. Education was used as a device to oppress, control and divide the South African population along racial and cultural divides.

In this study I share similar sentiments with Rogerson and Rogerson (2020), where they argue that the literature review in their study suggests that there is limited informed historical research that explores the racialised dimensions of tourism landscapes, across the international academic discourse, hence why in this study I attempt to base my argument within the scope of the South African history in order to achieve what Saarinen et al. (2017, p. 311) refers to as "*the extended application of historical perspectives in order to inform contemporary debates and practices*". Even though there have been equity and equality measures put in place by the new government dispensation to address the inequalities of the past, the legacy of apartheid continues to be evident in various sectors of the economy and culture, including tourism spaces which are still associated with power imbalances (Witz, et al., 2004). The long-term effects of this system led to a failure to address democratic principles, which are based on access, participation, and equity, argues Msila (2007). Therefore, this paper argues that

learners' active participation in their education is key in creating sustainable communities.

The system of apartheid in South Africa reinforced colonial land dispossession policies, resulting in Black communities losing vast tracts of ancestral lands. These lands were often reallocated to white ownership and have since been developed into tourism enterprises that benefit the descendants of apartheid-era beneficiaries. For instance, the Natives Land Act of 1913 and subsequent legislation confined Black South Africans to only 7–13% of the country's land, facilitating white ownership of the remaining areas. This historical colonial land dispossession has had lasting impacts, with many tourism ventures operating on land that was historically taken from Black communities. The concentration of tourism assets in the hands of a few, predominantly white individuals, underscores the enduring economic disparities rooted in apartheid-era policies; Maharaj, (2006).

These historical puzzle pieces; colonialism and apartheid, significantly shape the readers' understanding of why the curriculum is at the core focus of this study, and why the study examines the Tourism curriculum's role in promoting socially cohesive and heritage-sustainable communities. In this context, the curriculum presents itself as a bridge and springboard to manage local tourism innovatively, but most significantly to address the past injustices for rural and township communities. However, with poor implementation of the curriculum due to various reasons, such as lack of knowledge and innovation and creativity from the side of the teachers, and or subject advisors, Tourism as a subject, has not yet reached the level at which it can elevate local communities, particularly rural areas and townships, to gaining World Heritage status. This view is based on the belief that knowledge should be based on a bottom-up approach and used to foster partnerships with communities; promoting the view that schools are not isolated institutions but have a transformative role to play for the wider society. This study draws from different contexts yet similar experiences of implementing the Tourism curriculum worldwide.

One notable situation is discussed by Tribe (1999; 2005a; 2005b; 2005c). Tribe notes that the curriculum was cushioned or supplemented by multi-disciplinary

knowledge at the early developmental stages of tourism in the United Kingdom. Based on this approach, scholars believe that curriculum developers and planners have managed to incorporate multiple ideas, skills, and methodologies to inform the teaching of the subject. Tribe (2000a; 2000b; 2000c; 2002) argue that this brought a significant maturity of tourism as an academic subject, and emerging vocational subject, focusing on the economy and business. According to this literature, the approach to teaching Tourism, should be viewed as a tool to capacitate and empower students to think critically, and being able to study disciplines from a cross and inter-discipline perspective and being able to transcend the different parts that contribute to the totality of the subject or discipline. For this reason, this study argues for the practical inclusion of local heritage as extended knowledge in the formal curriculum by teachers and relevant stakeholders as one of the routes to achieve sustainability within the teaching of Tourism as a subject in South African schools. This is necessitated by the justifications highlighted in the subsequent sections of this article.

Justification and Background

Post-1994 South Africa's objective of the tourism subjects is to empower the students with practical skills and knowledge needed to pursue careers in the tourism sector, while instilling an understanding of the rights and responsibilities associated with tourism for both tourists and tourism practitioners. This study argues that incorporating tourism education from an indigenous heritage perspective can assist students recognise the significance of the heritage passed down by their ancestors and encourage them to engage in conservation efforts for the benefit of future generations. However, owing to the general lack of access to resources and challenges faced by teachers in terms of curriculum flexibility, in rural and township schools (Tapala et al., 2021), the tourism curriculum is not yet fully maximised as a platform to assist preserve indigenous knowledge that natives had been denied to, during colonial and apartheid South Africa. Furthermore, the subject also empowers citizens to develop sustainable livelihoods from their heritage. According to Mtapuri and Giampiccoli (2020), tourism with

a community-based aspect and vision is essential in empowering poor communities, and in South Africa, rural communities are often marginalised and impoverished, which makes this approach even more relevant.

