



It starts with a story...

NAL'IBALI READING-FOR-ENJOYMENT CAMPAIGN

TELLING TALES: THE STORY OF THE NAL'IBALI READING-FOR-ENJOYMENT SUPPLEMENTS

By Viv Edwards

FOREWORD

A critical friend can be defined as a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work.
- Costa & Kallick (1993)

Having watched the work of The Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) from the sidelines for well over a decade, I welcomed the opportunity to act as a critical friend in evaluating the bilingual reading-for-enjoyment newspaper supplements, just one aspect of their recent campaign, Nal'ibali.

The minutiae of daily life – and whichever crisis is placing greatest demand on our energies and patience – can make it difficult to step back and see the bigger picture. I hope my questions about every aspect of the supplements created a useful space for reflection and that the story woven from my observations and answers to these questions succeeds in capturing the richness and complexity of the Nal'ibali journey over the last two years.

To the Nal'ibali team and their partners: enkosi, dankie, thank you for this opportunity to share. I am particularly grateful to the club leaders and volunteers at Vulindlela, Kwa-Faku, Zanolwazi and Kannemeyer reading clubs; and to the many people who gave generously of their time to talk about their experiences of using and producing the supplement, including Carole Bloch (Director of PRAESA), Arabella Koopman (Content Manager), Malusi Ntoyapi, Ntombi Mahobe, Tholisa Rayi and Thulile Seleka (Programmes team); Ashleigh Heese and Sally Mills (Campaigns Team); David Harrison and Angela Biden (DG Murray Trust); David Jeffrey (Nal'ibali Cluster Mentor), Pumza Mkune (Nal'ibali Story Sparker); Xolisa Guzula (Nelson Mandela Institute for Education and Rural Development); Maurita Weissenberg (Director of Shine); Patti MacDonald (Times Media Education) and Righardt Le Roux (Librarian, Westonaria, Gauteng).

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WHAT IS NAL'IBALI?

Ongoing concern about low levels of literacy in South Africa has been the catalyst for a number of national reading campaigns. Nal'ibali ("Here's the story" in Xhosa), however, is a campaign with a difference. It starts from the premise that stories – oral and written – are as important for literacy development as the more technical aspects of learning to sound or spell out words, write neatly and do grammar. It argues this on the grounds that children who are immersed in great and well-told stories develop a rich storehouse of language, imagination and vocabulary and are more motivated to read. Co-ordinated by PRAESA, an NGO concerned with literacy and multilingualism, it is intergenerational in thrust, offering support for caregivers, volunteers and communities to root the habit of reading and writing into children's daily lives. Most importantly, it promotes reading in African languages and English in a country where most children have to learn in a language they don't yet understand and that teachers often don't know well.

Nal'ibali has three core components: an awareness and advocacy media campaign; face-to-face mentoring and training ; and content development, mainly in the form of multilingual stories for children and information on literacy. This report focuses on the most important element of Nal'ibali content development, the bilingual reading-for-enjoyment supplements produced in partnership with Times Media.

The end of the second year of operation of the campaign offers a convenient point to take stock. The account which follows is based on analysis of the supplement content and related Nal'ibali promotional materials and reports; observation of the supplements in use in reading clubs; and interviews with a wide range of people involved in the funding, production, promotion and distribution of the supplements.

IN THE BEGINNING ...

Nal'ibali was officially launched in June 2012, with 22 editions of the supplement produced by the end of that year. By December 2013, 53 editions of the supplement had been produced with over 11 million copies inserted into papers or delivered directly to reading clubs. From June 2012 to June 2013, the supplements were printed in English and Xhosa and English and Zulu; from July 2013, English and Sesotho and English and Afrikaans were added.

