# SOMETHING NEW OUT OF AFRICA: THE AFRICAN STORYBOOK INITIATIVE AS A CATALYST FOR CURRICULUM MAKING

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## Abstract

The vision of the African Storybook (ASb) initiative is for every African child to have access to stories in a language they know well so that they can practice their reading skills and learn to love reading. Under the leadership of the South African Institute of Distance Education (Saide), open access digital texts for early reading have been sourced from and translated into many of Africa's local and regional languages and uploaded onto a comprehensive website which also has tools for story creation and translation. Users of the website are able to create new stories or to translate existing stories into local languages and thus to contribute to the growing numbers of stories available to teachers, parents and librarians. While the on-going development of the African Storybook website (www.africanstorybook.org) is the major innovation, the focus of this short paper is on innovative use of the resources of the ASb as a catalyst for the professional development of teacher-researchers through engagement in action research projects, one located in a teacher education programme in South Africa and the other in two primary schools in Uganda. Findings from a thematic analysis of data from each project (teaching materials, translated stories, transcribed interviews and researcher field notes), are drawn on to argue that access to a website which has both a bank of stories in local languages and tools for the translation, adaptation and creation of openly licensed stories, together with access to external consultants to support the research process, has enabled teacher-researchers to shift their professional identities from curriculum takers to curriculum makers.

*Keywords:* African Storybook initiative, open access digital texts, curriculum making, teacher professional identity shifts.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa many children are not learning to read competently in the first three years of primary school and thus both 'reading to learn' and 'reading for pleasure' in these early years, and in higher grades, are constrained (Howie et al, 2008; Pretorius, 2014; Barrett, 2015). One of the many reasons for reading failure is the absence of suitable materials in languages with which learners are familiar. Another is teachers' limited knowledge of pedagogic practices that support reading development. The African Storybook (ASb) initiative's main aim is to provide interesting and accessible reading material for young learners but its work in Kenya, Uganda, Lesotho and South Africa also includes teacher professional development. Both aspects of ASb have been the subject of qualitative and quantitative research and evaluation since the inception of the initiative in 2013 (e.g. Welch, Tembe, Wepukhulu, Baker & Norton, 2014; Janks & Harley, 2015; Jiyana & Ndlovu, 2015; Tembe & Reed, 2016; Treffry-Goatley, 2015). This paper begins with a brief description of key features of action research and of the African Storybook initiative after which two action research projects, in which ASb materials have been the catalyst for the research, are outlined. The first is located in a university teacher education programme in South Africa and the second in two primary schools in Uganda. For each project the 'problem' to which the research is a response is outlined and the collaboratively undertaken research process is described. My role in each project is that of research advisor and in this capacity I have been involved in both the design of the research and the analysis of the data collected. I use some of the findings from the first cycle of the on-going research in each project to argue that ASb materials and the affordances of the website for story-making have enabled teacher educators and pre-service and in-service teachers to become 'curriculum makers' and not just 'curriculum takers' (Janks & Harley, 2015).

## 2. Characteristics of action research

The notion of positive change or improvement, particularly in relation to the achievement of social justice, is central to definitions of action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) as is the notion of participation / involvement in a research process which involves collaborative reflective enquiry. Reason and Bradbury incorporate all of these ideas in their definition of action research as:

'a participatory democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes ... It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and communities' (2001:1).

Also characteristic of action research is the notion of research spirals or cycles involving planning, acting, collecting data in relation to the action, analyzing / reflecting on the data, using findings from this analysis to inform the planning of the next research cycle, 'so that those involved can define more *powerful questions* for themselves as their work progresses' (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988: 25, italics in the original). The researchers involved in each project described in this paper have desired to bring about improvement in the literacy levels of young learners and have used some of the resources of the African Storybook initiative to plan, enact and reflect on changes to their professional practices – changes which differ for each project but which are similar in terms of increased capability and agency for each teacher-researcher.