Problem Statement

Even though the curriculum addresses the topic of heritage multiple times in the distinct phases of its implementation, there are still gaps that exist in the way in which the Tourism pedagogy is perceived. Often, it is regarded as a classroom-bound subject instead of a platform for connecting schools and communities and bringing about community transformation. Jamal et al. (2011) describe tourism as a social and cultural phenomenon. This perspective is aligned with the move that higher education institutions instituted after the Bologna Process should re-invest in the tourism curriculum from a pedagogy renewal view. It is in the interest of this investigation to view pedagogy as a platform that designates local heritage as a strength of communities, particularly after the demise of apartheid. The curriculum should not only be a means to accumulate grades but also a springboard to facilitate social values, such as peace, social cohesion, non-sexism, non-racialism, and democracy (Muller, 2020). The term sustainability is used without necessarily understanding what sustainable education is. Youness (2017) argues that sustainability means enhancing jobs and improving the economy. South Africa has a diverse population, which also means diverse economic sources. Still, the curriculum seemingly has not yet been exploited to the level at which it can be applied to tap into the different economic sources, such as local heritage, to provide local economies with sustainable living and heritage preservation.

Research Questions

1. How can schools implement the Tourism curriculum in a way that contributes to heritage preservation and sustainable tourism in rural areas and townships?
 - RQ 1.1 Does valorising the tourism curriculum encourage stakeholder engagement in preserving local heritage in rural and township communities?

- RQ 1.2 Does the tourism curriculum require further reforms to encourage schools to play a meaningful role in community development?
2. How can Tourism curriculum be put on the same level with other subjects?
3. What impact does tourism education have on students' understanding of community sustainability?
- RQ 3.1 What knowledge and skills do students gain from the tourism curriculum regarding sustainable practices?
- RQ 3.2 What are the long-term impacts on students' attitudes and behaviour towards sustainability in their communities?

Research Aims and Objectives.

- Investigate the role of schools in forging partnerships and relationships with local communities to generate and preserve knowledge about local heritage sites.
- Examine the benefits of teaching the tourism curriculum from a community sustainability perspective in South African's rural and township schools.
- Investigate the long-term benefits for students regarding community sustainability.
- Investigate the role of teacher capacitation in uplifting the status of Tourism subject.

Literature Review

This study contributes to the existing literature on the role of the Tourism curriculum in fostering and bolstering sustainable heritage in rural and township communities. However, it is imperative to review the literature that discusses the school curriculum development and reform stages in South Africa from 1995 to 2014 to present a rather comprehensive, coherent, and logical argument. The curriculum amendments were intended to direct education towards a quality education, especially after most of the population had been subjected to subjugation for about five decades. From 1995, after the democratic elections, national audits were conducted to assess the different curriculums, and the results revealed significant gaps for

each audit. Subsequently, in 1997, a new curriculum policy was launched, curriculum 2005, which was outcome-based. In 2002, this curriculum was reconstructed and approved into the Revised National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and implemented in 2004. It was reviewed in 2009 regarding the quality of learning and teachers. As a result, the 2009 findings of the NCS were reviewed in 2011. Its subsequent amendment led to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), claims DoE (Department of Education 2009; National Education Policy Act 1996; 2009) and Pinnock (2011).

The Tourism Curriculum Concept

Based on the evolution of the school curriculum in South Africa, as documented by the CAPS Tourism Package published by the Umalusi, a Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training, in collaboration with the Department of Tourism in South Africa, the Tourism curriculum appears to be aligned with Curriculum levels and associated curriculum documentation (Thijs & Van den Akker, 2009). This characteristic presents Tourism as a key subject in the country's various economic strategies. In 2009, the subject was therefore identified as a priority economic sector as well as one of the growth areas which are expected to contribute to the development of economic activities in rural areas by the Industrial Policy Action Plan (IPAP2), according to the National Tourism Sector Strategy, (February 2011). Therefore, it is assumed that the tourism subject, as early as the school phase, is recommended as part of the improvements that can potentially influence the implementation of the curriculum both in and outside the classroom.