Languages	Newspaper	Province
English/Xhosa	The Times	Western Cape
English/Zulu	The Sowetan	Gauteng
English/Zulu	The Sowetan	KZN
English/Sesotho	The Sowetan	Free State
English/Xhosa	The Herald	Eastern Cape
English/Xhosa	Daily Dispatch	Eastern Cape

Table 1: Language of the supplements by newspapers and provinces

Any attempt to assess the effectiveness of the Nal'ibali supplements needs to consider aims and objectives at the point of departure. The supplements set out to address two major concerns for education in South Africa. The first was the dearth of reading-for-enjoyment materials for children –in African languages, fundamental to the delivery of mother-tongue-based bilingual education which, as the international research literature suggests, leads to the best possible educational outcomes. The second relates to the need to move away from approaches to the teaching of reading which stress technical issues at the expense of reading for enjoyment, thus creating appropriate learning opportunities – formal and informal – for all children. The supplements have been key to the delivery of

¹Grade 3 learners performed at an average of 35% in literacy and 28% in numeracy in a recent national study (SA: Dept of Basic Education Annual National Assessments 2011).

²See for instance, Read South Africa, Masifunde Sonke

³At the time of my visit, the Face-to-Face Programmes team includes a national training and mentoring team of 4; 8 regional Cluster Mentors, responsible for enlisting community support for reading clubs and several stipended Story sparkers who directly support six to eight reading clubs and reading club leaders.

reading materials in different South African languages and to communicating the essential messages of the campaign.

WHAT'S INSIDE?

But it is no easy matter to get material that we need... to have it formulaic makes it possible.
- Carole Bloch, Director, PRAESA

There are two main audiences for the supplements: subscribers to the Times Media newspapers already mentioned and people who buy street copies; and the reading clubs and others such as literacy organisations, schools, libraries and clinics. Producing a supplement every week throughout the school year is a huge task, made possible by their formulaic structure. Most supplements contain two stories – one in the form of a cut-out-and-keep book; the other intended for reading aloud or retelling; practical advice and ideas in a front page feature, a Get story active feature which offers activity ideas for the cut-out-and-keep book; an inspirational piece on the work of a selected Story Star; and, more recently, a Reading Club corner, which offers specific support to reading clubs. All content is presented bilingually in one of four language pairs: Xhosa–English, Zulu–English, Afrikaans–English and Sesotho–English.

CUT-OUT-AND-KEEP STORIES

The cut-out-and-keep 14 page storybooks make up four of the eight pages of the supplement. In reading clubs, the actual making up of the books– the folding and the cutting out – is an activity that varies from location to location. When volunteer help is available, Shine (a literacy NGO based mainly in the Western Cape) assembles the books before distributing to children; alternatively older children are involved in the process. Similarly, younger children in Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centres are sometimes given the folded pages and then tasked with cutting out to make the finished product. In most cases, however, children both fold and cut. Their engagement with the process is



an unforeseen benefit. The total absorption of children observed making books in one of the longer established reading clubs seemed to add to the evident enjoyment of the stories that followed. Once assembled, the books were read in a wide variety of ways: more experienced readers were paired with less experienced ones; some children chose to read on their own; others enjoyed listening to the club leader read the story.

The teacher in a reading club based in an ECD Centre began by reading a supplement story with the theme of transport to her Grade R children, before inviting them to share their own stories both orally and in drawings. Reading club sessions at the Centre are held once a week but tend to spill over; while not formally a Nal'ibali reading club, the class next door also uses the stories.

Not all reading clubs exploited the stories to the full: one school based club used volunteer parents to prepare cut-out-and-keep books, after which the teacher simply invited children to choose a book for reading which they could then take home. The emphasis here, it seemed, was on transmitting the message that reading was for fun and children were certainly enthusiastic about selecting stories. The

*Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey (2001);
Thomas & Collier (2002)

parents were also serving as important role models for their children's learning.

Supplement space is an important constraint: the majority of the cut-out stories are targeted at children of primary school age, with less material for very young or teenage readers. As part of a deliberate policy of redressing this imbalance, the supplements carry stories for older readers at least three times a year with zigzag fold out stories on the back page for very young children replacing the usual Story corner story. Also, at regular intervals, stories for very young children are featured as cut-out-and-keep stories.

