

Learning and Learning Difficulties in Africa

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SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- New center opened at UNZA
- The Role of Teacher in Mobile Learning in Kenya
- A Message from Ethiopia
- Profile: Juha-Matti Latvala, new Director of Niilo Mäki Institute, Finland

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The Center for the Promotion of Literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa (CAPOLSA) opens at University of Zambia

by Ms Mwanza Nakawala (MSc.), University of Zambia

The Centre for the Promotion of Literacy in sub-Saharan Africa (CAPOLSA) was launched on 18 October 2011 at the University of Zambia. It was a ceremonious event attended by a range of experts in the area of reading and other interested parties from various countries. The Center was officially launched by the University of Zambia Vice Chancellor Professor Stephen Simukan-ga. The official launch was followed by open Inaugural Symposium on future agenda for CAPOLSA and later Invitational Symposium on research design and operational issues for evaluation of the effectiveness of the Graphogame as an instructional resource in African public school settings and Advanced course in research design and statistical analysis

The Centre for the Promotion of Literacy was created in collaboration between two partner universities: the University of Jyväskylä, Finland and the University of Zambia

with the financial assistance from The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. The Center, which is located at the Psychology Department, School of Humanities & Social Sciences, is governed by a board which consists of the senior members of the two institutions. Capolsa works closely with an interdisciplinary team of professors and lecturers aiming at promoting literacy and capacity building.



Prof Robert Serpell (PhD), UNZA, Coordinator of Capolsa

The aims of CAPOLSA

1. promotion of support for children's acquisition of literacy in Zambian languages among parents, families and pre-school teachers

2. provision of technical support in curriculum and

instruction to the various training institutions mandated to prepare teachers for initial literacy instruction in the nation's lower primary school grades,

3. creation, collation and dissemination of child-friendly reading materials in the Zambian languages used as media for initial literacy instruction,

4. development of guidelines for the harmonisation of orthographies across the different Bantu languages as used in the various countries of sub-Saharan Africa,

5. specialised, advanced education of a critical mass of expertise at UNZA for the conduct of such research.

CAPOLSA has been supporting (i) Grapho Learning Initiative Project (Finland) in their Kalulu story writing competition (ii) and Reading support for Zambian Children (RESUZ) research project.

The Kalulu story writing competition was organised by Grapho Learning Initiative in June-August 2011 in Zambia. The Initiative invited creative Zambian writers to submit their stories and poems suitable for children aged 6-9 years in local languages (7).

The competition received over 700 entries from all over Zambia in all languages. A total of 13 prizes were awarded to the authors according to the deliberations of the panel of expert jury at the award ceremony which took



on the grounds of Kaunda Square Basic School in Lusaka.

RESUZ is a study designed to document the process of initial literacy acquisition among the first graders at Government schools in Lusaka. The 3 year research project (2010-2012) grant was awarded to Professor Heikki Lyytinen of University of Jyväskylä by the Academy of Finland.

A pupil reading one of the winning stories at the ceremony.

Photography: Timeslice Media

The Research focuses on three goals: 1) to explore the connections or language and reading acquisition in detail, 2) to examine the efficiency on computer/cell phone based phonics (Graphogame) training on improving literacy skills on the first grade pupils and 3) learn how to train teachers to use phonics in Zambian language literacy teaching as an addition to current curriculum.

For further information on CAPOLSA, please contact Ms Mwanza Nakawala, +260 (0) 211 290 850 or email to lukundonaks@gmail.com

The Role of Teacher in Mobile Learning in Kenya

by Carol Suzanne Adhiambo Otieno, University of Jyväskylä/NMI

Graphogame Kiswahili and Kikuyu (both are Bantu languages) adaptations have been developed and are being piloted for use in Kenya. The research involves pupils of class I in one rural and one urban area. In addition to this a questionnaire has been distributed to more than 200 teachers of class I in Nairobi and Central provinces. Of central importance is the role that the teacher plays in the classroom especially in East and Sub-Saharan Africa where there is inadequate reading material, parent illiteracy is

high and overcrowded classrooms the norm. The main question the researcher(s) is asking is what the role of the teacher is when mobile learning tools are to be incorporated into the school system to ease the learning difficulties and problems.