Heritage and Economy

According to Timothy and Boyd (2006) and Stoddart and Rogerson (2009), tourism is regarded and described as a strategy in rural areas to market less developed heritage asserts. One of the effective ways to achieve this, according to Snowball and Courteney (2010), is documenting them. Although most of the publicity is often done by tourism boards and municipalities, for example, on wine routes in the Western

Eastern Cape and in KwaZulu-Natal Midlands Meander and the Eastern Cape, heritage trails are named after local chiefs; on such occasions, schools can also get involved by researching the names and even the roles these individuals played in the political-liberation struggle for freedom or cultural roles, which is a way in which the subject of tourism can apply the knowledge gained from the history curriculum.

The preservation of heritage in South Africa is intrinsically linked to the political context of the country before 1994. According to Timothy and Boyd (2006), the history of certain races was excluded, which Kim et al. (2007) refer to as collective amnesia. The deliberate suppression of certain histories can be addressed through revitalising local heritage, which Snowball and Courteney (2010), described as a healing process and an attempt to correct the gaps in South Africa's history. While this requires a substantial amount of financial funding, schools can contribute from an academic point of view.

A study in Indonesia (Hampton, 2005) advocates for community participation, presenting tourism as a bottom-up, participatory, and benefit-oriented activity. While schools may not be involved in the financial planning and management of the heritage sites for tourism, their involvement could be a step forward in the practical education and training of learners about the Tourism industry. More significantly, if we single out the Midlands Meander, which is mainly rural, the local community, according to Snowball and Courteney (2010), was not benefiting from the tourism offshoots; it is only a recent development that emerging Black entrepreneurs are obtaining membership in the route association. Most factors responsible for the lack of rural Black participants in heritage and tourism development include limited information and lack of finance and experience. Schools, as centres of knowledge, can educate communities about the role that they can play in developing a sound tourism economy. One example would be to discuss a much simpler and user-friendly White Paper, a policy paper which stresses the advancement of tourism to develop even those areas that are lagging because the tendency, even for the government, is to focus only a few

destinations already enjoying publicity, argues Viljoen and Tlabela (2006).

Theoretical Framework

This study is shaped by three theories, Community Based Education, Cultural Heritage Education and Sustainable Development theories. According to the community based education theory, residents' views on the benefits of tourism shape the attention that scholars have afforded the subject (Almeida-García, et al., 2016). Studies show that community members will support development initiatives if they realise that community initiatives are a platform for development (Lee, 2013), which leads to supporting such programmes. Bui (2011) and Bui et al. (2020), argue that community-based environmental education is a participatory, collaborative, action and information based process, hence the positive reaction of communities towards development programmes, such as community based tourism (Abdul Aziz, et al., 2023). This approach to education is empowering and preserves community heritage. Cultural heritage education asserts that culture has many layers, movable, immovable, tangible and intangible heritage, and is highly contested discipline (Jagielska-Burduk, et al., 2021). Cultural heritage and sustainability are aligned because, culture is a non-renewable resource, therefore its preservation is crucial, according to Jagielska-Burduk, et al. (2021). In light of this, education is an integral part of its preservation, through awareness and other forms of education. Thus far, UNESCO has been crucial in developing the existing legal framework in the area of culture, by adopting six conventions in the area of heritage. According to the Agenda 2030 for sustainable goals, SDG 4.7 ensures that by 2030, learners acquire knowledge and skills required to promote sustainable development, human rights, equality and the promotion of culture, peace, diversity and global citizenship. According to the Sustainable Development Theory, the curriculum has a role to promote and encourage tourism practices that merge economic growth with environmental stewardship and social equity. The Brundtland Commission presents this theory as a lens through which learners' learning patterns should be guided. They should learn

about how tourism impact communities in the communities where they live and go to school (Brundtland & Khalid, 1987). This aligns educational outcomes with broader goals of sustainable community development.

