Growing young readers and writers: underpinnings of the Nal’ibali National Reading-for-Enjoyment Campaign

Conference Paper · January 2014

1 author:

Carole Susan Bloch
University of Cape Town

26 PUBLICATIONS 56 CITATIONS

All in-text references underlined in blue are linked to publications on ResearchGate, letting you access and read them immediately.
Growing young readers and writers: underpinnings of the Nal’ibali National Reading-for-Enjoyment Campaign

... When someone reads aloud, they raise you to the level of the book. They give you reading as a gift.

Daniel Pennac (2006:95)

It starts with a story

Since 1992, PRAESA (The Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa) has argued strongly for a focus on two interconnected educational priorities: the need to base our education system on the languages children and teachers speak, think and feel in; the need for early literacy teaching approaches to be based in meaningful and exciting encounters with stories and books (Bloch 1999, 2000, Bloch and Alexander 2003, Bloch 2009).

In 2006, PRAESA began working with communities to set up and support informal reading clubs to expose children to the desirable conditions that we believed should be in place for all children so that they can learn to read and write. These experiences over two decades informed the design of the Nal’ibali Reading for Enjoyment Campaign which began in 2012 when we took up the challenge1 to set in motion and drive a national children’s literacy campaign.

Nal’ibali, now in its third year, means ‘Here’s the story’ in isiXhosa. With its key message ‘It starts with a story’, Nal’ibali aims to revive and deepen our appreciation of stories and narrative as being not only essential as the primary way we as human beings remember and organise our thoughts and conceptual worlds, but also the basis for critical thinking and a meaningful education for all children (Krashen, 1993, Clark and Rumbold, 2006). It does this by sparking connections between adults and children as they tell, read and talk about stories2 in languages they understand as well as those they want to learn. This is a powerful way to sew seeds of curiosity and interest for reading and writing and the desire and motivation to know more. In so doing, we are helping to create the kinds of informally structured conditions for essential, but often invisible literacy experiences to take place regularly in communities. By overtly (re)positioning oral and written stories as valuable in daily life, parents and other adults have the chance to experience for themselves how homes, community venues and after school spaces which

---

1 Nal’ibali was initiated with support from the DG Murray Trust.

2 We do not exclude other genres or texts of any kinds, and indeed encourage these. But the core thread of Nal’ibali is about storytelling, reading and writing.
are in fact places of learning, can contribute richly towards children’s literacy development. Their role, even those who are not readers and writers themselves, is central for the growth of literate communities.

Jonathan Gotschall describes human beings as storytelling animals:

_Tens of thousands of years ago, when the human mind was young and our numbers were few, we were telling one another stories. And now, tens of thousands of years later... we still thrill to an astonishing multitude of fiction on pages, on stages and on screens... We are, as a species, addicted to story. Even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories._ (Gotschall 2012: xii-xiv)

By working with this ‘story addiction’ wisely, from early childhood onwards, as research shows, we enhance learning capacity and output. Sensible as this may sound, such an understanding is not widely accepted as being central to supporting all children’s initial literacy learning, although it is actually taken for granted, as ‘normal’ for the children of middle class English speakers. Here, we contextualise the work of Nal’ibali, by raising and discussing some major issues which affect and influence formal literacy education. We then introduce the work of Nal’ibali.

The hegemony of formal literacy education

A widespread and largely unchallenged assumption is that children need to, and will, learn to read and write at school. However, huge educational investment at many levels in South Africa since 1994 has not given rise yet to the kind of classroom environments that motivate children to learn to read and write with meaning, enjoyment and confidence (PRAESA 2012, Needu 2013). It is now widely accepted that there is a crisis in literacy education in South Africa. Huge numbers of children perform poorly in the Annual National Assessments in grades 3 and 6 as well as in the annual grade 12 National Senior Certificate. International comparative tests such as PIRLS 2006 (Howie et al 2007) and SACMEQ 2007 confirm that most children cannot read at grade-appropriate levels, and perform worse than their counterparts in neighbouring countries in all but the ‘least poor’ quintile (20%) of schools (Fleisch 2008).

What is going on?

