It’s Not All Bad: Researchers Find Educational TV Benefits Children's Early Learning in Rwanda

June 28, 2019 - Screen time is now almost synonymous with inactivity and intellectual decline.

But it’s not all bad. Educational media is an inexpensive way to help children develop early learning skills and better prepare for school according to a new study of the Akili and Me television program in Rwanda from University of Maryland School of Public Health researchers.

The study, published in the International Journal of Early Childhood this March, “expands on recent efforts to develop and evaluate educational media in sub-Saharan Africa.” The research focuses on adapting a successful Tanzanian early education animated program, Akili and Me, to a Rwandan audience. An international team conducted this study; Dr. Dina Borzekowski of the UMD was joined by Dr. Agnes Lando of Daystar University; Sara Olsen, a UMD doctoral student in behavioral and community health; Lauren Giffen of the University of Melbourne; and an in-country team of data collectors from the University of Rwanda.
With a sample of over 400 children ages six through eight, the researchers found that Rwandan children who watched the Kinyarwanda-language *Akili and Me* series had significantly improved scores for essential early learning skills like counting, number recognition, shape knowledge, letter identification, color identification, body part recognition, health knowledge and vocabulary than those who watched popular children's programs instead.

The researchers attribute part of the program's effectiveness to *Akili and Me*'s use of settings and characters already familiar to the children, "When children are familiar with and able to relate to the characters and settings of a show, they devote more attention to new content embedded in the stories such as numbers, letters and vocabulary," they add.

The series, produced by Ubongo, was not only reformatted using the majority language of Rwanda, Kinyarwanda, but adapted for Rwandan children.

"[I]t's critical for us to be close to our audience of African kids, and have a team of local creatives who deeply understand the cultural context," said *Akili and Me* Series Producer and Ubongo Co-founder and CEO Nisha Ligon. "By working closely with educators and creatives from Rwanda and across East Africa, we've been able not just to translate the content, but to make it relevant and engaging for kids in Rwanda."

Dr. Borzekowski, an expert on children's educational media, reiterates this point. "What's cool about *Akili and Me* is that it's produced in sub-Saharan Africa. In this study, we had the exciting opportunity to work with East African producers and researchers," she added.

Access to early childhood education can help children succeed later in life and children who lack such resources are disadvantaged. In Rwanda, many children face additional challenges because of the country's troubled history and high adult mortality rates. So local and culturally relevant educational programs like *Akili and Me* are cost-effective solutions to bridging the learning gap faced by children in Rwanda and other low-income and middle-income countries.

Since this study, *Akili and Me* has expanded into seven countries in languages including English, French, Kiswahili, Kinyarwanda, Kikuyu and Luo. The research team is conducting additional studies to explore expanding Akili and Me's reach.

"This research is part of a larger set of ongoing studies on *Akili and Me*, says Dr. Borzekowski. "We have four new studies happening. Three are in Tanzania, where we're examining new content on socio-emotional development and health, parental and co-viewing and radio adaptations. We also have a study in Nigeria exploring a Hausa-language adaptation of the show."

To support Dr. Borzekowski's ongoing research, five Behavioral and Community Health undergraduate students from the UMD School of Public Health will intern with Ubongo in Dar es Salaam and Arusha this fall.
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