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Countering linguistic imperialism with stories in the languages of Africa: The African Storybook initiative as a model for enabling in and out of school literacies

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Background: In South Africa, and in many other African countries, official language-in-education policy supports the use of learners' primary language(s) in early schooling. In reality, texts in the language(s) of the former colonial power are dominant, with high-interest texts in languages familiar to young learners in short supply or non-existent. Where government education departments have begun to address this shortage, it is mainly by producing graded readers in the 'standard' variety of a language.

Aim: The main aim of this paper is to demonstrate how quality texts can be provided in a wide range of African languages to stimulate children's interest in reading, across the African continent and beyond.

Setting: The African Storybook (ASb) initiative of the South African Institute of Distance Education (Saide) aims to provide illustrated texts in local languages and language varieties that enable children to read for pleasure and for learning. This is done through a publishing model that makes these texts available, cost-effectively, as needed, by teachers, librarians and caregivers.

Methods: Internal reports, external evaluations, two interviews with the initiative's co-ordinator and a review of selected texts on the ASb website provided data for analysis.

Results: The analysis enabled reflection on the challenges faced and the successes achieved, identification of factors that have enabled many of the challenges to be addressed and finally consideration of what the initiative offers as a model for supporting literacy development in local languages.

Conclusion: While the paper tells a story that includes elements of a cautionary tale, it is primarily a story that offers inspiration and guidance to other organisations already involved in, or wishing to embark on, the important project of providing texts for young readers in a wide range of languages.

Keywords: African Storybook initiative; literacy in African languages; digital open licence publishing model; cost-effective children's texts.

Introduction

In South Africa, and in many other African countries, the recasting of the languages of children's homes and communities as 'a problem' for schooling and the lack of reading materials in these languages are legacies of colonial discourses which constructed the languages of the colonial powers (English, French and Portuguese) as superior to local languages (Alexander 2009; Pennycook 1998; Philipson 1996). Currently, there are few (if any) texts for beginner readers available in many African languages and even fewer that incorporate the translanguaging practices evident in the linguistic repertoires of significant numbers of children, particularly those living in urban areas (Makalela 2015; McKinney 2017). After a 2-year investigation of African language publishing for children in South Africa, Edwards and Ngwaru concluded that the quantity of material published was 'limited, even in the more widely spoken languages' and that there was a 'dearth of materials for very young children' (2010:iii). They also found that publishers considered the production and distribution of texts for children in African languages to be both 'risky and expensive' (2010:v). In Moller's subsequent investigation of the state of multilingual publishing in South Africa, the hegemonic position of English is evident in her finding that 'mother tongue speakers of African languages prefer to write in English in order to get published and to ensure a wider audience' (2013:4) and also in her finding that 'many publishers show no

innovative strategies to create high-quality work in African languages which will remain cheap and accessible' (2013:4).

Although the South African Constitution states that all 11 official languages must 'enjoy parity and be treated equitably' in all spheres of public life, including schooling, turning a right into reality is an enormous challenge. For example, although the official language-in-education policy in South Africa (and in many other African countries) supports 'mother tongue' education in the early years of schooling and additive bi- and multilingualism throughout the school system, in practice the lack of texts in the languages that children know when they start school, has negative consequences for literacy development. Literacy researchers in South Africa have found that teachers are likely to teach as they themselves were taught, using a very small number of texts repeatedly if these are available, or to attempt to teach learners to read in a language that they do not know well – usually the language introduced by the former colonial power – and in doing so to focus on learners' ability to read aloud rather than to read for comprehension (Pretorius 2014; Rule & Land 2017; Taylor 2014). A researcher working in Uganda (another country in which the learners' mother tongue is supposed to be used for initial literacy learning) found that when student teachers at a Ugandan college of education were asked about their experience of reading while at primary school (Janks 2016a):

> … the highest number of stories that any student had read throughout primary school was five, others had read none or one, and only 10% of students had been taught to read in the language they spoke at home. (pp. 8–9)

Given the extensive research which supports the importance for literacy, of learning to read and write first in your primary language, and then using this as a base to transition into languages of wider communication, it is not surprising that throughout sub-Saharan Africa the majority of children in the middle years of primary school have performed poorly on a range of national and international reading tests (Barrett 2015; Howie et al. 2017; Pretorius 2014). Lack of access to texts in the languages that children know well has been cited as one of the main reasons for this poor performance (Edwards & Ngwaru 2011; Parry, Andema & Tumusiime 2005; United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/Uganda School Health and Reading Program 2015; Welch 2012).