## 3. The African Storybook initiative

Conventional publishing models which rely on economies of scale, are unable to provide texts in sufficient number or variety in the continent's multitude of languages, some of which are spoken by relatively small populations (Welch, 2012). The African Storybook (ASb) initiative is an imaginative response to the need for many stories in many languages at little or no financial cost to readers. Under the leadership of the South African Institute of Distance Education (Saide), open access digital texts for early reading have been sourced from and translated into a total of 73 languages to date (March 2016) and uploaded onto a comprehensive website. Learners do not have to be online to read the texts: they and their teachers or caregivers can download them onto their own devices or print them, though access to the resources with which to do this is still problematic in some contexts. Since the start of the ASb initiative in 2013, Saide has facilitated the process of story development, translation and adaptation through partner-led workshops in a variety of contexts in Sub-Saharan African countries as well as through the integration of story development and translation into teacher education programmes. It is possible for story developers to create or translate or adapt a text offline and then upload it when the internet is available. When texts are originated in dominant languages such as English or French there are likely to be literacy experts available to evaluate the lexis, syntax, spelling, etc. Finding experts to quality assure stories in a wide range of local languages poses a considerable challenge for ASb.

In the next section I outline how two teacher educators with expert knowledge of the siSwati and isiNdebele languages have worked with two research advisors to design and implement an action research project with a focus on translation and evaluation of stories for young readers.

## 4. Addressing a literacy gap: student teachers as translators and evaluators of stories in siSwati and isiNdebele for early grade readers in South African classrooms

In order for learners to develop multilingual literacies they need access to 'rich multilingual print resources' (Makalela, 2015: 189). In South Africa such resources are in very short supply for some languages. At the Siyabuswa campus of the University of Mpumalanga two teacher educators responsible for content and methodology courses for student teachers majoring in siSwati or isiNdebele, were concerned about the lack of quality texts available for their students to study and to use in teaching early years learners. They decided to use the resources of the ASb website to initiate an action research project with their third year students. The firs cycle of the project had three goals: (i) to enable student teachers to contribute to the store of reading material for Siswati and isiNdebele early years learners; (ii) to enable student teachers to understand what is involved in the effective translation or versioning of stories; (iii) to give student teachers opportunities to engage with translated stories and to evaluate their suitability for early years learners.

In collaboration with two research advisors the teacher educators designed two assignments based on ASb materials, with student teachers' responses to each assignment and teacher educator field notes constituting the major sources of research data. The first assignment required students who are studying either Siswati or isiNdebele to translate a story from the ASb website into one of these languages. After receiving feedback from the teacher educator responsible for one of the languages, students were asked to improve their translation in terms of grammatical accuracy, appropriate vocabulary level and 'story quality' and to resubmit it for 'quality assurance', after which the translation would be added to the stories available in these two languages on the website. The second assignment required each student to read and evaluate three stories from the website (in any language in which he or she is literate) in terms of suitability for and likely appeal to young readers. After the second assignment had been completed the teacher educators conducted focus group interviews with a convenience sample

of students to gauge their responses to the assignments (e.g. what they had learned, what they valued, what could be improved). A detailed analysis of findings from the teacher educator-researchers' analysis of students' translations and story evaluations, from the focus group interviews and from their field notes is the subject of a paper on student teacher learning by Jiyana and Ndlovu which is currently under review. In this paper I focus on teacher educator learning, drawing on data from the focus group interviews with student teachers, the teacher educators' field notes and my own field notes. With reference to research in education, Baxen et al consider a key question to be 'What factors influence the ability of education participants to convert educational resources into capabilities?' (2014: 100).

