

## Learning and Learning Disabilities in Africa

October 2009 Issue 2.

*Dear Colleagues and Friends,*

Difficulties and failures to acquire the basic academic skills are a major hindrance for a child to participate in education. Learning difficulties are common, it is estimated that 5-10% of children are having developmental problems of this kind. In addition several childhood diseases found in Africa, e.g. cerebral malaria and HIV, affect central nervous system, often compromising the ability to learn new skills.

Neuropsychological approach to learning disabilities has proven to be effective, both in terms of revealing the neurocognitive functions responsible for the learning disabilities and providing remediation and training methods for children. In co-operation with Universities and in service teacher training institutions Niilo Mäki Institute and a University Network of Psychology (Psykonet) in Finland are co-operating with running clinics for children with learning disabilities in Lusaka and Nairobi, and supporting the setting up of such clinic in Windhoek, Namibia.

The clinics provide diagnostic services for children with learning difficulties. In many cases the diagnostic procedure will clarify the difficulties for the child and his/her parents. It is also necessary to include the child's teacher into the process to discuss the ways to remediate and alleviate the child's problems in school setting.

In addition to the diagnostic services, the clinics provide an opportunity for the students to do their practicum on learning disabilities under the guidance of the professionals who also work as lecturers at these Universities and Institutions. As such the aim of the clinics is to bring together the theoretical knowledge and practice.

A further aim of clinics is related to scientific research. The clinics, with common assessment and training materials, provide an opportunity to collect data for research. The possibilities for research are extensive. One obvious is to collect clinical data on learning disabilities. Another, more closely related to clinical work, is to run training experiments for children with learning disabilities and utilize single case research designs. Linking research to the clinics provides also possibilities for the students of the Universities and Institutions to do their projects and dissertations related to the clinical work.

Learning disability clinics functioning within Universities or other higher education institutions provide several possibilities which some are very practical, serving the children, their parents and teachers. The training of professionals working with children will provide in the long run better possibilities in diminishing problems caused by learning disabilities and provide opportunities for various scientific research activities.

*Vesa Närhi, PhD*



*Zambian language and learning experts gathered together on 1<sup>st</sup> July, 2009 in Lusaka to discuss the role of language in literacy education. Workshop was organized by Professor Heikki Lyytinen from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, and funded by SANORD. The workshop discussed the meaning of current scientific consensus on the impact of language in reading acquisition and its implications in the Zambian education system. The attempts to promote local languages in the education system have been ignored for a long time even though scientific knowledge strongly supports it. The participants agreed that indigenous literacy and language research as basis for education policies is the way forward.*

Professor Oswald Chakulimba, the Head of the Department of Educational Psychology, UNZA, and Mr. Davies Kunda (SEO) from the Ministry of Education (on behalf of acting Permanent Secretary Mrs. Mubanga (Dir. TESS)) delivered the opening remarks of the workshop. The first presentation of the day, by Professor Robert Serpell, Department of Psychology, UNZA, illustrated how literate individuals create a literate society and how reading research is always multidisciplinary, combining disciplines such as Psychology, Sociology, Linguistics, Education and Economics. He suggested that practical decisions about how to help a given child learn to read can best be taken in light of a number of complementary, more technical issues about curriculum, instructional methods, assessment, teaching materials, teacher training, and school management. In Zambia literacy instruction needs a balance between cultural values and economic efficiency and more emphasis on teacher training and material production in Zambian languages.

Senior curriculum specialist Mr Chiika Muyebaa summarized the history and development of Zambian education policy and expressed his concern of a repeated pattern of foreign donors favouring teaching English over the use of local languages. Mr. Muyebaa reminded the audience that before independence Zambia had a successful literacy teaching program where local languages and English were taught so current problems should not be impossible to solve.