In 2013, the African Storybook (ASb) initiative was launched to respond to the severe shortage of local language early reading materials throughout sub-Saharan Africa. This paper draws on external evaluators' reports at mid-term and at the end of the 4-year pilot initiative (Gultig 2017; Janks & Harley 2015), five of the six commissioned case studies on the aspects of ASb's work and a cross-case synthesis (Harley 2016a, 2016b; Janks 2016a, 2016b, 2016c), the 2016 report of ASb's co-ordinator, Tessa Welch (Saide 2016), an overview of the initiative prepared for one of its principal funders (Saide 2017a, 2017b) and a concept document with regard to reading promotion (Saide 2017d), together with a video-recorded and transcribed interview with the initiative's co-ordinator (April, 2017) and a subsequent shorter interview (May, 2018). Each of these is drawn on to reflect on the challenges faced and the successes achieved to date, to identify factors that have enabled both responses to the challenges and the achievement of success in several aspects of ASb's work and finally to reflect on the initiative as a model for supporting literacy development in local languages.

The African Storybook initiative

The ASb initiative of the South African Institute of Distance Education (Saide) aims 'not only to provide storybooks in the range of languages needed by young African children as they are learning to read', but also (Saide 2016) to:

> … do so through a publishing model that ensures that growing numbers of storybooks are available to teachers, parents and librarians as needed, without having to consider the size and buying power of the market for a particular language. (p. 3)

Theoretically framed by conceptual and empirical studies in the fields of bi- and multilingual education (e.g. Heugh, Siegruhn & Pluddemann 1995; McKinney 2017), critical literacy (e.g. Janks 2010) and new literacy studies (e.g. Cope & Kalantzis 2000; Pahl & Rowsell 2005), the vision of the initiative is summarised on its website: 'Open access to picture storybooks in the languages of Africa for children's literacy, enjoyment and imagination' (www.africanstorybook.org).

With funding from the United Kingdom-based organisation *Comic Relief*, in 2013 the ASb initiative began a 4-year pilot project with 'in-country co-ordinators' facilitating its work in schools, teacher education institutions, libraries and community centres in Kenya, Uganda and South Africa. Its website was officially launched in June 2014, and by 2017, partnerships between ASb and non-government organisations (NGOs), universities and individual champions of the initiative had been established in Ethiopia, Rwanda, Ghana and Zambia (Saide 2017a).

On its website there are two categories of ASb texts: those created and published independently by the website community and those produced and published through ASb's central office in Johannesburg. The latter are identified as 'ASb approved' because they have been through a quality assurance process in both their original and commissioned translation versions (Treffry-Goatley 2016). Although the majority of texts are stories of various kinds, there are also poems, songs, rhymes, information texts and wordless picture books. The texts are organised into four 'levels' beginning with 'First words' (one image and up to nine words per page) and culminating in 'Longer paragraphs' (there may not be an image on each page and with up to 150 words on a page). In addition, there are storybooks for teachers, librarians, caregivers or older children to read aloud to young audiences.

With the exception of a small number of donated titles, all texts have African origins. In the first years of the initiative, the majority were developed and written by teachers,

librarians and education students in Kenya, Uganda, South Africa and Lesotho, but currently writers from a number of other African countries (e.g. Ethiopia and Cameroon) are contributing texts to the website. Some of the texts on the site have been translated into multiple languages – 22 languages in the case of a story originally written in Lusoga and English (*Omusaadha omuleeyi einho* and *A very tall man*). Editing of the texts, commissioning of illustrations and online creation are done at ASb's central office in Johannesburg.

Although ASb's priority is the promotion of reading in indigenous African languages, its staff members acknowledge that 'the national languages of colonising countries are still aspirational in many post-independence countries, and associated with access to social and economic power' (Treffry-Goatley 2016:10) and also that there is demand for texts in English on the website because of the widespread use of English in schools in southern and East Africa and in parts of West Africa.

African Storybook 2013–2017: Achievements, challenges encountered and lessons learned

African Storybook's achievements are outlined in two categories: growth in text numbers, in the languages in which texts are available and in improving quality assurance on the one hand; and influence on Open Education Resource (OER) debates and practices on the other. There have also been a number of challenges encountered and responding to some of these is still work in progress.