Walker et al define capabilities as 'the real and actual freedoms (opportunities) that people have to do and be what they value being and doing' (2009: 567) and capability as 'not just the opportunity for empowerment, or agency, but being able to exercise such agency in advancing the goals one values' (2009: 568). Both teacher educators appreciated the opportunity, afforded by the ASb website and the support of the research advisors, to design new types of assignment. They felt affirmed by the positive responses from the majority of students who commended them for 'an alternative assignment that enabled us to do something that will help us as teachers', for 'giving us the challenging experience of translation', for 'helping us to become more proficient in using ICTs and especially the ASb website' and for 'helping us to think about language that is suitable for young learners' (focus group interviews). They were further affirmed by the interest expressed in their project when they presented a paper on the first phase of the research at the annual South African Education Research Association conference. (As a member of the audience I can confirm that the comments and questions that followed their presentation indicated a high level of interest.) As a result of these positive responses from both students and academic colleagues, the teacher educator-researchers have planned the next cycle of their research in which they will refine the assignment 'process' and, in collaboration with staff at Saide, aspects of the technology. These refinements are in response to challenges for students identified from analysis of the assignments and the focus group interview data. Two examples of planned refinements to the assignments are giving more input to students on Open Educational Resources (OER) and on the importance of student teacher contributions to a 'story bank' and giving more detailed reasons for the editing changes made to the students' draft translations so that students are able to extend their knowledge of the syntax and lexis of these languages. With reference to the website, two examples of proposed changes are an adaptation which would make large group log-ins easier and the creation of an identifying tag for stories in different varieties of a language (e.g.SiSwati (Swaziland); SiSwati South Africa) ). The teacher educators have also planned a change to the final year B Ed curriculum so that the students with whom they worked in 2015 will have opportunities in 2016 to originate stories (both text and images) for the ASb website. I argue that the refinements to what were experimental assignments for third year student teachers in 2015 and the planned changes to the fourth year curriculum are evidence of these teacher educators' newly identified capability as curriculum makers and that key factors enabling such capability have been the resources of the ASb website and the guidance of two research advisors from outside their university.

## 5. Using African Storybook materials for teacher professional development in two Ugandan primary schools

In Uganda, teachers are expected to teach the curriculum through the dominant local language for the first three years of schooling. In the Butaleja district the dominant language is Lunyole but while teachers speak this language fluently, they do not consider themselves to be competent readers and writers of Lunyole. They are more confident in using English in the classroom although they understand that learning to be literate and numerate in an unfamiliar language is very difficult for learners. When the ASb co-ordinator for Uganda, introduced teachers and community librarians to the resources of the ASb website and showed them stories written in Lunyole, six teachers and one school principal from two neighboring schools expressed interest in using these stories to improve their reading and writing in this language. It was decided to constitute a professional development group which would meet once a fortnight for two hours after school with the meetings facilitated by the ASb co-ordinator. After their first meeting the group agreed that their 'study group' should become a group of action researchers who would investigate the following question: Could group reading and discussion of ASb stories in Lunyole lead to increased teacher competence and confidence in reading and writing in Lunyole and to greater use of Lunyole in the classroom? Each teacher recorded notes at each meeting and at some of the meetings they collaborated in the preparation of materials for use in their classrooms (e.g. topic-based bilingual vocabulary charts in Lunyole and English). The ASb co-ordinator recorded field notes during the meetings, wrote reflections in her journal after each meeting and emailed these, together with photographs of the group at work, to the research advisor for discussion in email conversations. At the final meeting for the first phase of their work the teacher-researchers wrote individual reflections and used these in a critical group reflection and to make plans for the second term. Data gathered from all of

these sources during the first cycle of this project were analyzed and the findings presented at a literacy conference (Tembe & Reed, 2016; forthcoming). I draw on the same data and findings to present two vignettes of the group at work and two examples of agentive behavior indicative of shifts in professional identity.