Back copies of the supplement are available electronically to download and print from the Nal'ibali website; the Story corner stories can also be downloaded from the mobisite for viewing on smart and feature phones. The mobisite, only launched in March 2013, is in fact proving very popular and attracting even more engagement than the main Nal'ibali website. The 11,095 visits in the first six months indicate the importance and success of tailoring platforms to the local audience, and offering mobile-specific platforms. Another indicator of the popularity of the mobisite is the average length of each visit: for the period 17 August–17 September, for instance, visitors spent a massive nine minutes 20 seconds on each visit as opposed to three minutes 52 seconds on the main website. The fact that most visits are from returning visitors underlines the rapid development of a virtual community.

The Story corner stories are also being used in other publications, including the Jet Club magazine (a free magazine for its 4,336 million members, making it one of the most-read publications in SA) as well as available as downloadable PDFs from the Jet Online website. Content is also being reproduced in the Muslim Views with a circulation of 27,500.

STORY CORNER

Most of the Story corner stories on the back page have been specially commissioned. They appear to be slightly less popular and less used than the cut-out-and-keep stories at the reading clubs visited. However the very good response rate to them when they appear in the Jet Club magazine would indicate that they are being used and enjoyed.

The main constraint is space: because there are two language versions, the word limit for each story is approximately 350 words



One attempt to address the issue of limited space has been to spread the stories across two supplements. This approach is likely to work better for people receiving the supplement with their newspapers than in the reading clubs. A reading Cluster Mentor pointed to problems of continuity when distribution problems (discussed below) lead to delays between the delivery of the two parts of the story, or when a child is present for one part of the story but not the other. Another concern is that that the break between parts is determined more by space than literary quality: Part 1 seldom ends on a cliffhanger.

These back page stories were originally intended for reading aloud and retelling so as to encourage adults to bring stories alive for children. Carole Bloch explains:

“Reading aloud is one of our major challenges,

as this is not seen to be a significant practice – more commonly it is understood that you read a picture story to children that they will then read, so the impetus is to practice reading so as to learn HOW to read, rather than to bring a story alive for children. So this is a new challenge for many – and most adults are not yet comfortable or adept at reading aloud. This practice needs practice!”

While I saw little evidence of this in practice in the reading clubs I observed, a reading Cluster Mentor described how he and a reading club volunteer worked side by side, delivering the stories in two languages, paragraph by paragraph. There were also reports of more confident children using the stories for independent reading. There was certainly evidence of the stories on display: sometimes both stories were glued on card side-by-side as in the supplement; on other occasions, one language version was pasted on one side of the card and the other on the reverse, practices encouraged and offered as ideas for use in the supplements.

QUANTITY AND QUALITY?

A key objective of the campaign – to increase accessibility of African language stories – has quite clearly been achieved. The most recent supplements were on show on visits to reading clubs and schools and, in most cases, had been collected to form an ongoing resource. In addition, NGOs, reading club leaders and teachers in schools were usually able to send children home with their own books. In self-critical and reflective mode, however, questions are beginning to emerge from the team about a number of issues relating to the quality of the stories.



The main criterion for selection of the stories to date has been availability, though other factors, such as space on the page for two language versions, have also come into play. The production team has dealt exclusively with South African publishers to avoid extensive delays involved in negotiating copyright agreements with overseas publishing houses. A team of people is then responsible for abridging, translating where necessary, editing, designing and proofing the entire supplement in a highly complex and finely tuned operation which requires a lead in of up to nine weeks before each supplement.

Comments made during Nal'ibali training are a useful source of information on how the stories are received in reading clubs. These usually focus on stories that have worked well with people retelling a story that they enjoyed without always remembering the title. The fact remains

that only confident readers and writers are likely to respond to invitations to comment on Facebook or the website and, as members of the Face-to-Face team pointed out, many of those involved in the reading clubs lack confidence and may be nervous about how their spelling, grammar and pronunciation will be perceived.