I believe that at the level of formal schooling, a wasteful tragedy is unfolding for millions of children who cannot learn to read and write well enough to learn effectively. The dominant but implicitly accepted view of literacy sees it as sets of skills taught separately from context with the intention to empower people once these skills have been taught to them (Street 1984). This tends to result in widespread neglect to appreciate powerful culturally embedded aspects of reading and writing which have major significance for how to approach early (and later) literacy teaching. This view underpins teaching methods which do not systemically deal appropriately with early literacy pedagogy or with the major foundation of learning: oral language.

On social and cultural practices: An alternative and broader view of literacy is to see it as being embedded in people’s social practices (ibid) and as being learned at the same time as reading and writing happens in authentic ways. This view opens the way for meaning-based and holistic teaching approaches in school, but also points to the...
significance of home and community settings for informal learning. Across South Africa and Africa, children learn in and out of school in a range of very diverse linguistic and socio-cultural contexts. Barbara Rogoff, an anthropologist, describes children as cultural apprentices who learn the ways of their families and communities by joining into culturally valued activities. People around them do not have to overtly signal or praise particular activities for children to start appreciating their value relative to other activities within their particular setting. Rather they experience and come to know these profoundly through the actual meaningful activities they have in the day-to-day rhythm of life. She explains how both individual participation and community traditions are dynamic, and how individuals both learn from and shape cultural traditions as they ‘observe and pitch in’, adapting them for use in their own lives (Rogoff, 1990, 1993). Put starkly, if people around you find reading and writing useful and powerful, you will start to engage and explore why this is so, and how to do it for yourself. If, on the other hand they don’t, the chances are that you won’t either.

On the prevailing language policy: The assumption that African language speaking children need only three years of teaching through their mother tongue4 has disastrous implications for a meaningful education. Nothing of the transformative potential of a mother tongue based bilingual system (Alexander 2004) promised by the 1997 Language in Education Policy has yet to be realised; after the first three years, the strange reality of an unsystematic ‘abracadabra-style’ linguistic mix prevails. In effect, this is the same ‘subtractive bilingualism’ system that has been in place since apartheid days which in the 4th year should bring about a transition to English. To try to keep communicating and aid understanding, many teachers continue to speak to children in African languages. But all textbooks are in English and reading, writing and assessment has to happen in English. For many adults and children, understanding, critical thinking and making meaning are only possibilities, rather than the central tenets of education. Research by PRAESA and others over the years have pointed to the educational gains for African language speaking children of implementing mother tongue based bilingual approaches (Ouane and Glanz 2010, PRAESA 2012). These have not, to date, been considered systematically by the National Department of Education.

On the prevailing early literacy pedagogy: In South Africa (and across Africa) few early literacy experts have studied how young babies and young children learn to read and write or experienced for themselves the breath-taking learning capabilities of young children. Thus, there tends to be little appreciation of relevant international theory and research about how literacy emerges though informal and playful exploration and experimentation with print. The early literacy curriculum - molded often in large part by policy makers, linguists and text book writers - contributes to a disastrous capping of children’s potential because it is based in flawed theoretical assumptions that children are passive agents who have to be fed knowledge, instead of seeing them as active agents searching for meaning and understanding as they interact with the world around them. Many children dutifully master the mechanics of reading but are often simply unable to comprehend and interrogate texts, or write communicatively.

Digging deeper: global forces reinforce inadequate approaches

Keen global interests in the potentially fertile African literacy markets enabled the USA’s DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) to give birth to EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment5) for Africa, which began in 2006, with South African government involvement. It is now all over (Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, Zambia, South Africa, DRC, Ghana, Liberia, Mali) and uses African languages. But that is not enough; pedagogy counts too! The five ‘essential’ components of reading development are proposed to be taught and assessed in strict order6: 1. the alphabetic principle, 2. phonemic awareness, 3. oral reading fluency, 4. vocabulary, and 5. comprehension. In African settings, sadly this reinforces many teacher’s own early personal experiences as learners of ‘ma me mi mo mu’ and their later training which suggests that it is quite normal for initial literacy learning to be meaningless.

DIBELS has had large-scale support, but it has been criticised and discredited by many too, for

---

4 I am using the term mother tongue broadly – it is a familiar language or even languages that the child understands well enough to learn meaningfully in.