Mr. Geoffrey Tambulukani from the Language Department, UNZA presented his PhD study on the impact of language familiarity in literacy acquisition. His results indicate that schools in Lusaka area gave poorer learning results because children have to learn literacy in a multilingual environment. In comparison, Mongu area in Western Province had the best performance as the children were able to learn in the language that is most familiar to them.

### **International collaboration brings new insight to Zambia**

Professor Elena Grigorenko from the Yale University, USA, presented results from a study on learning disabilities in Zambia conducted together with UNZA in 2005. Professor Grigorenko reminded the audience that even though learning



Photo: Milla Salo

Professor Elena Grigorenko,  
Yale University, US.

disabilities exist in every society, good teaching minimizes individual differences so that all children have a chance to learn academic skills required in life.

The challenge of learning disabilities research in Zambia is finding a way to distinguish those children who have actual learning disability from those who never had an adequate chance to learn. As a result of the study, it was estimated that out of 1592 children only 37 (~2%) might have had a learning disability, which indicates that majority of children's difficulties in school are related to something else than their own abilities to learn.

Professor Heikki Lyytinen from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, presented a summary of recent understanding on how children learn to read. Failure to learn letters is the best predictor of later reading difficulties. If children have problems in learning basic literacy skills, it is helpful for them to e.g. play a computer game (Ekapeli or Literate game) that specifically trains consistent units of language, such as letter-sound correspondences in Finnish and similar languages and rhymes in English.

### **Zambian observations on learning literacy**

Mr. James Chilufya, Principal Education Officer, MoE, presented the pilot study results of Ekapeli (Literate game) in Zambia. A group of Zambians (James Chilufya, Sylvia Kalindi, Grace Kachenga, Rodrick Mando and Simon Kaoma) and one Finn (Emma Ojanen) explored possibilities to use Ekapeli for literacy skills intervention in Cinyanja and English on grades 1-4 in Lusaka. The results indicate that teachers are not adequately trained to teach literacy in local language and that trying to transfer to English before children are literate in local language is confusing to children.

Mr. Kelly Mulenga, the Head of Student Support Services at Baobab College, demonstrated how children with reading difficulties can be helped with intervention. In Baobab College, English literacy is taught with phonetic methods, and it is the only international school in Lusaka that teaches Cinyanja as mandatory subject. Mr. Mulenga reported that according to his experience, even children who speak English as their first language, and have problems in reading English, benefit from literacy training in Cinyanja.

Mr. Bestern Kaani, EPPSE, UNZA, presented results from a Yale-UNZA collaborative study which indicate that children perform better in English phonological skills contrary to current understanding that learning to read is easier in transparent languages. This supports the concern expressed earlier that Zambian teacher's are better informed and more successful in instructing reading English.

Consensus exists that there is a dire need to promote research of local languages and to increase collaboration between the University of Zambia and Ministry of Education in order teaching materials, teaching programs, teacher training curricula and intervention programs be developed based on scientific knowledge. Overall the workshop participants were delighted that international reading research is transforming from English-based theories into language-specific reading research providing new possibilities to develop successful literacy programs in the future.



For further information on Sanord, please visit [www.sanord.uwc.ac.zm](http://www.sanord.uwc.ac.zm)

## Second Edulink meeting in Jyväskylä, Finland

*European Union Edulink funded project Education for Children with Learning Disabilities: African-European Co-operation for Promoting Higher Education and Research 2<sup>nd</sup> workshop was held in Jyväskylä Finland, on 17-21 August 2009.*

The presentations covered a range of studies and research findings conducted on reading, writing and mathematics related learning difficulties.

PhD Marja-Kristiina Lerkkanen from the University of Jyväskylä gave first a detailed presentation on the Finnish education system and teacher training education. She also explored the question of how research is connected to the teaching and learning to read in Finnish preschools and primary grades and how research has effected to the learning material.

PhD Mikko Aro from University of Jyväskylä explored the question whether learning to read differs between languages and drew attention to the problems of Anglocentric approach of current reading research and practice stressing that more interest should be paid to speed/fluency instead of accuracy of reading.