Methodology

We present a constructivist qualitative study. Adopting a constructivist approach, according to Crotty (1998), allows the researcher to search for culturally and historically explained interpretations of the social life world. The construction of meaning and knowledge, according to constructivism, is a societal-driven process through interaction with reality (Schmuck, 1997). This paper aims to pool multiple teachers' knowledge about the topic at hand to contribute to the Tourism curriculum in the South African context. The sample consisted of a total of ten (10) teachers, nine (9) who are experienced, and one (1) who is a novice, in schools located both in rural and township South Africa. Due to the logistical dynamics, an internet survey was chosen as the most practical way of administering the research questionnaire to teachers. It was designed in Microsoft Word format and emailed to the respondents.

The purposeful sampling of the respondents was based on the idea that I am a teacher and have worked with some of the respondents as colleagues in different schools. In the process, they could suggest names other teachers I did not know, who could also be potential respondents. However, the results of this study cannot be generalised because of the size of the sample.

The choice behind the use of email as a tool and platform for conducting online research data collection is supported by the idea that as early as year 2002, emails were already used in Iceland in a study involving teachers and students (Lefever et al., 2007). Electronic data collection methods vary widely, including computer-administered, electronic mail, and web surveys (Nayak & Narayan, 2019). Since the early 2000s, the Internet has become the most convenient tool and platform for survey research, argues Van Selin and Jankowski (2006). Online surveys present themselves as both advantages and liabilities; for this paper, the positives surpass the challenges. It should be mentioned

that internet-based surveys provide the researcher with economic relief based on the logistical factors posed by the distance and financial costs, according to Van Selin and Jankowski (2006). The ease is also provided by the accessibility by which potential respondents can be reached. In this study, using email was particularly attractive because the participant teachers work in different schools across a large South African region, meanwhile the researcher is based in outside South Africa. However, despite the benefits, challenges were still encountered. For example, communication with some teachers stretched much longer because of the poor internet networks, leading to receiving responses later than anticipated. Other teachers were concerned about their privacy and anonymity because, as Van Selin and Jankowski (2006) argue, email-based responses are prone to invasion of privacy, where the identity of respondents can be compromised due to the nature of the Reply Function of an email programme.

The study also references two case studies. Case studies in education can bring to the fore challenges faced by teachers in education (Broudy, 1990). In the context of this article, teachers are unable to some extent to implement the Tourism curriculum to effect community transformation, through the two case studies below, we can draw some conclusions that it is a possible feat.

Results

In rural and township schools, the tourism curriculum can serve as a vehicle for teaching students about local heritage, environmental stewardship, and sustainable business practices. By embedding sustainability principles within the tourism curriculum, educators can prepare students to become custodians of their heritage and proactive participants in local economic development, however teachers also should be prepared. This means that curriculum transformation and teacher training is crucial to the achievement of the roles that the subject is expected to fulfill.

Discussion

Lack of a Strong Will

Some teachers agree that tourism remains a vocational subject that is not taken as seriously as it should be,

partly due to the country's symbolic nature of curriculum changes. In the wake of South Africa's democratic elections in 1994, the then minister of education launched national processes that aimed to transform the curriculum and purge its apartheid-subjugating matter. However, these changes did not legitimately usher in change; instead, they exposed the symbolic and superficial transition, argues Jansen (1999). The gaps in the curriculum implementation are visible generally across the curriculum, including the Tourism subject.

South Africa's Tourism curriculum seems advanced and detailed compared to countries that implement the IGCSE Curriculum, like Kenya, Lesotho, India and the UK, because its objectives include content that discusses culture and heritage, mapwork and marketing the country (Department of Education, 2014). However, it still does not occupy the same status as other subjects in the school curriculum. Teachers and school managers' perception of the Tourism subject, according to Nhlapo et. (2019), poses a challenge of rendering it an easy subject for those learners who are struggling in the STEM subject. This attitude is also popular among teachers in Lesotho. In 2011, when the subject was introduced in the country, learners did not hesitate to elect it as part of their high school curriculum package. Teachers who participated in a study conducted by Nhlapo et al. (2019), Lesotho also holds similar sentiments about the Tourism subject resembling a dumping site for learners struggling with other elective subjects.