In Kenya the current policy implemented by the Ministry of Education through the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) is that early reading should be taught in the local language most commonly spoken in the school catchment.

While this policy is a step in the right direction theoretically, practically it brings with it many implications. The first and major one being that most of the teachers currently in employment in the schools have received training to teach early reading in English only and majority of them based on interviews and questionnaires were not taught reading in the vernacular (native) language. They were taught reading in English. It is therefore not surprising that many of them are using English letter names and methodologies to teach

early reading in the local languages and therefore evidently confusing the children and leading to reading problems. Given the fact that this is a problem for the average to below average pupil one can only imagine how detrimental it is to the poor or delayed reader and worse to the learner with a reading disability.

The above factors show that teachers are central to either building or destroying the capacity of the early readers and shows that it is important that they are first to receive training using the developed mobile phone literate

Environments so that they can in turn disseminate the correct information to their pupils. In providing this kind of training the teachers will also embrace the mobile learning technologies as teacher assisting tools rather than gadgets that are threatening to declare them and their profession redundant in schools (as this is currently the way in which many teachers view new technologies especially in the rural areas).

The author recommends that various materials be tailored to suit the diverse learning environments in the rural and

urban areas and the information be distributed freely through the Ministry of Education and the Kenya Institute of Education to the Primary schools. All stakeholders must work together if the Millennium development goal of achieving universal primary education is to be met in the near future.

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A Message from Ethiopia — The Experiences of Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus by Selamawit Sagni (EECMY-DASSC Disability Project)

In spite of Ethiopia making huge strides in improving the number of children enrolling into school 68% (2005) to 90% (2011) with near gender equality, there remains huge challenges with regards to disabled children's access to education. UNESCO estimated in 2010 that less than 5% had access to school. Haile and Bogalem, when researching disability provision in Ethiopia in 2007, noted that of all disabled groups, children with learning or intellectual disabilities were least likely to be supported to get an education. Furthermore

they also highlighted another key problem that much of the work that is being done to develop education for learners with learning disabilities is in the form of NGO-funded or pilot programmes which do not necessarily continue after the initial support period, and are not often scaled up.

Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus started such a pilot programme in 2009 in the town of Nekemte in Western Ethiopia by establishing a special unit for children with intellectual

disabilities primarily with Down's syndrome) who were not accessing a government special unit. The main challenges they faced were:

- Lack of training for teachers and teaching materials for children with learning disabilities in Ethiopia
- Empowering the parents to send their children to the centre
- Lack of assessment materials to do initial assessment of children with learning disabilities

It has been a steep learning process and there are still many challenges but we have

"...much of the work that is being done to develop education for learners with learning disabilities is in the form of NGO-funded or pilot programmes..."

"We have worked alongside the special unit in a local government school sharing resources and doing joint activities and trainings."

learnt a lot in the last two or three years which we hope others can benefit from.

1) Setting up a strong parents group. We have worked with Ol Adema the Ethiopian Association for Intellectually Disabled and Youth to set up a parents group which now has nearly 30 members. The parents group successfully went to the local government and obtained with the deaf association 3 little shops - 2 of which they now rent out to give them a small monthly income to support. The next stage is to help those who live in poverty and struggling to send their children to school access microfinance.

2) Take every learning opportunity. We are lucky to have an Irish VSO volunteer with some special needs experience in our town. She has been working with us to develop an improved curriculum which includes basic literacy, numeracy, gross and fine motor skill development, life skills and vocational skills.

3) Share your experiences. In 2012 I visited Uganda on a trip sponsored by the UK NGO SEDFA (www.sedfa.co.uk) to learn what was going on with similar projects there and also support a local Ugandan NGO wanting to set up a Community Based Rehabilitation Project. I learnt a lot of which I plan to implement in

Ethiopia. It was empowering to see so much great work done by a small East African Project. We have now linked with one (CLDC Uganda) and are in a process of initiating a joint project focussing on developing initial assessment materials.

