Chapter 11

Studying the Effectiveness of the Storytelling/Story-Acting (STSA) Play Intervention on Ugandan Preschoolers’ Emergent Literacy, Oral Language, and Theory of Mind in Two Rural Ugandan Community Libraries

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the impact of two rural village libraries in Uganda on preschool children’s school readiness skills. Using two rural village libraries in Mpiji and Kabubbu as a backdrop, this study explored the effectiveness of a six-month play-based intervention known as the Storytelling/Story-Acting (STSA) activity. Children ages 3 to 5 at each library were randomly assigned to participate in either the STSA play intervention (n = 63) or a story-reading activity (n = 60) for one hour twice per week for six months. All children were administered school readiness skills measures before and after the six-month intervention. Caregivers were also administered an interview that assessed their educational level, quality of life, reading aloud to target child, social support, and total possessions. Children who participated in the STSA intervention had higher scores on the colors subtest of the emergent literacy measure than children who did not participate in this activity. Preschool children benefit from a story-reading activity with or without the STSA play intervention.

INTRODUCTION

Children in the developing world are at far greater risk for all sorts of emotional, psychological, and health challenges; at the same time, they have little access to therapy, clinical interventions, and other types of support services. There are precious few resources, so traditional approaches to play therapy that might include toys and other props are not available. The intervention presented in this study is a low-cost, play-based intervention that we believed could help to address some early learning and developmental challenges using the child’s natural inclination toward flexing his or her imagination and play muscles. The intervention also builds on the local practice of oral storytelling. We believe that play therapists, educators, and philanthropic foundations in the West need to be aware of these efforts to improve the socioemotional, educational, and financial well-being of sub-Saharan African preschool children. Perhaps this study will inspire others to implement play-based interventions in rural village libraries and schools in Uganda and other sub-Saharan African countries to produce a dramatic difference in the lives of these preschool children as well as their families and communities.

One of the legacies of colonialism on the African continent is the widespread illiteracy and entrenched poverty that interfere with its people’s full participation in the global economy. A historical snapshot illustrates the scope of the problem: as of March, 2014, 38% of all Africans were illiterate (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2014). Africa is also the poorest region in the world and the only major developing region with negative growth in income per capita during 1980 to 2000 (Sachs et al., 2004). In sub-Saharan Africa, the per capita gross domestic product is less than it was in 1974 (Artadi & Sala-i-Martin, 2003), and recently, the average per capita income declined from $608 to $556 (Lakner & Milanovic, 2015). The average life expectancy is 59 years (World Bank Sub-Saharan Africa Statistics, 2014), while the average child mortality rate (deaths before the age of 5 per 1,000 live births) is 92 (You, Hug, & Chen, 2014). Improvement in the literacy rate could provide the necessary conditions for an economic renaissance in Africa through mass dissemination of information that people could then use to produce goods and services in demand in other parts of Africa and overseas (Dent, 2007). The role of literacy in the functioning of the democratic process has also been noted (Kranich, 2001; Stilwell, 1989, 1991).

Uganda is a sub-Saharan landlocked country enduring the same struggles as its African neighbors. With a population of 37 million (World Bank Country Statistics, 2014), Uganda’s literacy rate is 86% for men (World Bank Literacy Indicators Male, 2014) and 62% for women (World Bank Literacy Indicators Female, 2014). The average life expectancy is 58 years (World Bank Country Statistics, 2014), and the scourge of AIDS orphaned more than 1 million children in the 1990s alone (World Bank, 2014). Eighty-eight percent of the population live in rural villages and earn an average daily wage of 77¢ (Dent, 2006, 2007). Having gained independence from Great Britain in 1962, Uganda is ranked 163rd out of 188 countries on the Human Development Index (Human Development Reports, 2014). Since coming to power in 1987, the current Ugandan government has attempted to redress illiteracy and its devastating effects by instituting the policies of universal primary education in 1997 and universal secondary education in 2007 (Parry, 2007, 2014). These policies seem to be bearing early fruit; the current literacy rate for young adults is approximately 10% higher than for older adults (UNESCO, 2007).