According to Sean (2010), there is a general feeling that Tourism is a generic subject that utilises everyday knowledge. While this may be true to some degree, it still threatens to tarnish the image of the subject and water down its significance. Dube (2014) argues that these phenomena present a paradox because while the government designates the subject as an integral contribution to the economy, on the ground, it is perceived as a soft discipline, which may be interpreted to mean that it has no significant value, which this is a direct opposite of the sentiments shared by this study. Based on the above claims in the South African context, it can be argued that the extent of commitment and support from key decision-makers to formulate

policies to address particular social issues by utilising the curriculum seems to be an inevitable practical trajectory. This is reflected by the coastal part of Lebanon and Syria, which, according to Bellos et al. (2021) and Bou (2021), the tourism industry will thrive and be shielded from threats such as terrorism, conflict and political corruption, and become a smart and sustainably worthwhile investment if there is a visible political will to transform tourism, a process that is contingent on the power of education as a reform tool (Airey & Tribe, 2006). This perspective portrays and regards the youth as the custodians of heritage, which is achievable through a meaningful education system. Considering this view, this paper understands that Tourism education or Tourism curriculum can promote sustainability and economic development since sustainable tourism has become a popular trend worldwide, according to UNWTO (2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d).

A Self-reliance, Community-based Curriculum

The self-reliance community-based concept in education is a philosophy linked to Tanzania's former statesman, Julius Nyerere, which he popularised across the African continent after recognising that the Western-based education system was not benefiting Africans, instead, it was turning Africans into dependent individuals. He further criticised it as being theoretical and lacking practical skills (Nyerere, 1967). He campaigned to adopt a community participation-based curriculum. In this light, one of the participants agreed that tourism as a vocational subject should be taught in a way that triggers an entire community's awareness of tourism attractions available in their communities. Nhlapo (2018) argues that communities are an asset which can assist schools and learners in reaching a state of self-reliance, which is an idea that is also supported by Kretzmann and McNight (1993; 1996) and Moeller and Bielfeldt (2011). According to Russell (2009), communities play a significant role in improving local education in Mexico, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Kenya. Community participation is a well-documented concept (Fan & Williams, 2010; Moeller & Bielfeldt, 2011; Barron, 2013; Fathi, 2014).

Nhlapo (2018) argues that community participation goes a long way where the community members have low levels of education because once community members see a value in the knowledge that they possess and begin collaborating with schools in the form of capacity building, they can significantly gain self-esteem (Myende, 2014). This therefore informs us that in addition to the heritage asserts that exist in communities, it can be the beginning of a long-standing relationship between communities and schools, if utilised meaningfully. For this section of the study, I am presenting the participants views on the contributions of the example of Mount iNhlankakazi.

This mountain lies in the valleys of Ndwedwe. It is a pilgrimage mountain of the Nazareth Baptist Church, founded by Isaiah Shembe, a Zulu prophet who holds a special place in the hearts of the members of this church. This church is one of the oldest and largest independent African churches, also known as an indigenous church, founded around 1910 (Van der Heyden, 2004). The church has Zulu traditions and culture at the centre of its doctrine, making the mountain a shrine and a heritage site. Apart from that, the Nazareth church is one of the many Zionist churches that sprung up to resist colonial religion, which rendered it an enemy of missionary work, leading to being labelled as a black nationalist organisation that was threatening public safety and their leaders' charlatans and rebels in disguise, argues Lea (1924) and Van Wing, (1958). Therefore, the historiography of the church describes a strong political, religious, and cultural heritage that exists mainly in rural areas. The historiography presents the mountain and the whole religion as heritage, and the community living in Ndwedwe and the schools located there are said to be the main initiators and beneficiaries of the heritage. This idea is aligned with the Community Cultural Wealth Theory that acknowledges that Indigenous knowledge from the community is worthy for educational purposes (Mahlomaholo, 2012; Graven & Schafer, 2013). Such an approach to teaching tourism is believed to be useful in assisting teachers who sometimes are not adequately trained or lack resources to gravitate towards learner-centred teaching, which renders the subject effectively vocational; Park, (2008).