4) Use of local resources. You do not need Western resources. We have managed to develop many of our own. In our centre we have made mini blackboards to help children develop prewriting skills; we have number lines made from bottles and many others. Likewise the community can be a resource. In 2011 for International Disability Day we raised funds amongst the local businesses in Nekemte and raised \$1000 for vocational training and follow up microfinance.

5) Ensure you work alongside the local government. One of the unintentional side effects of many NGO disability projects is that they can disempower the local government in what small provision they may be providing. Therefore we have worked alongside the special unit in a local government school sharing resources and doing joint activities and trainings. Likewise when it came to developing vocational skills, we ensured our children have access to a government basic skills centre rather than try and set up something ourselves.

The final message is that a change is possible. When we started, 6 children with intellectual disabilities were accessing education. Now we have 13 children in the government school special unit and up to 18 children attending our centre. This year we met with the Western Wollega Zonal Education Office who is responsible for an area of 1.1 million people. He turned to us and said that to achieve Universal Primary Education Ethiopia needed to get children with intellectual disabilities into schools. He offered a classroom and a teacher in a government school in all the major towns if we could train his teachers and show how to locally resource the centre and support in setting up parents groups. For us that is great, the project has potential to scale up with the financial support from the government.

We are still learning and have a long way to go but there is an African proverb "Stick by Stick we make a bundle" and slowly our bundle of improved education provision for intellectually disabled children is growing.

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News is Pictures



GraphoWORLD Summer School

The meeting brought together experts in the area of reading from all over the world in Jyväskylä, Finland in September 2011.

Photo: Dr Ulla Richardson



Niilo Mäki Institute organised a 2 day event—**A Good Start (Hyvä Alku)** in Jyväskylä on February 15-16. The event brought together several thousand pre- and primary school teachers, psychologists, and other professionals working with children and parents to learn about the early development support methods and learning environments, and share latest research findings and methods. Photos: Miika Pekkarinen



'N'gombe PTA School Dance Group performing at the Kalulu Story Writing competition Award Ceremony on the grounds of Kaunda Square Basic School, in Lusaka. In October 2011.

Photo: Timeslice Media

Profile: Juha-Matti Latvala (PhD), Director of Niilo Mäki Institute, Finland

1. For those who are less familiar with Niilo Mäki Institute (also known as NMI), what does the Institute do?

Niilo Mäki Institute is a multidisciplinary unit for research and development work in learning disabilities. The aim is to prevent problems in learning as soon as possible and to help children learn.

For example, we work with the themes of reading acquisition and reading disabilities, disabilities in writing skills, learning disabilities in mathematics, attention deficits, deficits in motory coordination, as well as estimation of learning disabilities and remediation. We also have research, training and development projects in Africa (Zambia, Kenya, Tanzania and Namibia).

2. What does the director do? What includes to your normal day?

I work as an operational leader of Niilo Mäki Institute. I have responsibility for the economics, personnel and general administration. There are currently 16 projects and almost 50 people working for Niilo Mäki Institute, so there is lots of work to do.

3. How has the first 6 months been in the new job?

The time has gone very fast. I have to say that no two working days are the same. I have learned a lot, and I have started to realize some of my visions for the future. I am happy that we have such an excellent and professional staff working with me.

4. What are the current issues in the area of learning?

One big issue is marginalization and school dropouts. On society level, there has been a lot of discussion on how to prevent marginalization and to motivate youth to stay in school. We have got good project ideas, and I hope we manage to get funding for them. I presume that researching disabilities in reading and mathematics will continue and also new methods of assessment and training will be published. The current theme is also how technology could help children learn. Graphogame learning game has raised lots of interest worldwide and I am sure it will be an even bigger thing than we can even imagine.