Expanding 'reach': The numbers 'speak'

In the mid-term evaluation of what ASb had achieved in relation to an initial base-line study, Janks and Harley wrote 'on every measure there are remarkable gains' (2015:ii), while Gultig's recent external evaluation report begins with the statement that '[T]he African Storybook initiative have exceeded all the important targets they set when embarking on this project' (2017:5).

Gultig's (2017) report together with the 2016 ASb co-ordinator's report (Saide 2016) and a recent concept and strategy document prepared by Saide for funders (November 2017), document growth both in overall text availability and in quality-assured texts. The initiative's text stock has grown to 4786 stories. In terms of countering the effects of linguistic colonialism, one of ASb's most noteworthy achievements is that by the end of 2016, 68% of the texts produced were in indigenous African languages, with the total number of languages used in texts reaching 120 by November 2017 – mostly from Africa but a few from other parts of the world. The text stock includes 3500 translated texts together with 864 original texts and 422 adapted texts (Saide 2017d).

From the initiative's launch in 2013 to the time of the mid-pilot evaluation in 2015, the many activities associated with launching ASb took up much of the time of the initiative's small core staff, leaving limited time for quality assuring the texts uploaded on the website. As a result, only 37% had been quality-assured by the end of 2015. However, one year later the percentage had risen to 61% (Saide 2016).

The accessibility of available texts enhances the reach of the project. Gultig reports that the monthly average download of texts more than doubled from the inception of the website in 2014 to the latter part of 2016: from an average of 14 602 to an average of 31 566 (Gultig 2017). Community librarians in countries involved in the pilot phase of the initiative have been enthusiastic users. For example, at the Kibera Library in Nairobi, 14 000 children were reached in 3 months through digitally projected story reading sessions of a total of 41 storybooks in Kiswahili and English, with teachers bringing children from 70 schools to the library for their weekly library period (interviewed on 20 April 2017, ASb co-ordinator). In Uganda, the Busolwe Community Library is the hub for a wide range of literacy activities offered in a deeply rural area. The library is the home of the Lunyole Language Association that has played an important role in developing the Lunyole language through producing a Lunyole dictionary and stabilising Lunyole orthography. The Association members play a central role in writing and editing stories in Lunyole, in running ASb story reading sessions at the library and in supporting the work in schools of the in-country co-ordinator (Janks 2016c; Tembe & Reed 2016).

As a result of the accessibility of the materials, there has been a significant increase in independent use of the website by teachers, librarians and others in countries beyond the pilot countries in which ASb staff promote its texts and their use in formal and informal literacy education. In 2016, independent users in countries such as Ethiopia, Tunisia and Cameroon included 3189 teachers and over 100 000 children who had accessed stories with 'very little or no effort' on the part of ASb (Saide 2016). *Worldreader*, a large e-book NGO, is using 51 ASb titles on mobile devices as well as in their school and library projects in sub-Saharan Africa. This organisation reports having 'pushed' 42 968 individual ASb storybooks to their projects, with the majority going to Nigeria (Saide 2017b).

Another success has been the recent take-up of ASb texts by key players in the provision of formal schooling. For example, the Kenyan Institute of Curriculum Development 'has approved and republished 135 titles on the Kenya Education Cloud and is loading ASb storybooks onto tablets being distributed to all Kenyan public primary schools' (Saide 2017b:3). In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education is uploading 30 ASb titles to its website for use in its *Read2Lead* campaign. These will be available in all official languages with bi- or multilingual learners able to read the same story in more than one language (Saide 2017b:3). These titles can be viewed on Vodacom Digital Classrooms, with data zero-rated for Vodacom subscribers (see http://digitalclassroom.co.za/digitalclassroom/otherresources-3/African-storybook-stories).

In December 2017, participants in the Salzburg Global Seminar's session on *Springboard for Talent: Language Learning and Integration in a Globalized World* issued the following statement (Salzburg Statement 2017):

> In today's interconnected world, the ability to speak multiple languages and communicate across linguistic divides is a critical skill. Even partial knowledge of more than one language is beneficial. Proficiency in additional languages is a new kind of global literacy. Language learning needs to be expanded for all – young and old. However, millions of people across the globe are denied the inherent right to maintain, enjoy and develop their languages of identity and community. This injustice needs to be corrected in language policies that support multilingual societies and individuals. (p. 1)

With reference to enjoying and developing their languages of identity and community, teachers, teacher educators, librarians, parents and other caregivers, community leaders and children reached through the ASb pilot programme have expressed their pleasure in reading and teaching reading and in originating or translating texts into local languages. The three examples quoted here are broadly representative of the 'flavour' of this appreciation:

> 'Maa teachers did not believe it was possible to teach in Maa. And they didn't know that they could produce stories in Maa' (Lecturer at Kenyatta University, Kenya, quoted in Janks & Harley 2015:17).

