Newsletter

Learning and Learning Disabilities in Africa

May 2009 Issue 1.

Dear Readers!

This is the first issue of the joint Niilo Mäki Institute (NMI) and Edulink -funded project Newsletter on learning difficulties. For years this has been my dream and to see it realized fills me with great happiness. Unfortunately we, who have worked together for a long time, have not always had regular contact or shared the latest news in the field of neuropsychology. This Newsletter gives a great opportunity to all interested parties to network and share information on learning difficulties.

In 1990, there was a growing interest at an international level to discover why so many children had not learnt to read and had dropped out of school. A lot of research was done, but an important piece of the puzzle was missing. Professor of Neuropsychology Heikki Lyytinen, Professor of Development Psychology Timo Ahonen and myself, an expert in special education and rehabilitation, came to the conclusion that in depth research was needed. For this purpose, in 1990, the Niilo Mäki Foundation (NMI) was established at University of Jyväskylä. Since then the Niilo Mäki Institute has followed the principle of *applying the latest research for assessment and methods, and the*



Dr (h.c) Onerva Mäki at the 48th Session of the International Conference on Education in 2008, Geneva, Switzerland. (© point-of-views.ch)

training of experts, teachers and parents in learning difficulties as a means to address problems in reading, and it has been the guideline in training the Finnish as well as international experts.

In 1992 the NMI decided also to provide this training in some of the African countries. With the support of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland the first African neuropsychologists training started with the participants from Kenya and Zambia. The subsequent courses had participants from Cameron, Ethiopia, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The two-year distance learning training of African neuropsychologists was based on the similar form of training given in Finland. During the course 6 modules were covered including theory, methods, assessment and practice. Altogether 46 specialists in neuropsychology were trained in 4 courses. In addition, six Zambians have gained MA degrees from the University of Jyväskylä and six graduated last year from the University of Zambia (UNZA) with BA degrees. Furthermore, the first African training of neuropsychologists started this year at Kenyatta University. However, despite these successes in capacity building, there is still work to be done and a need to train more people in clinical neuropsychology.

During these years of cooperation three assessment clinics have been founded: at UNZA, at Kenyatta University and at the Zambia Institute of Special Education (ZAMISE). The data collected from these clinics has been used in research. We have been very fortunate to be able to work successfully with the Ministries and the Universities at a high level and sincerely hope this co-operation will continue in the future.

I am grateful for all these years which have given me great happiness, life long friendships and the belief in a better future for the ones who need us the most.

Onerva "Mama" Mäki

The launch of Edulink funded project in Windhoek, Namibia

Psykonet, a Finnish university network of psychology, together with the Kenyatta University, Kenya, the University of Zambia **Educational Psychology Sociology** and Special Education, and Psychology departments, the Zambia Institute of Special Education and the University of Namibia Education Psychology department and an associate organization, Niilo Mäki Institute, Finland received a funding for a three year project entitled Education for the Children with Learning Disabilities: African-European Co-operation for **Promoting Higher Education** and Research (2008-2010) from the European Union Edulink programme. The aim of the project is to improve the school attendance and achievement of pupils in primary education in partner countries. This is achieved by improving the skills of educationalists (teachers, special education teachers and psychologists) to diagnose and treat learning disabilities amongst school children.

The project was officially launched on 26th January 2009 in Windhoek, Namibia. During the five day workshop covered topics included participant country education and special education systems, panel discussion on psychologists and special needs teachers experiences from their fields of work.

As a new feature, the workshop included an interactive video-conferencing session where presentations from Finland were broadcast via the internet to Windhoek.

The presentation by Prof. Timo Ahonen on the current debates

evolving around the definitions of learning disabilities created lively and active discussions among workshop participants.

The next workshop on academic skills will be held in Finland in August 2009. Each partner country will host at least one workshop during the duration of the project.



of psychology consisting of all the six departments of psychology in Finland. The network was established at the end of 1980s in response to the Ministry of Education plans to reduce the number of psychology departments in the country.

psykonet focuses on the teaching of psychology, graduate training and continuing education of practicing psychologists.

EDULINK funds cooperative projects between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the ACP Group of States and the 15 EU Member States that are signatories to the 9th European Development Fund (EDF). The objective is to foster capacity building and regional integration in higher education in ACP States and Regions, and to promote higher education as a means of reducing poverty.

For further information on Edulink project and Psykonet, please contact Coordinator Ms. Susanna Kharroubi, susanna.kharroubi@utu.fi

IN MEMORIAM

OBITUARY



PROFESSOR SHASHI BALI 1946-2009

It is with great sadness to notify the passing on of our colleague Professor Shashi Bali from the Kenyatta University, Kenya.