5. What would you like to see to be changed in the field of learning difficulties?

I would like to see that we could help every child in need of support for their learning as early as possible. One essential thing is to train teachers to recognize learning difficulties and to provide them with material and methods to support the learning process.

6. How do you see Niilo Mäki Institute to be in 5 years time?

Niilo Mäki Institute will continue to be one of the leading Finnish research and development centers in the area of learning difficulties. I am sure that we have many new research and development projects. I also hope that we will be an even more satisfying and encouraging place to work.

7. Can you tell us something about yourself? Who is Juha-Matti Latvala?

I am 36 years old and I have studied at Jyväskylä University majoring in Educational Sciences (primary school teacher) and minoring in Mathematics, Information Technology and Technology Education. I finished my doctoral studies at the Department of Psychology concentrating on technology enhanced collaboration between home and school. My family includes my wife and two children. In my free time I enjoy playing computer and other games, floorball (like hockey indoors) and reading. I recommend everybody to read *The Egyptian* by a Finnish novelist Mika Waltari.

I wish you all Newsletter readers an inspiring year!



Dr Juha-Matti Latvala started as a new director of Niilo Mäki Institute, Finland in November 2011.

Risk for Dyslexia as a Challenge of Learning: Phonological Intervention and Learning to Read by *Ritva Ketonen (PhD), University of Jyväskylä, Finland (2011)*

Abstract

The study followed the development of six children participating in the Jyväskylä Longitudinal Study of Dyslexia (JLD) from pre-school to the 7th grade. These children were at clear risk of dyslexia: they had familial risk and weak letter knowledge at preschool. Four of the children participated in an individual intervention to train phonological skills and letter-sound correspondence in their pre-school year, two of them partly during the 1st grade. The training lasted 20 weeks, one hour per week. In addition, the children had homework. The training sessions were similar to normal clinical practice sessions with a psychologist or speech therapist. The progress in the children's phonological awareness and reading and writing skills was monitored during the intervention and the 1st grade.

The second focus of attention was how the children's linguistic skills prior to the intervention were reflected in their later reading and writing skills. Thirdly, the progress of the children's literacy skills was compared: a) to children who had been divided into JLD risk and control

groups on the basis of letter naming at pre-school, b) to other JLD risk children, who were divided into two groups based on whether or not the risk of dyslexia was realised, and c) in reading skills, to the JLD children's 7th grade classmates.

The results showed that a six-month intervention fostered the risk children's letter and sound awareness, but did not sufficiently enhance actual reading and writing skills. In grades 1–3, all of the intervention group children had reading and writing difficulties resulting from different factors: some had a background of broader linguistic delay, some had delay mainly in phonology and letter knowledge, and one had difficulties in rapid naming. Spelling problems were the most common. In the 7th grade classmate comparison, children who were challenging ("treatment resistant") in terms of reading acquisition were examined. Five of the six children fit into the weakest 10% either in reading accuracy or speed.

Reading and writing difficulties were thus shown to be very stable. In conclusion, children with clear dyslexia risk benefit from

direct, intensive and motivating literacy skills intervention, in which their development is closely monitored, at pre-school or even earlier. If this is not sufficient, stepwise intensified training is recommended at school age, in the spirit of the soon-to-be amended Basic Education Act. Part of the children benefit from phonological exercises even at school age, side by side with actual literacy teaching.

Keywords: dyslexia, familial risk, phonological awareness, intervention, treatment resistant, reading acquisition, spelling

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Niilo Mäki Instituutti
Niilo Mäki Institute

Newsletter details

The Newsletter is a publication of Niilo Mäki Institute, Finland . The aim is to provide a forum to network and exchange knowledge and latest research in the field of learning difficulties.

Niilo Mäki Institute has been working in Africa over 20 years, providing neuropsychology training for education professionals in the continent. The Newsletter links partners and colleagues from previous and present NMI Africa projects.

We are always looking for contributions, articles and comments for next issue. Those interested in contributing to the next issue, please contact: Pia ([pia.krimark\(at\)nmi.fi](mailto:pia.krimark@nmi.fi)).

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