5 https://www.eddataglobal.org/reading/

6 https://dibels.oregon.edu/market/assessment/dibels
perpetuating the (race and class) literacy gap it is supposed to eliminate. This is because of the different teaching methods arising from different definitions of literacy that are used for more and less affluent children:

For those school/districts which are neither high poverty nor low performing, children are less likely to be held to this narrow view of literacy. These children have a more balanced literacy environment that includes viewing, writing and other critical literacies. (Tierney and Thome 2006:53)

Children who are recipients of DIBELS however, get a more restrictive curriculum, leading to the sad conclusion:

Once again, the rich get richer and the poor are left only with the most basic of basics (ibid).

The bias inherent in DIBELS arises in part because its proponents have based their arguments on literature concerning easily measured and fast developing skills among young readers. It is easier to ‘measure’ and quantify decoding skills like letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, and even ‘fluency’, than motivation, semantic knowledge and comprehension among beginning readers. However the latter matter deeply, and are central to the beginning moments of literacy learning in most literate homes and many ‘good’ schools; the former are of course necessary components, but do not have to be taught first.

The long running ‘reading wars’ between skills-based and holistic views of reading development ultimately concern control of the instructional agenda and financial resources devoted to literacy teaching textbooks. Enormous financial gains are made by companies investing in ‘essential’ diagnostic tests and phonics workbooks. In the last 20 years, ‘scientific evidence’ has been used to bolster methods based on the primacy of teaching phonics (Strauss 2004). However the evidence and the methods need to be scrutinised if we are to make informed choices about what we offer children.

The evidence base

It appears that the phonics ‘approach’ has been given a large boost via a remedial education route that use phrenological neuroscientific brain imaging techniques, with dyslexia as the yardstick. Dyslexia came to be conflated with the notion of general reading difficulty and includes all low-performing readers, even very young ones, who have not yet had the chance to learn (Shaywitz 2003). The claim is that normal as well as dyslexic students learn to read faster through methods that break down words into small segments (phonics) (Abadzi 2006). Abadzi claims that… to attain high-level skills, learners must first master component tasks in small bits. To increase performance speed and accuracy, practice and feedback for error correction are necessary. Only with manageable tasks and feedback can learners progress to more complex skills. (Abadzi 2006: 21)

This approach bases itself on panels of experts’ reviews of reading research, for example Preventing Reading Difficulties (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), the Report of the National Reading Panel (2000), and Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel (2008). But it may well misinterpret the intention of these reports, and it arguably misunderstands the reading process because of a failure to take into account relevant factors relating to early learning, psycholinguistic and socio-cultural factors and so on.

Shaywitz used evidence from NICHD 2000 research, to recommend explicit phonological awareness and synthetic phonics training to promote effective dyslexia intervention and to promote reading instruction. She was supported in this by a remedial educationalist, Reid Lyons, advisor to President Bush at the start of No Child Left Behind. Her model of reading is that spoken language is instinctive and natural – you do not have to teach a baby to speak – but reading has to be taught, it’s artificial, it’s acquired.8

The Problem

These are false arguments: learning to speak is not inbuilt, it is learned through the baby’s early life experience that forms the background within which spoken language is understood (it is much more taught informally than formally). Learning to read and write is not essentially different: it is learned in a similar way, as a developing understanding growing from the child’s ongoing

7 http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/Reading_Wars.html
8 See http://www.childrenofthecode.org/interviews/shaywitz.html
experience of what reading and writing is about and how to do it.

The underlying view of the skills based approach is that we decode print (unnatural language) into sounds and words (natural language), which are then comprehended by the brain. But oral language evolved too!

Just as money is a symbolically embodied social institution that arose historically from previously existing economic activities, natural language is a symbolically embodied social institution that arose historically from previously existing social-communicative activities …. (Tomasello 2003)

Listening is a complex process, involving joint attention, understanding different roles, speakers intention, and talking also involves physical skills development with relevant organs (tongue, lips, throat, breathing and so on) (Hobson1993).

Don Holdaway says:

There seems a strong case for looking at initial language learning as a suggestive model – perhaps the basic model - for literacy learning. (Holdaway, 1979:21).