Clinical neuropsychologist Pekka Räsänen (Ps. Lic) from Niilo Mäki Institute gave a lecture on the neuropsychology of mathematical learning disabilities. He presented their own recent research findings that confirm the notions that dyscalculia (i.e. severe math disabilities) is a specific neural dysfunction, and therefore children with dyscalculia need long-lasting and individualised support for their learning.

PhD Pirjo Aunio introduced the Lukimat programme ([www.lukimat.fi/english](http://www.lukimat.fi/english)) for

mathematics and gave further details on the summary of maths research findings conducted during the last 10 years around the world which was gathered together with Pekka Räsänen.

MA Ritva Ketonen, a researcher and speech therapist from Niilo Mäki Institute addressed the topics of core deficits related to reading difficulties – phonological awareness (ability to identify or manipulate sounds within words); phonological memory (short term of speech based information); rapid naming and letter-sound knowledge and the training methods of these deficits.

Dr Tuija Aro from Niilo Mäki Institute and University of Jyväskylä talked about executive functions in relation to reading comprehension and various methods how reading comprehension can be improved.

From University of Turku, Dr Hanna Kiiski-Mäki in turn talked about writing and writing difficulties. The presentation covered problems with content and text structure, as consequences of difficulties in the writing process. More attention should be paid to the process of writing itself, and not only the end product.

MA Emma Ojanen shared the findings of the Ekapeli, a computer based learning game research, conducted in Zambia in 2005. The results indicate that teachers need more training on using phonetics in literacy instruction, and the effect of using two contradictory orthographies (English vs. Zambian languages) needs more research.

Dr Tuire Koponen held the last presentation of the workshop on the remediation of learning disabilities in mathematics drawing experiences both from research and practice. She highlighted that the development of calculation skills requires 3 types of knowledge – how to calculate, what to calculate and why to calculate - skills which a surprisingly large number of children fail to gain.

# Literacy Fun Fair in Lusaka organised by Read Beyond Zambia

Text by Nsama Chikwanka, Director & Founder – Read Beyond Zambia

## Real literacy fun at the 2009 Literacy Fun Fair

Children from various Lusaka schools on September 19<sup>th</sup> attended the 2009 **Literacy Fun Fair** organized by Read Beyond Zambia (RBZ), a local NGO that is advocating for the development of children's literacy skills and culture of reading. This was the second successive event RBZ hosted providing an opportunity for children from all walks of life to interact with their role models and get mentored on the value of education and literacy skills in a fun environment.

Held under the theme, '**Literacy protects children, empowers children**' the event emphasized on the role of literacy in protecting children from all forms of abuse, and empowering them by providing knowledge of their rights.

The Zambia Institute of Special Education (ZAMISE) was the guest partner and conducted assessments on children's reading skills. Over 30 children were tested, and 6 of those were found having problems with reading. RBZ appreciates the contribution of ZAMISE to the success of this year's event.



Despite the comparatively low turnout, those children who attended the fair had a chance to put their literacy skills to the test in various activities.

18 children took part in the story writing competition while 25 took part in speed reading competition. There were also spelling competitions for the grades 1-4, 5-7 and 8-9. A total of 30 children took part in this activity and the winners of each category went away with Zain Zambia branded school bags, water bottles, note books, ball pens or caps.



The 2009 event recorded a number of parents who supported children as they took part in various activities. It was a fun day for the entire family, and, as one parent commented, *"I had only come out of curiosity but I'm so impressed that there could be such activities organized to provide children with both fun and education"*. *"We have to do a little bit more to encourage children to develop interest in reading widely,"* she added. The parents urged RBZ to hold similar events regularly, and advertise them widely.

A guest of honour, Lusaka district commissioner, Mrs Krista Kalulu addressed the participants and applauded RBZ for the initiative urging more collaboration. She appreciated that the parents were spending their weekend with their children in such a beneficial manner. She also awarded K100 000 to each of the winners of the district spelling competition.