SMS entries to competitions also offer feedback on individual stories, such as the comment on The magic paintbrush which follows:

I did lyk ur story I rili read dem alwys wen I get tym nd dis magic painbrush story it makes me hapy, jst as I love it to be as for Ho he dd hve a wonderf ul heart as God wil wanted rather den de rich man who tink for himself. I dd love ut so piz keep dem cuming dey put joy in mt heart wenever I read dem, thnk u again or nd if I dd de painbrush I was gng to create mor Job to de pple who nid it as I do also

While it is difficult to accurately assess how Times Media newspaper subscribers/readers view the stories, anecdotes abound. One Cape Town based-reader of The Times newspaper bought two copies of The Times to pass on the Xhosa supplement to his domestic worker for her two grandchildren, so that she could purchase this herself if interested. He also regularly downloaded and printed two copies of the Afrikaans versions from the website, one for his cleaner at work who reads it to her two younger children (aged 4 and 6) while her 12 year old reads it for himself, and the other to a 56-year-old grandmother who shares it with four of her grandchildren while another three younger children listen in. Other members of his family also share. His father, a subscriber to Sunday Times, gives the Johannesburg version of the supplement to his gardener to use with his children.

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The stories are intended to be an ongoing and sustainable resource. With a growing backlist, it is possible, for instance, to start considering which stories work best in training and why. As the project director commented:

If you're using the supplement properly, it means that every week you're getting to know a new story, and you become more discerning: this is a book for a very little child, I don't like this story because I'm sick of stories about this and so on. That discernment happens book by book. People need to start having a store of material that they can then recommend to others

The intention is that this awareness will feed not only into training activities but also the selection of future stories.

READING IN TWO LANGUAGES

The widespread ambivalence around the use of African languages in education is well documented. English remains the language of high status and social mobility and, as a 12-year-old boy at one of the reading clubs commented, 'If you don't want to be a street sweeper, you need to speak English'. In a similar vein, a church organisation setting up a network of reading clubs with the support of the Shine NGO, has specified that they want English to be both the language of training for the volunteers and the language of interaction in the club.

The fact remains, however, that English is not the first language of most South Africans, and many people, including teachers, operate far more effectively in their home languages. International research also points to the importance of using both home and official languages for as long as possible, and for at least the first six years of education, and underlines the need for greater advocacy of bilingual education.

For these reasons, the decision to draw on bilingual stories in the supplements is non-negotiable. Observation of the ways in which the language pairs are used suggests a range of practice. At one end of the continuum, the ECD Centre reading club made exclusive use of the Xhosa text of the stories. At another reading club, there was some evidence of children cross-checking between the two language versions to establish the Xhosa version of an unfamiliar English word; this is clearly a strategy to be encouraged. In the same reading club, a 12-year-old Xhosa speaking girl whose schooling has, to date, been exclusively in English and was therefore unfamiliar with Xhosa spelling conventions, used the reverse strategy to decode the Xhosa text.

The recent Department of Education plan for the Incremental Introduction of African languages in all African schools is likely to create a further use for the bilingual stories: children learning African languages as second languages will have an urgent need for appropriate reading materials. The potential of the existing stories for use in second language classrooms is clear. As the Nal'ibali content manager pointed out:

If you've got a book for a younger child, an older child can read it themselves. How cool is that? How cool is it that the text is available in two languages and you can actually read it in the additional language?

⁵Alidou et al. (2006)

⁶www.theshinecentre.org.za

⁷A case in point was an ECD teacher who asked for a Xhosa-speaking member of the Nal'ibali team to interpret when being interviewed for this report.

⁸Alidou et al. (2006)

⁹This policy responds to the failure of the education system to respond to legislative mandates and, in particular, the 1997 Language in Education Policy which compels the Education Department to: promote multilingualism; develop the official South African languages equitably; to foster respect for all languages used in the country; counter disadvantages resulting from different kinds of mismatches between home languages and languages of learning and teaching; develop programmes for the redress of previously disadvantaged languages (Joshua, 2013).

INSPIRATION AND INFORMATION

The supplements have clearly succeeded in the aim of providing reading material in a range of South African languages. The guiding principles for the content and feel of the other supplement content – the front page 'editorial' message, and the Get story active and Story stars features – are to inspire and inform and to provide concrete what-to-do ideas. The aim is to model (rather than preach) good language and literacy practices in a way that leaves the adult reader feeling 'Hey, I can do this!'