This ‘special case’ of developmental learning, appears natural and happens with ease, and the prevailing conditions for learning are similar to those for visual perception, learning to crawl and walk, ride a bicycle and so on.

We believe it is indeed the appropriate model for literacy learning, and this applies for ALL children, not just children of the elite despite claims that this is not so (Abadzi 2006, Heugh 2009). Readers develop the ability to make the direct link from written language to meaning through experiencing this link in their lives. The aim needs to be to attain that direct comprehension and it does not first have to involve sounding out. This means we need to enable holistic engagement from the start, one where young learners are free to make and correct ‘mistakes’, as they did when learning to speak.

In summary, when children learn to read and write, from the beginning they use their knowledge of spoken language, knowledge of the world and their experiences in it to bring meaning to and transact with texts. They use cueing systems for reading: grapho-phonetic, semantic and syntactic cues, aided by redundancy in text and the brain's inclination to guess/predict: that is unless they are discouraged or stopped from doing so, by being given decontextualised, low level texts to read, by being forced to decode meaningless stuff, or being made to use a language they do not understand.

Putting theory to work: Nal’ibali in a nutshell

The Nal’ibali position is simple: because all children need similar nurturing and motivation to become literate, we urgently need to help to create spaces where voluntary and regular reading for enjoyment ‘reading club’ sessions can take place. Apart from the Nal’ibali mentors, whose task is to ignite community interest and involvement, then support and monitor the process, neither children nor the adults have to be there - they come because they choose to.

Nal’ibali has an ongoing national awareness and advocacy campaign about the power and value of stories and it provides guidance to an increasing number of people in homes, schools and through it’s network of reading clubs. We define a reading club loosely as a gathering of between five and 50 children who meet at an agreed time and place at least once a week, from 30 minutes to two hours, with one or more adult volunteers. Because the intention is communication around stories, the adult-child ratio is preferably no greater than 1:10 (it is even better if it can be 1:5). The programme can be as simple as ‘just’ telling and/or reading stories or can be made up of a mix of songs, games, acting, reading and writing activities. We have found that all of these fun activities bring about bonding, a
Resourceful young children

keen sense of belonging. Everyone concerned is affirmed by the commitment to sharing playful, imaginative times together. Children in particular, appreciate having their opinions and ideas listened and responded to. We appreciate storytelling for its role as a bridge to reading and writing, but we also value it in and of itself to provide adults and children with opportunities to connect with one another as a group as they remember and share old stories, and dream up new ones. Storytelling invites everyone in, whether they do or do not read and write themselves. However, some adults model reading and writing: choosing stories they like to read aloud to children, writing for, to and with them, and then allow children to choose their own books to look at, talk about and read, alone and with friends. In some reading clubs, children are of a similar age, in others, there are toddlers and teens together in the same space. Different strategies are worked out for dealing with opportunities and challenges that arise from such groupings.

What does it take?

Reading material: Libraries are few and far between, as are storybooks in African languages. So, each week, an eight-page bilingual supplement is created by PRAESA and is produced in partnership with Times Media, presently in combinations of English and Sesotho, Xhosa, Zulu and Afrikaans. Each supplement is designed as a scaffold for adults to use each week for a reading club session with a short article about any number of aspects relating to reading and writing development in children of all ages, stories to read aloud and to cut out and keep, a story-star section about reading promoters and clubs, as well as other story and book events related information.

Knowing how: The reading clubs are establishing themselves in many settings with a modicum of infrastructure and comfort: homes, community centres, schools, libraries, churches and mosques. Some adults are teachers, librarians and crèche workers, others are community members. Most require an orientation to this informally structured approach, so Nal‘ibali offers a range of mentoring workshops on how to use the supplement and other materials for various aspects of reading, writing, storytelling and reading club set up and maintenance. For many, the supplement is the only source of reading material and guidance available and is, for this reason, invaluable. But it has another use too: we all become readers text by text, story by story, and without access to a constant flow of material, nobody can become a discerning reader, who knows what s/he cares to read and share. The supplement offers a way for many people – both children and adults – to grow their personal repertoires of stories.

In addition to its multilingual supplements, Nal‘ibali produces radio stories across nine different languages in partnership with SABC Education, while Mxit subscribers receive a Nal‘ibali literacy tip each week on their cell phone. All of the materials are freely available to download on www.nalibali.org or www.nalibali.mobi.

