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Stories and resources: Findings from a collaborative action research project in

South Central Uganda

[Sub-theme: Research on literature for children and young adults]

Speakers

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Abstract

This presentation will report on a collaborative action research study conducted at a Madrasa pre-primary community school in South Central Uganda, led by Safina Mutumba and supervised by Shelley Jones, which explored the pedagogical possibilities and learning opportunities though MT resource development and story-based instruction. Safina, the primary investigator worked collaboratively with two teachers/co-researchers of the pre-primary school to create texts, activities, implement lessons, and conduct reflective sessions after the lessons to improve the content, materials and pedagogical approaches. The findings revealed that MT stories could be used effectively across the pre-primary school curricula to support a wide range of early literacy learning that directly addressed prescribed learning objectives and outcomes. The children demonstrated a high level of comfort and willingness to engage in their learning with MT stories and other resources, and MT-based instruction. In addition, the findings provided insights about professional development opportunities for teachers in the areas of MT-based instruction and resources development, and recommendations are made based on these.

Professional Profiles of Presenters

Safina Mutumba

Safina Mutumba is Senior Education Officer in charge of Pre-primary Education at the Ministry of Education and Sports in Uganda. Safina coordinates national activities concerning Early Childhood Care and Education, provides technical advice, support and guidance to Education Managers on matters pertaining effective management of pre-primary schools, and monitors and evaluates the implementation of plans and programs for the development and promotion of pre-

primary education. Safina has an extensive teaching and research experience at different levels including pre-primary, primary, and professional development for teachers across Uganda in all learning areas in the early year's context. Amongst the short course to teachers include, scientific reasoning for the early years, promoting gender responsive pedagogy, the use of MT stories in promoting early literacy, parental and community engagement in early years education, and material development for the early years through the use of the local environment and Mother Tongue languages. She has made several presentations on radio and television to create awareness on the significance of ECD/ECCE for the well-being of children. Before joining the Ministry of Education and Sports, Safina held the position of head teacher at Kireka UMEA Primary School, a government school in the central region of Uganda. Safina earned her Master's Degree in Education through Aga Khan University – Institute for Education Development, East Africa (Tanzania).

Shelley Jones

Dr. Shelley Jones is Associate Professor in the College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences at Royal Roads University where she is Program Head of Year One. Shelley has extensive teaching and research experience at all levels (pre-primary to tertiary) in diverse international contexts (Tanzania, Uganda, Canada, England, and Japan) in the areas of gender and education, girls and women's empowerment, literacy, educational research, and global education. Her publications include articles and book chapters on girls' and women's literacy and empowerment, digital literacy, sexual health, multimodality, children's engagement with writing, and global education. Prior to joining Royal Roads University, Shelley held the

position of Assistant Professor at the Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development, East Africa (Tanzania), and at the State University of New York, College at Potsdam. Shelley earned her PhD through the Department of Language and Literacy at the University of British Columbia.

Introduction

Stories captivate children, and open their minds and imaginations to process, celebrate, query, and challenge the complexities of life. Stories also engage children in developing important communication and literacy competencies: they acquire vocabulary, learn the syntactical and grammatical structures, learn to experiment and play with language, and develop their own unique voices through the re-telling of stories and the creation of their own stories (Wells, 2009). Stories that represent familiar environments, characters, and situations support children's sense of identity and belonging in the world (Campbell, 2009; Luongo-Orlando, 2010; Ngeng, Azoo, Tabe-Tambe and Hotou, 2011; Whitehead, 2004; Wray, 2004). As such, stories lay a strong foundation for reading, writing, and comprehending new information, knowledge, and experiences (Whitehead, 2004), *but only if the stories are written in a language the children know and understand*.