> This is an historic moment: after at least 100 years of being treated as a subset of Dagbani, the Mampruli language (spoken by three quarters of a million people in Ghana) is recognised in its own right! (Michael Stark of Educators International speaking about stories in a neglected Ghanaian language, quoted in the ASb co-ordinator's report 2016:7).

> When I express myself in the language of my heart I'm sure of what is coming out. Their hearts – their culture – is being opened up by reading these stories so they find they are going much deeper in their learning. This is what African Storybook helps us do. (Hirome Gershom, Chairperson Lunyole Language Association, Uganda, quoted on the front cover of Gultig 2017).

A key finding of Stranger-Johanessen and Norton's (2017) investigation of language teachers' responses to the ASb initiative is that the investment of these teachers in language learning, and the desire to read, are enhanced both by the affirmation of their identities through the availability of texts in local languages and by enabling their access to and use of digital resources.

Influencing Open Education Resource debates and practices

Amongst many practices, the aims of the Saide (n.d.) are to:

- stimulate and/or coordinate projects for the adaptation, development and use of OER
- encourage institutions to develop policy that supports the use, creation and sharing of OER
- support and contribute to networks and communities of practice involved in the development and use of OER (p. 4).

The ASb initiative involves all three and all three involve advocacy work. The external evaluator's report describes 'powerful examples' (Gultig 2017:12) of the quality of ASb's influence on OER debates and practices in Africa and globally. For example, the initiative is 'being noticed, published and used by global influencers' (Gultig 2017:13) such as the Global Book Alliance which both cites ASb's contribution to global thinking about book development and provision and uses ASb's typology of early literacy reading levels. In addition, the Global Book Alliance invited ASb to join its technical working groups which investigated how to transform book access, development, delivery and use in developing country contexts.

A total of 200 ASb titles form part of the newly launched (2018) Global Digital Library which aims to increase the availability of high-quality reading resources in underserved languages worldwide. The ASb texts are one of three core collections of this new library together with those of Storyweaver, a project of Pratham books that operates in similar ways to ASb from its base in India (https://storyweaver.org.in/) and Benetech. The Global Book Alliance has contracted Saide to do quality assurance of selected African language titles for the new Global Digital Library.

A group based at the University of British Columbia has taken 40 ASb titles and created a website for Canada (http://www.storybookscanada.ca/). It uses a translation tool to translate these ASb titles into 14 languages spoken in Canada (including Urdu, Punjabi, Persian and Arabic). These books can also be listened to in audio form.

African Storybook's work is described in two 'influential publications' (Gultig 2017), namely, the *Global Open Policy Report* (2016) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) publication *Open Educational Resources: Policy, Costs and Transformation*. African Storybook's network of advocacy partners 'continues to grow' (Gultig 2017:11) and in late 2016 stood at 55 individuals and organisations listed on the website as active partners.

In addition to research being undertaken by ASb staff and partners, further research is being conducted by academics and postgraduate students at several universities who are engaged in research projects with aspects of ASb's work as the focus. Conference presentations and published journal articles contribute to ASb's work reaching wider audiences.

Current and future challenges for African Storybook

Several challenges were identified in the mid-term and the end of pilot phase evaluations, while others have emerged from the work of in-country co-ordinators and the core ASb staff. These are outlined here and discussed further later in the paper, in conjunction with factors contributing to ASb's achievements.

Variability of impact

One challenge is that of responding to the variability of impact (Gultig 2017) of the materials and of professional development workshops across sites within and across countries. The mid-term evaluation, the case studies and the end of pilot phase evaluation all point to the need for ASb to make strategic decisions about which sites to continue supporting and what kinds of support are needed. Gultig suggests that 'socially cohesive pilot sites benefit from resourcing and training at a much higher multiple than do others' (2017:10). In their mid-term evaluation, Janks and Harley (2015) argue that these socially cohesive sites are often in rural contexts and that rather than being associated with 'deficit', 'rural can equate with asset' (2015:72). However, ASb's work has also been very successful in some urban sites such as the Kibara library, suggesting that decision-making about which sites to support and how will require careful consideration of a number of contextual variables.