The way forward

A wave of enthusiasm for reading is growing in hundreds of reading clubs9. The feedback from participants is often extremely enthusiastic as the quote from one father shows:

“I’m a 37-year-old father of a 7-year-old girl. Every Wednesday evening we read and do fun activities instead of watching TV. I find your supplement very resourceful because it teaches her to read. I use the story theme to teach her values such as respect, discipline, love, sharing etc. I would not know how to approach these subjects if it wasn’t for your supplement.”

Yet without concerted ongoing and far-reaching collaborations and investment, the majority of children will remain strangers to the joy and power of print in their mother and other tongues. Involvement is the key. For this reason we are seeking supportive partnerships of all kinds to join in, join Nal‘ibali and give all children in South Africa the chance of a meaningful, interesting and joyful educational experience.

9 https://www.facebook.com/nalibaliSA

This learning brief was written by Carole Bloch, Director of PRAESA. This article was first published in Language Rich Africa policy dialogue - The Cape Town language and development conference: Looking beyond 2015. Edited by Hamish McIlwraith. A copy of the full series of conference papers is free to download at http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/sites/ec/files/E291%20Cape%20Town%20Publication_A4_FINAL_web.pdf
References


Available online at https://web.up.ac.za/sites/files/file/150314/54%20PRLS%2020 06%20SUMMARY%20REPORT.pdf


Available online at http://www-teachline/courses/rdla155/pdfs/ c2s5_1teachingchildren.pdf


Web:  www.nalibali.org
Mobile:  www.nalibali.mobi
Facebook:  nalibaliSA
Twitter:  @nalibaliSA

The DG Murray Trust encourages its implementing partners to share their experiences and learning in the form of a Hands-on learning brief. Download guidelines on writing a Hands-on brief from http://www.dgmt.co.za/what-we-learned/For more information visit http://www.dgmt.co.za

DGMT
THE DG MURRAY TRUST
Investing in South Africa’s potential

WEB:  www.nalibali.org
MOBILE:  www.nalibali.mobi
FACEBOOK:  nalibaliSA
TWITTER:  @nalibaliSA

The DG Murray Trust encourages its implementing partners to share their experiences and learning in the form of a Hands-on learning brief. Download guidelines on writing a Hands-on brief from http://www.dgmt.co.za/what-we-learned/For more information visit http://www.dgmt.co.za

DGMT
THE DG MURRAY TRUST
Investing in South Africa’s potential

WEB:  www.nalibali.org
MOBILE:  www.nalibali.mobi
FACEBOOK:  nalibaliSA
TWITTER:  @nalibaliSA

The DG Murray Trust encourages its implementing partners to share their experiences and learning in the form of a Hands-on learning brief. Download guidelines on writing a Hands-on brief from http://www.dgmt.co.za/what-we-learned/For more information visit http://www.dgmt.co.za

DGMT
THE DG MURRAY TRUST
Investing in South Africa’s potential

WEB:  www.nalibali.org
MOBILE:  www.nalibali.mobi
FACEBOOK:  nalibaliSA
TWITTER:  @nalibaliSA

The DG Murray Trust encourages its implementing partners to share their experiences and learning in the form of a Hands-on learning brief. Download guidelines on writing a Hands-on brief from http://www.dgmt.co.za/what-we-learned/For more information visit http://www.dgmt.co.za

DGMT
THE DG MURRAY TRUST
Investing in South Africa’s potential

WEB:  www.nalibali.org
MOBILE:  www.nalibali.mobi
FACEBOOK:  nalibaliSA
TWITTER:  @nalibaliSA

The DG Murray Trust encourages its implementing partners to share their experiences and learning in the form of a Hands-on learning brief. Download guidelines on writing a Hands-on brief from http://www.dgmt.co.za/what-we-learned/For more information visit http://www.dgmt.co.za

DGMT
THE DG MURRAY TRUST
Investing in South Africa’s potential

WEB:  www.nalibali.org
MOBILE:  www.nalibali.mobi
FACEBOOK:  nalibaliSA
TWITTER:  @nalibaliSA