Vignette 1

At their second meeting the teacher-researchers read an ASb first sentence story *Ono indiise* (This is me). Individual reading of sentences was sometimes interrupted by suggestions for correction to pronunciation. At the conclusion to the story reading there was extensive discussion of the spelling and punctuation used in the text. For example, while the word *hifanani* is used in the story, the group agreed that the word in common usage is *hifananyi* and that they would tell learners this when reading the story with them. As a group they decided that it would be helpful to learners to use the phrase *hifananyi hiranyi* to generate further words beginning with *hi* and that they would begin with *Higalamu* (It is wide); *Himaali* (It is black); *Hihosa (*It is white) and *Hirando* (It is red). (Sources: teachers' notes; ASb co-ordinator's field notes; sentence chart prepared by teachers)

Vignette 2

Towards the end of the first term one of the meetings focused on pedagogy. In discussing the drawings in the ASb stories the teachers agreed that these assisted reading comprehension. One teacher told the group that she planned to bring objects, photographs or drawings to class to help learners with word meanings in both Lunyole and English. Her idea was taken up by the whole group, with each teacher agreeing to include objects or images or both in their literacy lessons, to make notes on learners' responses and to bring these notes to a group meeting for discussion. Two teachers showed the group a shortened version of an ASb story and explained how they used this adapted story in numeracy lessons in which they taught subtraction. In the final part of the meeting the group discussed learners' difficulties with prepositions in Lunyole: in a written text they are separate words but many learners appear to hear them as part of the adjacent word. Everyone agreed to bring suggestions for tackling this problem to the next meeting. (Sources: teachers' notes; ASb co-ordinator's field notes)

These examples of research group members' agentive behavior were recorded in the field notes of the ASb co-ordinator. In addition, she noted that at a regional Ministry of Education workshop, in response to a question about whether to teach in Lunyole or English, the teachers participating in the action research project argued in favor of Lunyole and were the only ones to do so. The teacher-researchers have submitted a request to the Uganda School Health and Reading Program, run by RTI International, that teachers' and learners' books be translated from Luganda, one of the 'cohort languages' in the programme, into Lunyole, a language not currently part of the programme. One of the advantages of having these materials translated into Lunyole is that the RTI materials are available for downloading under a Creative Commons agreement.

The vignettes of the teacher-researchers at work and the examples of their public support for the use of Lunyole in their classrooms suggest that having ASb resources available in this language and having opportunities to use these to extend their literacy in Lunyole by working collaboratively, with the support of a Lunyole language expert, have resulted in increased interest and confidence in using the local language in the classroom. For the second cycle of the research project the group has identified a need to understand more fully aspects of the phonics and the grammar of Lunyole and also the need to write stories together so that there will be more material available in Lunyole for learners to read. While these teacher-researchers are arguably not fully fledged curriculum makers (innovators), they are engaged in a process of materials development to support improved teaching of Lunyole as subject in the curriculum and optimal use of Lunyole for teaching and learning across the curriculum, alongside English so that learners become biliterate.

## 6. Concluding observations

The African Storybook initiative is something new out of Africa, with contributions to its story bank now offered not only from many African countries but also from other parts of the world. It is work in progress. The midterm review (Janks and Harley, 2015) found much to praise and also offered suggestions for improvements, particularly in the area of teacher professional development. First the praise:

Where schools had no access to reading material, particularly in local languages, children are now able to read stories projected magically onto their classroom walls; where teachers were inclined to favor enliteration in English, doubts about mother tongue literacy have largely been dispelled. While traditional choral rote responses to reading persist, more effective practices have been introduced so that children now interact with texts more meaningfully and they are being given some reading instruction… The review shows gains in the level of teamwork amongst the teachers, increased autonomy and greater learner centeredness (2015: ii)

Noting the key role of the ASb co-ordinators in the various sites at which teachers are being supported in using existing ASb materials and in creating new materials for the website, and the impossibility of taking this work to scale, the reviewers recommend making increased use of teacher

education institutions both for working with pre-service student teachers, as in the first action research project described and discussed in this paper, and for short courses and /or workshops for in-service teachers. They also recommend using the resources of the website for modeling and explaining examples of good teaching practices. While they do not elaborate on what these might include, showing video clips of teachers working together to improve their understanding of a language or to create teaching materials, as has happened in the second action research project described in this paper, could be useful, together with model lessons showing teachers using ASb texts to enhance learners' literacy experiences..

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