Local musician MC Wabwino, who also performed at the fair, was interested in taking events like this to rural areas. Another local artist, Red Linso, encouraged children to study hard, and practice reading to get good grades. He told the children that nothing beats education and that with it one could be anything they wanted. For the second year running, Miss Zambia 2008 was among the key personalities who came to read with the children.

No attendance fees were charged. Instead, participants were asked to bring two children's books which will be donated to the Buku Clubs set up for needy children in selected communities and schools.

*The sponsors of the event were: Zain Zambia, Strong Technologies Zambia, Californian Beverages, Lynn Footwear and JL Consultancy. Many thanks to our volunteers who once again gave their time and efforts for the cause of Zambia's children. Next event is planned to take place in 2010 in collaboration with other literacy and reading organizations operating in Zambia.*

## ZAMISE- ARC attends Read Beyond Zambia Literacy Fun Fair

Text by Mr Kelly Mulenga, Baobab College

The ZAMISE Assessment and Rehabilitation Centre (ZAMISE-ARC) staff, individuals from the University of Zambia (UNZA) and Baobab College also participated to the Literacy Fun Fair organised by Read Beyond Zambia by screening school children at the fair. More than 30 children aged between five to 14 years were screened for reading, spelling and writing difficulties. The assessors were using tests that involved timed reading, phonological awareness, non-word reading and timed spelling. Six children who showed low literacy levels and may therefore be at risk of later reading and writing difficulties were referred for more comprehensive neuropsychological assessment at the ZAMISE-ARC.



The Fair was officially opened by Lusaka District Commissioner (D.C) Mrs. Krista Kalulu. She also took a reading test with the assistance of the district spelling competition champion Veronica. The DC praised the staff from ZAMISE-ARC for establishing the Assessment and Rehabilitation Centre and encouraged the acting Head of the Learning Support Department Mr. R. Mando to approach her office for support. Mrs. Kalulu applauded ZAMISE for providing a valuable service to children with LDs and other cognitive impairments. She said Lusaka as a district needed this significant service as many

children, despite being able, were passing through, and, off- loaded from the school system without appropriate support.



## 21<sup>st</sup> ISSBD Biennial meeting in Lusaka, 18-22 July 2010

Text by Mrs Jacqueline Jere-Foloty

The 2010 meeting in Lusaka will feature an invited program, including 20 keynote and invited speakers and about 12-15 invited symposia. It is anticipated that the full program will also include about 80 submitted symposia, 10 poster workshops and 60 poster groups each including 10-12 posters. The conference will be preceded by two training workshops addressed to topics of emerging scientific interest and applied societal significance, Methodology and Analyses of Longitudinal Data, and Social Change and Human Development. A number of other satellite meetings are also being planned.

Keynote and invited speakers, as well as invited symposia are already in place. The call for submission of abstracts for paper symposia, poster symposia and posters can be accessed on the conference website at [www.issbd2010.com](http://www.issbd2010.com), and is currently open until October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009 though the deadline is likely to be extended.

The planning of the congress has been guided by three complementary bodies: the International Scientific Program Committee (ISPC), the African Research Advisory Panel (ARAP), and

The invited programme seeks to respond to the following complementary agendas:

- manifestation and promotion of the scientific study of behavioural
- promotion of inter-disciplinary understanding and cross-fertilisation of ideas
- articulating the interface between science and policy
- enhancing international communication and cooperation
- strategic action to mitigate the HIV and AIDS pandemic
- giving voice to cultural traditions that have been marginalised
- empowerment of women
- acknowledging the significance of linguistic diversity

