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# CONTEXT MATTERS

## Sustainable literacy development by Africans for Africans

By **Katie Bryant & Lynn O'Rourke**

“The grant program has enabled me to better understand the context of adolescent girls in Uganda to carry forward in my future education projects, and I feel that I am part of a bigger CODE network—something I appreciate.”

— Researcher John Mitanna, Uganda

Where you live, how you experience the world, the languages you hear and speak, and the day-to-day challenges and opportunities you encounter all influence how and what you learn. To be able to read this magazine, most of you would have acquired the basic literacy skills at an early age from a qualified teacher. This is true no matter where you live.

Globally, a tremendous amount of work has gone into programs for developing reading, writing, comprehension, and critical thinking skills for children. However, in sub-Saharan African countries, many children lack access to quality early literacy education—even more so for girls and vulnerable populations.



A teacher in a Class 2 classroom, Sierra Leone. Photo by Peter Bregg/CODE



Professor Colomba K. Muriungi, second from right, standing, and researcher Andima George, back row, along with patrons and student representatives from secondary schools in Kenya in 2020 where the CODE research on girls' access to education was carried out. Photo courtesy of Colomba Muriungi

Without foundational learning (i.e., basic literacy and numeracy skills), young people are limited in their social and economic life choices.

Many organizations, institutions, and governments are working tirelessly to contribute solutions to support African countries' ministries of education in their curriculum development and teacher education programs. Yet often the approaches are based on evidence collected in non-African contexts, by researchers outside of sub-Saharan Africa, or they represent outside interests. As a result, the solutions can fail to address the importance of local needs and capacity building, as well as the social concerns, environmental contexts, language, or ways of knowing the world of the specific African country.

### Empowering researchers

CODE, a Canadian-based literacy and education development organization, has been working with education partners and practitioners from around the world to improve the quality of teacher education and access to culturally relevant learning materials for over 60 years. In an endeavor to address the need for local research and to build research and development

capacity in sub-Saharan Africa, CODE launched the Context Matters Research Grant Program in 2017. CODE also works with the International Literacy Association's International Development in Africa Committee to support programs in Africa for Africans by Africans, and to strengthen the reach and impact of this grant program.

Now in its fifth year, and its second year in partnership with ILA, Context Matters has issued grants to sub-Saharan African researchers conducting contextual, exploratory studies in the areas of literacy development, teacher education, and girl's empowerment. The dedicated and thoughtful researchers whom this grant program supports are designing and leading research projects that provide valuable insights into both practical and theoretical issues affecting education in sub-Saharan Africa.

As Professor Colomba K. Muriungi from Chuka University, Kenya, and Professor Hellen Inyega from University of Nairobi, Kenya, explain in the quotes that follow, this funding has allowed research teams, who might not otherwise have had the opportunity, to work in collaboration with communities, colleagues, education institutions, and practitioners. By mobilizing local expertise, they have been able to engage with local, context-

specific educational challenges and potential solutions.

- “The Context Matters research grant enabled us (the lead and the coresearcher) to carry out cross-institutional and collaborative research to leverage our individual professional strengths. I believe this is a core ingredient of academic scholarship. Scholars in developing countries also face enormous financial challenges, mainly in carrying out research activities, because universities have limited funds to support research activities. From this view, the Context Matters grant contributed immensely by enabling the grantees to carry out research involving girls living in vulnerable contexts. This was specifically significant because the semi-arid rural setting in Tharaka Nithi County in Eastern Kenya has always received limited research attention because it is so geographically remote.” —Muriungi
- “Context Matters grants bring to the foreground research that would otherwise remain on the periphery. The program provided ample opportunities to

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refine and focus the project with support from reviewers with plenty of latitude to determine my own research design and data collection methods. It also provided the opportunity for professional growth and to now mentor others.” —Inyega

## Tapping into community contexts

Many of the Context Matters-funded studies have involved researchers working directly with education practitioners to explore solutions that can be used by teacher educators, pre- and in-service teachers, parents, and communities.

An example of this collaboration is described below by researcher Daniel Fussy from Mkwawa University College of Education, Iringa, Tanzania:

- “Our study found a gap in the capacity of parents and teachers to facilitate or promote literacy practices among girls. Most of the literacy practices used were print-based and non-traditional literacy materials. For example, except for storytelling, drama, and songs, the in- and out-of-school girls never reported engaging with traditional literacy materials like poems, folklore, music, dance, or rituals. These are rich resources for developing literacy skills among

girls and a path toward their empowerment. Based on these results, the team plans for an action-based, capacity-building project to empower parents and teachers in Choma village on skills and approaches to develop literacy practices in and out of school.” —Fussy

The grants also support research that takes a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, which are suited to each context—particularly those trying to amplify the voices of their participants. One unique approach is described by Fussy:

- “...the project presented an opportunity to test the relevance and efficacy of the Indigenous Standpoint Theory (IST), which insists on culturally respectful and safe research with Indigenous people. IST is a new approach in Tanzania, though this approach is widely used in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.” —Fussy

## Advancing education for all

The creative and resourceful researchers are examining an array of issues that range from gender representation in textbooks to communities’ perceptions of literacy education for girls. Despite the variety, what ties these studies together are the efforts to reduce barriers to quality education for girls, and to present locally and contextually specific

recommendations to improve education policy and practice in each country, as illustrated in the following quote:

- “Literacy, girls’ empowerment, and education have been chanted by higher officials and some NGOs. Smart declarations have also been endorsed. Smart strategies were developed. However, the study indicated that there are still concerned bodies (material writers, publishers, practitioners, and educators) that need to be pushed forward regarding these issues.”  
—Assistant Professor Yewulwese Mehari, Debre Markos University, Ethiopia

Foundational literacy is the key to improving learning writ large in any context, and context does matter, especially as we endeavor to support researchers in sub-Saharan Africa to investigate literacy program development that meets local needs, supports local expertise, and engages with local participants in ethical and respectful ways.

The barriers to literacy in fragile circumstances, including refugee, internally displaced peoples (IDP), and the most vulnerable populations, are many and varied. In the coming years, CODE is looking forward to providing researchers with grants to explore these topics, build strong networks, and contribute to the global movement to support education in Africa. ■

*CODE (formerly the Canadian Organization for Development Through Education) has been championing children’s literacy as a foundational building block of quality education for over 60 years. Our partnership with the International Literacy Association was formalized in 2020. To learn more or to donate to Context Matters, please visit [code.ngo](http://code.ngo) or email [info@code.ngo](mailto:info@code.ngo).*

## Apply for a Context Matters Grant

The deadline to apply for the next round of Context Matters grants is **August 1, 2022**.

Visit [code.ngo](http://code.ngo) for more information, including eligible countries and areas of inquiry.

You can also read the research descriptions and the final research papers of previous grant recipients.

For more information, email [contextmatters@code.ngo](mailto:contextmatters@code.ngo).