Teacher Capacitation and Empowerment

The teaching of Tourism as school subject, but significantly as a vocational subject, is not executed in earnest, according to the view of some participants. Previously, the subject did not enjoy the same status as other subjects to qualify learners for university entrance. This is one of the reasons that contributed to the relegation of the subject to an inferior status compared to academic subjects.

Participants believe that the threat of the subject not being taught justly looms, if a subject is not held in high regard (Chili, 2013; Adukaite et al., 2016). Therefore, it is paramount that Tourism teachers and school management be capacitated on available ways of elevating the subject so that it becomes a tool to prosper the subject and uplift the status of local heritage. In Lebanon and Syria, a study conducted, provides perspectives on the role of educational institutions in encouraging local development through educational tourism; Bou (2021).

Tourism in South Africa is renowned for its role in the economy and its ability as a sustainable labour attraction (Adukaite et al., 2017). Considering this view, Tourism teachers and learners, as early as high school, should be aware of the subject's critical role (Adukaite et al., 2016). According to Adukaite et al. (2017), teachers can implement the curriculum flexibly in deciding which methodologies to adopt. However, such knowledge comes with extensive training and experience. Generally, Tourism teachers are not qualified to teach the subject argues Adukaite et al. (2017) and lack innovation, interest, and exposure. To address the challenge of student apathy regarding the subject, we must create relationships with the community to forge a participatory teaching and learning approach to heritage as one of the aspects of the tourism subject.

Case Studies

The Madikwe Game Reserve in the Northwest Province is an example of a successful integrating tourism education with community sustainability. This programme facilitates the participation of local schools in the wildlife conservation, eco-tourism, and economic development benefits of sustainable tourism. Through

this programme, community participation in various tourism initiatives has increased. One of the key factors that renders this programme a success, is education. The Madikwe Reserve operates various educational programmes that aim to conscientise locals of the importance of conservation, empower locals with the knowledge and skills needed to engage in sustainable practices. Some of the significant benefits of this initiative is the income generated from tourism. The funds help fund local schools and educational projects, thereby contributing to long-term community development. There is an increasing demand for programs that produce socially conscious students armed with practical and contextual knowledge and ready to act accordingly (Arrobas, 2020). The tourism sector requires students who can interpret theoretical views into practical realities.

Another case, is that of Khayelitsha Tourism Education Project. Khayelitsha is one of the biggest Black townships situated in Cape Town, formed by the apartheid state (Mokoena, 2022). Upon its formation, it was characterised by overcrowding and poverty. Today, Khayelitsha is a predominantly characterised by informal housing and unemployment and lack of infrastructure (Phelanyane, 2021; Kongo, 2022). Despite these challenges, schools and other institutions remain radical in capacitating the youth. The Tourism Education Project focuses on empowering youth through tourism. The curriculum includes modules on local history, cultural tours, and sustainable business practices. The project has fostered a sense of pride in local heritage and equipped students with practical skills to enter the tourism industry (Lange, & Bricker, 2024), empowering the youth to contribute to the local economy.

Conclusion

The study explored how Tourism education is perceived through a community sustainability lens, particularly in terms of preserving and promoting local heritage via the tourism curriculum. The literature highlights that community engagement, collaboration, participation, and the recognition of community cultural wealth are essential elements of a successful curriculum. These aspects also contribute to expand-

ing learner knowledge beyond the classroom. Recognising Tourism's vital role in driving economic growth and addressing historical inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa, this approach may offer a pathway to job creation through heritage-based initiatives, depending on whether communities are aware of the significance of heritage in this context. However, implementing this vision poses challenges. One key concern is the shortage of professionally trained teachers who understand the subject's depth and societal relevance. Such educators are crucial in influencing school leadership to actively involve communities in the educational process. The study suggests that adopting a community sustainability perspective in the Tourism curriculum, particularly in rural and township schools, can reframe the subject to emphasise heritage preservation, sustainable development, and community-based education. This approach promotes a more integrated, relevant, and engaging curriculum. It prepares learners to become proactive agents in their communities and supports long-term impact through strengthened school-teacher-learner-community relationships. Ultimately, the study advocates for a resilient educational model that fosters community empowerment and sustainable development through Tourism education.

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