The impact of these other features is inevitably difficult to observe and assess but anecdotal evidence suggest that reading club volunteers focus more on the stories than the other content. The greater emphasis placed on the use of supplements in training during the second year of the project, however, may be starting to shift this trend. Reading club corner, a new feature in the supplement, is reinforced by alerts sent to leaders in clubs supported by the PRAESA team about the stories due to appear in the next supplement and ideas for activities they can build around the stories. The Face-to-Face Programmes team now specifically draw attention to the useful tips, advice and activities in the features. A Story Sparker explained:



Reading club leaders were not using the supplements. They were just reading the stories then putting them under the table. And then I showed them this is not only for the children ... There are so many messages, so much information that we get from this supplement.

The increasing awareness of the value of the information on literacy development in the supplement is a hopeful sign of the emerging reading habits of adults involved in the reading clubs.

Reading club volunteers are not, of course, the only audience. The hope is that parents, too, will read the advice on how to go about reading and literacy-related activities with their children. There is, of course, a very real possibility that parents, like reading club volunteers, look mainly at the stories. In contrast, other user groups, including

teacher educators and NGOs involved in literacy, greatly value the practical advice, admitting to recycling the features in their own training. To address the issue of parents not reading the lead article in the supplement, the advice is replicated on the mobisite and website, and promoted via social media. It is reproduced in the Jet Club magazine and other sites through content partnerships to reach parents in that way.

Finally, the Story stars features showcase the achievements of a wide range of people involved in books and stories and are designed to inspire. In a society where books are in short supply and reading for pleasure is not an everyday practice, they reinforce the importance of sharing books with children. They enhance the status of the people in the spotlight and have the potential to motivate others 'just like them'. By the same token, they offer a valuable opportunity for Nal'ibali to strengthen links with partner organisations, communities and volunteers by showcasing the efforts of others, with Nal'ibali serving as an umbrella for national reading-for-enjoyment efforts.

DISTRIBUTION

A lot of Early Childhood Centres in townships are run out of people's homes. They're really difficult for the supplement delivery people to find. After three weeks of calling up and asking for directions, the delivery guy eventually just left them at the library.

- Nal'ibali Cluster Mentor

We usually have about 30 kids but 50 young readers joined us yesterday for the Nal'ibali Reading program. We ran out of supplements yesterday and children ended up having to share.

- Librarian

Please note T. reading club, another old recipient of our supplement, is currently not receiving. It has apparently been 4 months. Please can we reinstate this drop.

- Thulile Seleka, Nal'ibali Programme Manager

The only problem flagged by all members of the Nal'ibali team was distribution. The insertion of the supplements into the newspapers organised by Times Media is relatively straightforward; in contrast, delivery of the supplements to registered reading clubs in the Nal'ibali network, outsourced by Times Media in keeping with the principles of Black Economic Empowerment, is a complex operation.

A great challenge concerns delivery to rural areas where the roads are bad, some of the clubs don't have postal addresses, or to townships where outsiders have difficulty in finding their way around. Attempts to solve these issues have been time-consuming and frustrating for all parties – Times Media, the distributors, the Nal'ibali team and the reading clubs affected.

One of the medium-term strategies for addressing distribution problems is to use libraries as distribution points, something of a logistical challenge in itself. In an attempt to coordinate regional drop offs, members of the Nal'ibali team have approached the Department of Arts and Culture; spoken to the heads of all provincial libraries; and addressed meetings of Free State, Gauteng, Western Cape and KZN librarians. Although there are outstanding examples of partnerships between Nal'ibali, certain regional initiatives and individual libraries, much work remains. The key to success would appear to be in strengthening relationships on the ground between the libraries and the reading clubs. This could be achieved through awareness-raising activities: explaining to library staff why they are receiving the supplements and encouraging them to start reading clubs in their libraries. Local buy-in is essential for success: without it, the supplements are likely to sit on shelves or under tables.