Professor Bali served the
Kenyatta University in the
Department of Educational
Psychology, having joined the
University in 1978 as a Lecturer.
She was promoted to Senior
Lecturer level in 1986 and
became an Associate Professor in
1996, a position she held until
her demise.

Those who knew Prof. Bali found her to be very diligent and dedicated to her work. She was very resourceful in project work and was a mentor to many students. She leaves behind her Mother and three brothers.

May Her soul rest in eternal peace.

NMI sponsored Overcoming learning difficulties seminar in Lusaka, Zambia

Niilo Mäki Institute (NMI) hosted a four day seminar "Overcoming Learning Difficulties" with the funding from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland on 5th-8th January 2009 in Lusaka, Zambia. The participants came from the Kenyatta University, Kenya, the Zambia Institute of Special Education (ZAMISE), the University of Zambia (UNZA), the Ministry of Education and local schools. The seminar focused on some of the most common forms of learning difficulties: Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD); Arithmetic learning difficulties and Reading difficulties, and included presentations on rehabilitation models from Finland, Kenya and Zambia.

Dr. Vesa Närhi (NMI) presented neuropsychological rehabilitation of learning difficulties in Finland. Rehabilitation in general was described as helping the individual to meet the expectations of education system and daily life. Helping the child to learn requires good co-operation with teachers and parents, and the systematization of teaching methods.

Dr. Jacinta Kwena from the Department of Educational Psychology of the Kenyatta University stressed the fact that currently there is no African definition for learning difficulties even though problems are common. Furthermore, the parents lack information on learning difficulties and seek help for their children too late.

Mr. Kalima Kalima from the Department of Educational Psychology, Sociology & Special Education (EPSSE), UNZA, emphasized that good rehabilitation requires multidisciplinary teamwork and awareness rising among parents and communities.

In his presentation Dr. Sammy Tumuti from the Kenyatta University, highlighted the children's rights and their meaning in Africa. Special needs children are often marginalized, hence helping the children with learning difficulties is also a human rights issue.

Psyc. Lic. Pekka Räsänen (NMI), an expert in Arithmetic difficulties reminded the audience that there is no such thing as Maths - what is taught about mathematics at schools depends on the demands of the society which change over time. Therefore the demands for children's performance can also change. Even seemingly simple calculations require very complicated functions in the brain and teaching mathematics requires understanding of these processes. For example, counting skills can be compromised due to a working memory deficit even if intelligence and/or verbal skills were normal. Teachers need to have adequate mathematical skills in order to be able to teach children efficiently.

Mr. Räsänen also reminded the participants that in most cases children do not have a problem in learning, but the teachers have a problem with teaching. The prevalence of dyscalculia is very small, only 3-6% and secondary problems in mathematics is only 5-15%. If greater number of children is experiencing difficulties in mathematics at school, it is likely to be an

"educational problem".

Few years ago Mr. Räsänen and Mr. Michael Chilala developed a BANUCA test which is an arithmetic skills assessment test with Zambian norms, and should be available at the Ministry of Education, Mr. Räsänen also demonstrated Finnish computerbased rehabilitation programs developed in LukiMat project which provides free information to teachers and parents on reading and mathematics and learning games for children in Finland. The website of the project is www.lukimat.fi.



Professor Heikki Lyytinen from the Department of Psychology of University of Jyväskylä and Niilo Mäki Institute told about Finnish perspective to reading difficulties. In Finland majority (90%) of children learn to read during the first semester of the first grade. As much as 30% learns to read without any formal education at all, and by the end of the first grade, practically everyone reads. The learning outcomes are strongly related to the Finnish language which is regular and transparent. This means that children only need to learn little over 20 letter-sound correspondences in order to learn to read (compared to hundreds in English). The main problem with children with dyslexia is that they need more time and repetitions to learn

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letter-sound correspondences, which is the most essential skill in learning to read.

The Literate game created by a team led by Professor Lyytinen was piloted in Zambia and the results of the pilot study team (Mr. James Chilufya, Mrs. Grace Kachenga, Mr. Simon Kaoma, Mr. Rodrick Mando, Miss Sylvia Kalindi and Miss Beatrice Matafwali) were presented. The results indicate that the performance in year 2005 was generally very low in grades 1-4. But even a short, 2 hour intervention with the Literate game improved children's spelling and orthography skills. However, the study also revealed that the Zambian children seem to have difficulties in reading because some of them have learned the English letter names

despite the recommendation of teaching initial reading skills in a local language.