It is widely acknowledge that MT instruction, especially in the early school years, is essential to ensuring that children have the best possible opportunity to succeed academically and therefore increase their abilities for promising futures (Alidou & Brock-Utne, 2011; Alidou, Boly, Brock-Utne, Diallo, Heugh, K. Wolff, H.E, 2006; Benson, 2004; Brock-Utne, 2014; Cummins, 2000; GCE, 2013; Heugh, Benson, Bogale & Yohannes, 2007; Milligan & Tikly,

2016; Norton, 2014; Ouame & Glanz, 2005, 2010, 2011; Pinnock, 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2002; Tembe, 2008; UNESCO, 1953, 2003, 2010, 2016). However, millions of children in the world, including many children in Uganda, begin school where the Language of Instruction (LOI) is one that they do not know or understand, and the resources are not linguistically accessible to them (Brocke-Utne, 2014; Global Campaign for Education (GCE), 2010; UNESCO, 2010, 2016). Despite policies such as Uganda's Early Childhood Development Policy (NCDC, 2007) that mandate MT-based instruction for early primary year (in Uganda, until Primary 4, when English becomes the LOI), the implementation of these policies is problematic: there are typically few MT resources (Alidou et al, 2005; Benson, 2004; GCE, 2013; Hardman, Ackers, Abrishamian & O'Sullivan, 2011; Stranger-Johannessen & Norton, 2017; Tember, 2006; UNESCO, 2003, 2016), and inadequate teacher training in MT-based instruction (Alidou et al, 2005; Akello et al, 2015; Benson, 2004; GCE, 2013; Hardman, Ackers, Abrishamian & O'Sullivan, 2011; Tember, 2006; UNESCO, 2016). This paper discusses a collaborative action research project, conducted at a pre-primary school in South Central Uganda, which explores the pedagogical possibilities and learning opportunities though MT resource development and story-based instruction.

The study

This study, led by Safina Mutumba and supervised by Shelley Jones, included 57 pre-primary school children, and the headteacher, Ms. Namakula[1], and classroom teacher, Ms. Nansubuga, who participated as co-researchers. The school integrated two curricula - the Learning Framework for Early Childhood Development (3-6 Years of Age) (Ugandan National Curriculum Development Centre, 2005) and the Madrasa Resource Centre (MRC) Pre-primary

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[1] Psuedonyms are used to ensure anonymity of participants in the study

Curriculum (MRC, 2009) - to provide learners with a foundational pre-school educational experience in which Islamist teachings and culture are emphasized within the learning of the standard national curriculum. The MT in this area of Uganda is Luganda[2]. Based on the themes "Exploring and knowing my immediate environment" from The Learning Framework (2005; p.18, section 2i), and "God's creation" from the Madrasa Resource Centre Uganda Curriculum (2009, p.57 – 60), Safina and her co-researchers collaboratively developed four Luganda storybooks, a variety of support materials and lesson plans, and also implemented and reflected upon the lessons to gauge the effectiveness of the content and pedagogical approaches, and the children's learning experiences.

The four stories - *Amaka ga Ismail [Mr. Ismail's Home], Enimiro ya mwami Ismail* [*Mr. Ismail's Garden*], *Eddundiro Lya Mukyala Fatuma* [*Ms. Fatuma's Farm*], and *Okulambula Kwa Imran ne Hadijah Mutelekero lyebisolo* [*Imran and Hadijah's Trip to the Zoo*] featured people, homes, animals, plants and communities that reflected life in the local community and with which the children would be familiar. Safina and her co-researchers prepared accompanying resources (such as posters, flashcards, illustrations with words) and a variety of multimodal activities (songs, drama, discussions, writing, and walking tours outside the school) to support the children's learning. Five lessons were developed and implemented based on these stories.

The first lesson introduced the students to *Amaka ga Ismail [Mr. Ismail's Home],* which represented a home environment similar to the home environments of the local area and which were familiar to the children. The children engaged in class discussion, independent writing, and a walking tour around the school. The second lesson, emphasized plants within the local environment as depicted in *Enimiro ya mwami Ismail* [*Mr. Ismail's Garden*]. The children discussed plants they had in their gardens at home, and then independently drew pictures of

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[2] Throughout the discussion of this study, Luganda and MT will be used interchangeably

plants and wrote the plant names. Lesson three focused on phonemic awareness and emergent reading, using flash cards with syllables to make words that had been introduced in the two stories. The focus for the fourth lesson was domestic animals, in which the story *Eddundiro Lya Mukyala Fatuma* [*Ms. Fatuma's Farm*], was introduced. The children sang a familiar song about animals and discussed the domestic animals and the importance of these animals to their lives. The children created their own drawings of domestic animals and were encouraged to convey their knowledge about them through text. They also engaged in some drama, assuming the roles of different animals. Lesson five featured the story *Okulambula Kwa Imran ne Hadijah Mutelekero lyebisolo* [*Imran and Hadijah's Trip to the Zoo*], and explored the topic of wild animals. The children sang a familiar song about wild animals, participated in a read aloud of the story, and class discussion of wild animals in Uganda. They also drew pictures and wrote about wild animals during their independent work time.