After extensive consultation, invitations were extended to (and have since been accepted by) a multinational slate of distinguished scholars (half women and half men) based in twelve different countries (Australia, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, China, India, Japan, Netherlands, South Africa, Switzerland, UK and USA) on six continents, to give **invited addresses** to the congress. Topics covered by these addresses include: an Africentric perspective; ageing, social relations and health; cognitive development in chimpanzees; cultural differences in cognitive styles; cyberbullying; development of verbal deception; gendered analyses of youth development; HIV, AIDS and behavioural change; individual differences in developmental plasticity; intervention with vulnerable children and youth in Latin America; learning to read Chinese; main-stream values among Chinese adolescents; multilingual socialization; neurocognitive development of decision-making; personal storytelling; risk,

protection, and well-being among children on the streets; self-regulation; theory of mind; a unified theory of development; and using research to improve child and youth well-being.

In addition, twelve pairs of scholars have so far agreed to co-convene **invited symposia**. In each case the two are based in different countries, and together they bring together twelve countries (Brazil, Canada, Finland, Germany, Israel, Kenya, Mexico, Netherlands, Peru, UK, USA and Zambia) on five continents, a scope that is further expanding as they complete the process of inviting other participants to their symposia. Details of these invited symposia have recently been posted as a downloadable attachment linked to the **INVITED PROGRAMME** page of the congress website.

The Professional Conference Organising firm, **Image Promotions** is managing the congress website for the congress, including an on-line submission facility. The Early decision phase of the Open Call for Proposals attracted proposals on a wide range of topics from scholars based in 23 different countries. These are currently under review by the Proposal Review Panel (whose membership is also posted on the website) and decisions will be communicated before the end of November.

Meanwhile **the invitation is currently still open until 31<sup>st</sup> October** (note the deadline will be revised) for anyone to submit a proposal on-line for a poster, a symposium, or a poster workshop. Details on how to do so are posted on the **PROPOSAL GUIDELINES/ABSTRACT SUBMISSION** page of the website.

#### **Social and recreational aspects of the congress**

The Local Organising Committee has also been giving a lot of thought to ways of making the experience of all participants both intellectually enriching and socially agreeable. We plan to entertain you, both at the opening ceremony and at the gala dinner, with an exciting display of African music and dance. We also hope that many of you will take this opportunity to explore more of Zambia than just the inside of the Conference Centre, and the city of Lusaka, by venturing out for a holiday trip to some of the many scenic wonders of the Zambian countryside or indeed in other African countries. Some details of these tourism attractions are already posted on the congress website, and our PCO partners, Image Promotions ([leeanne@image.co.zm](mailto:leeanne@image.co.zm)), will be pleased to respond to any questions you may have about travel logistics, advance bookings, etc. A special **"Young Scholars" group**, led by Dr

Zena Mello ([zmello@uccs.edu](mailto:zmello@uccs.edu)), is committed to creating opportunities for exchange of ideas among scholars at an early stage of their research careers. We hope that many of you will engage with her (either via email or on the Facebook "Wall" opened for the ISSBD) in brainstorming ways of ensuring that your voices are heard and your distinctive expectations are met.

If you haven't already done so, please write the week of 18-22 July 2010 into your diary, calendar or planner. The weather will be dry and sunny, but quite cool at night. The venue for the congress, the **Mulungushi International Conference Centre** is a modern, state of the art building situated within a small park on the edge of the city, in which a small herd of Lechwe antelopes roam freely. Right across the road is a modern shopping centre with a range of restaurants and two new hotels. We look forward to seeing many of you next year in Lusaka!



For further information, please contact Mrs Jacqueline Jere-Folotya ([jacqueline.folotiya@unza.zm](mailto:jacqueline.folotiya@unza.zm))

### **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 next issue.

The next topic is research on learning difficulties. Those interested in submitting articles on their research, comments, pictures or any other information to the next issue, please email to: Emma ([emma.ojanen@nmi.fi](mailto:emma.ojanen@nmi.fi)) or Pia ([piakrimark@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:piakrimark@yahoo.co.uk)) by **MARCH 2010**.



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