The pilot raised important issues relating to the literacy instruction in Zambia. The multilingual nature of Zambian schools makes it difficult to create efficient teaching programs.



Teachers seem to lack the basic knowledge of learning processes needed for reading acquisition. In addition their own literacy skills may not always be adequate, especially in Zambian languages.

Miss Beatrice Matafwali's (EPSSE) introduced the preliminary

findings of her doctoral study. The results are similar to Literate pilot study in that children are performing poorly and teachers are not adequately informed about the basics of reading acquisition.

Thus in order to help those children who are having difficulties in learning basic academic skills, the emphasis should be ensuring that teachers have adequate knowledge. Furthermore, the collaboration between all professionals in the area of education should be enhanced and methods systematized. More research and training in the area of learning difficulties is needed and a network of African experts should be formed. The quality teacher training and good collaboration between schools, families and administration are vital in learning.

Zambian MA graduates from University of Jyväskylä, Finland celebrate at Chrismar Hotel, Lusaka

Six Zambian students were awarded with MA in Developmental Psychology from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. The celebration took place at Chrismar Hotel, Lusaka. Also those 6 students (sponsored by NMI) who had completed their BA studies at the University of Zambia joined the festivities. The honorary guest, Her Excellency, the Ambassador of Finland Mrs Sinikka Antila congratulated the graduates and praised them for their hard work and dedication. Professor Heikki Lyytinen in turn described the Ekapeli pilot study which was the research focus of the Master's theses. The vote of thanks on behalf of the graduates was presented by the Zamise acting Principal Mrs Grace Kachenga. Also present at the celebrations were Mr Kaulule from UNESCO, colleagues from Kenya, Finland, UNZA, ZAMISE and relatives and friends.



(from left) MA graduates: Mr Progress Muhau, Ms Sylvia Kalindi, Mr Simon Kaoma, Mr James Chilufya, Mr Rodrick Mando and Mrs Grace Kachenga



The Ambassador (middle), together with Professor Heikki Lyytinen (right), and acting Principal Mrs Grace Kachenga, Zamise (left).

PhD (h.c.) Onerva Mäki receives the Jan Amos Comenius Medal in 2008

PhD (h.c.) Onerva Mäki was awarded UNESCO's international Jan Amos Comenius medal for her outstanding achievements in the fields of educational research and innovation, and exceptional personal devotion to education at the International Conference on Education in Geneva on November 2008. Dr Onerva Mäki is the first Finn to receive the award.

Nearly three decades Dr Onerva Mäki worked at the University of Jyväskylä as a lecturer, special education teacher trainer and as a researcher concentrating on CP, hearing disability, and visual disability. As an organizer and developer of educational and rehabilitative services Dr (h.c.) Onerva Mäki has significantly promoted the equal and full social participation of disabled people. Her active role in the national and international organizations for the disabled has promoted the construction of a more human and communal world for the disabled. Dr Onerva Mäki's impressive long-term work at the Niilo Mäki Institute and in special education development projects in several African countries still continues. In 2000 Dr Mäki was awarded the title of doctor honoris causa in educational sciences at the University of Jyväskylä.

The Comenius Medal was established in 1992 and it is one of UNESCO's most prestigious awards and intended to acknowledge the work of those educators who have made a significant contribution to the development or renewal of education.



The opening of NMI sponsored new intervention facility at ZAMISE, Lusaka, January 2009.

Newsletter details

As the purpose of this Newsletter is to network and exchange knowledge on learning difficulties, we are looking for contributions and articles for the next issue.

Learning is the topic of the next Newsletter. Those interested in submitting articles, comments, pictures or any other information to the next issue, please email to:

Emma (emma.ojanen@nmi.fi) or

Pia (piakrimark@yahoo.co.uk)

by the end of August.

Forthcoming SANORD funded workshop on *Learning to* read in transparent languages, in Lusaka, Zambia

Professor Heikki Lyytinen together with his team organises a meeting for researchers and educationists interested in Zambian languages and their use in education in Lusaka on 1st July 2009. The objective of the workshop is to discuss and explore what information is available and what studies have been done on Zambian languages, and what are the main areas where research could contribute to finding solutions and optimize procedures used to instruct reading of these languages.

Prof. Lyytinen invites all interested parties to share their research results and discuss possibilities for the improvement of literacy teaching in Zambia.

More information on the Sanord day, please contact Mr Tambulukani, UNZA, (gtambulukani@yahoo.co.uk), or Ms Pia Krimark (piakrimark@yahoo.co.uk).

More information on Sanord (Southern African Nordic Centre) can be obtained from http://sanord.uwc.ac.za/









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