Findings

The findings revealed that MT-based instruction was conducive to learning environment in which children enthusiastically engaged in a wide range of interactive activities such as retelling stories, role play, singing, responding to open-ended questions, as well as independent activities such as drawing and writing, that supported their MT literacy acquisition. The children felt free to contribute to learning activities in a language with which they were familiar, and make important text-to self/text/world connections that served bridge the between their home and school lives. All of this contributed to the construction of their identities as members of the classroom and members of their community.

Ms. Nansubuga and Ms. Namakula were both surprised and delighted with the children's learning during the five lessons. Prior to this study, they had used English stories for literacy instruction, but Ms. Namakula noticed that when the MT stories were used, the children "learn more" and the lessons are more "interesting". Ms. Namakula also noted that using MT as the LOI enabled all children to fully participate as they were not restricted by their linguistic proficiency in a foreign language (i.e., English).

Ms. Nansubuga further discussed the pedagogical opportunities that using MT story-based lessons offered. The children's familiarity and ease with Luganda naturally generated a more interactive and comfortable learning environment than one where English was the LOI. In this environment, Ms. Nasubuga felt more empowered to adopt a more child-centred pedagogical approach: "I did not know that one can teach without using a blackboard. It's today that I am learning that a teacher can teach when he/she has not used a blackboard." MT-based pedagogical approaches also promoted the children's sense of *belonging* and *contributing to* their learning community. The level of engagement of the children in the classroom when Luganda was the LOI was much higher than participation when English was the LOI. The children were eager to talk about their own homes, their gardens, the animals the family kept, and many of their personal experiences in relation to the four Luganda stories the researchers had created and used in the classroom. It was apparent that the children made connections between the classroom learning and their home learning.

The children also made direct connections between their classroom learning and their own identities. For example, when the class was discussing some of the animals in the story *Okulambula Kwa Imran ne Hadijah Mutelekero lyebisolo* [*Imran and Hadijah's Trip to the Zoo*], one child exclaimed, "Tikya nze nedira mpologoma" [Teacher for me I am of the lion clan].

Conclusion and recommendations

This study found that MT stories offered a wide range of pedagogical opportunities to engage children in meaningful and relevant learning that supported their literacy (and other subject area) development. MT story-based lessons encouraged children to share their knowledge and experiences in a language they knew and with which they were comfortable, and stories that featured familiar contexts in a familiar language motivated the children to become actively engaged in their own learning.

In addition, MT instruction offered the teachers opportunities to have more student-centred and interactive pedagogical experiences with the children. Ms. Nansubuga observed that using MT stories with support materials related activities promoted a welcoming, highly interactive, child-centred classroom environment, where she was not required to stand at the front of the class and write on a blackboard: "I did not know that one can teach without using a blackboard. It's today that I am learning that a teacher can teach when he/she has not used a blackboard."

The study clearly demonstrates that MT stories provide a wide range of multimodal pedagogical possibilities – such as retelling stories, role-playing, drawing, and singing – and facilitate MT-based instruction and classroom environments in which children feel empowered to interact freely with the teacher and their peers and, in the process, develop important literacy and social competencies. However, this study also points to the need for teachers to receive professional development that will support them in implementing for MT-based instruction, as well developing of MT resources where none may be readily available. Thus, recommendations resulting from this study are as follows:

- Teacher professional development in the area of MT-based instruction

- Access to MT stories (digital and/or hard copy) for teachers and children

- Support materials (e.g., posters, flashcards, picture cards)

- Teacher professional development in the area of creating MT stories and resources

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