Penetration is an issue closely related to distribution. While Times Media newspapers have an impressive reach, their strength lies in urban markets; and to date it has not been possible to insert the supplements into their community newspapers. An alternative strategy might be to develop partnerships with media organisations with a greater community reach. This would allow the supplements to reach important segments of the population not currently receiving the them. An additional benefit would be that community newspapers are free. Community distribution would have other advantages, too. Since they are routinely distributed door-to-door and to municipal offices, it would be a simple matter for reading clubs to collect their supplements from there.

However, this option also carries risks. Unlike commercially produced newspapers, a large proportion of community newspapers remain unread before being placed in the bin. The Campaigns team would therefore need to press for banner advertisements on the front page of the papers trailing the supplement inside in order to attract the attention of potential readers.

The Times Media contract for producing the supplement is due for renewal in March 2015. Given the time required to explore and negotiate alternative or complementary arrangements, longer-term aspirations for greater community penetration may need to be put on hold.

A TOTAL PACKAGE

The supplements provide a nice way of unifying our message. We can liaise with the Programmes team to create links with what is going out in the supplements to the reading clubs and the general public.

- Sally Mills, Nal'ibali Network and Communications Co-ordinator

A major weakness of campaigns is that they don't tap into peoples' hearts and emotions; they try and shape the brain and convey a particular message and that fails. Often media campaigns are divorced from people on the ground. The best you can do with the media is inspire, maybe provide some information, but it doesn't support the interpersonal. It's just not going to work. Successful campaigns can't just be another stodgy government communication.

- David Harrison, CEO, DG Murray Trust

The supplements are one part of an approach that combines the strengths of PRAESA, the parent organisation, with its history of on-the-ground work around literacy, bilingualism and young people, and the funder's experience of large-scale campaigns. The team consists not only of practitioners, trainers and materials developers but people with a background in marketing and communication.



The close and developing relationship between the supplements and the trainers has already been explored. The links with the Campaigns team are equally important in taking the Nal'ibali message to an even wider audience. To take just two examples, the Here's the story columns in various Times Media newspapers, where celebrities and others in the literary and literacy world promote the value of reading and sharing stories to help children realise their potential, are timed to go out a few days before the supplement and are used to flag both the supplement and the website. The supplements are loaded on the website as back copies and the lead article is loaded on several other platforms for those without access to supplements. Statistics on the reach of the supplement will potentially be useful in motivating the new partners that need to be brought on board to ensure the sustainability and growth of the project.

WHERE NEXT?

It's part of how you create habits.

- David Harrison

The achievements of the Nal'ibali supplements in the first two years of operation are impressive. The project has produced approximately 11 million supplements in total, including 85 bilingual stories. With just over 200,000 copies each week reaching subscribers and reading clubs in five provinces, a large following of readers, very many of whom would not normally engage in activities around reading with children, now regularly looks forward to receiving the next supplement, and using it in many different ways. Single-handedly, Nal'ibali has made accessible, to a huge audience and at very low cost, unprecedented numbers of stories in African languages. As part of a campaign that combines

stories, information and activities with face-to-face training and support for reading clubs, it speaks to peoples' hearts and minds and avoids the overly prescriptive messages associated with many less successful campaigns.

The teething problems associated with distribution of the supplements to reading clubs are likely to take some time to resolve. Issues related to extending reach, possibly through insertion in community newspapers, also need close attention. Emerging partnerships with libraries point to possible ways forward, but building the strong relationships that ensure the local buy-in necessary for success takes time.

Yet, when all is said and done, Nal'ibali has clearly created a template for delivering children's stories in African languages and English that reinforces a message of fundamental importance: reading is useful, meaningful and enjoyable. When children enjoy reading, they read more. The more they read, the better they become. The systems developed in the past two years can easily be used as the basis for extending the current language coverage to all eleven of the official languages across all South African provinces at minimal extra expense. Both sustainability and expansion, of course, rely on the support of existing and new funders.

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The Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) is an independent research and development unit affiliated with the University of Cape Town, and an initiating partner of the national Nal'ibali Reading-for-Enjoyment Campaign.

For more info visit www.praesa.org.za and www.nalibali.org