Limited success in teacher education

In the mid-term pilot project evaluation, Janks and Harley (2015) stated that it was vital for ASb to engage teacher education providers and to work with them because of the potential 'multiplier effect in terms of children reached' by teachers who are aware of ASb's resources and pedagogically able to use them optimally in the classroom. One of the key findings from Janks's (2016a) case study of 'systemic implementation through teacher education' is that, unsurprisingly, the institutions most able to utilise the ASb website productively in their initial teacher education and teacher professional development programmes, with minimal ASb support, are 'well-established' universities. Those with more limited resources (both in South Africa and in Kenya) have managed to produce stories (some original and many as translations), but only with the on-going support of ASb staff and there is as yet no evidence of student teachers or newly qualified teachers using ASb materials in the classroom. The evaluators (Gultig 2017; Janks 2016a) and the ASb co-ordinator (interviewed on 20 April 2017) all agree that to embed the initiative in early years' teacher education programmes, ASb will need 'buy-in' from national and provincial departments of education. In 2018, members of the ASb team have liaised with Foundation and Intermediate Phase teacher educators at some South African universities and as a result have been invited to offer workshops to student teachers to raise awareness of what the materials offer. To date there has been no research on 'take-up' from these workshops during teaching practicums or in the teaching of newly qualified teachers.

Questions about story content, text genres and the language(s) of stories

In her case study of the use of the ASb website in teacher education, Janks (2016a) queries the content of some of the stories generated by student teachers at a 'well-established' South African university:

> Not all the stories submitted have an African feel. Students could be invited to look though the stories produced by the class as well as stories on the website to try and articulate what makes a story an African story. Should African stories be about grizzly bears or fireflies? Do people in Africa eat frogs legs? Should isiZulu stories have children with names in English only? Do we want 'dwarves' or the 'eloko', a dwarf-like African Mythical creature? It might be worthwhile encouraging students to read stories from Africa including ASb approved stories and to do some internet research. (p. 10)

Treffry-Goatley's (2016) study of 40 folktales on the ASb website also raises questions about story content. One of her key findings is that 90% of these tales are set in 'somewhat idealised villages and settlements' in rural environments that are 'relatively untouched by modern communications and infrastructure' and that they represent a 'nostalgic imagined past' (2016:iv). With the single exception of a television set in one story, 'there are no references to electronic or digital technologies' (2016:75). Treffry-Goatley points out that the absence of urban and contemporary settings is only problematic if these settings are not represented or are underrepresented in the rest of the genres that make up the ASb collection. Another of her findings is that despite the occurrence of 'supernatural characters, objects and events in nearly 75% of the folktales' and the 'heteronormativity' and 'narrowly defined family roles' evident in the folktales, they do 'provide a range of identity positions for both girls and boys in African contexts' (2016:iv). Her recommendation is that teachers and other adult caregivers find ways to 'balance the moral and cultural lessons in folktales with the need for children to imagine and construct different worlds and positions for themselves' (2016:iv). Treffry-Goatley's study thus points to two challenges for the ASb initiative: the challenge of finding ways to support teachers and other adults in finding this balance when they work with folktales and the challenge of 'balanced provision' of texts in a range of genres and contexts (also raised by Janks 2016b).

Given the affordances of the ASb website for extending children's access to information, questions have been raised about the extension of its pedagogic role. Stories or information texts that introduce the vocabulary children need, as they prepare for subject study in Grade 4, will be the focus of some of ASb's work in future (interviewed on 20 April 2017, ASb co-ordinator).

For those teachers and others involved in early reading who would like opportunities for bi- or multilingual children to engage in translanguaging (intermingling linguistic features of two or more of the languages in their linguistic repertoire), it is possible to use the ASb website to develop bilingual storybooks. ASb promotes the use of the same title in different languages as another vehicle for translanguaging, with the ASb co-ordinator stating the following in the 2016 report (Saide 2016):

> Because our stories are available also in English (and increasingly in French and Portuguese as well), trans-languaging between dominant and less powerful languages is facilitated, i.e., the use of different languages to support comprehension. (p. 17)

Sustainability and/or expansion

Evident in all the literature to date on the ASb initiative is the theme of commitment and creativity on the part of what Harley describes as the 'small number of specialized and extremely gifted staff' (2016c:9). As the initiative moves into its post-pilot phase, questions of sustainability, consolidation and expansion become increasingly important. One of ASb's expansion strategies can be summed up in the words 'let the local lead' (Welch 2016, quoted in Gultig 2017:19). African Storybook is exploring the possibility of 'mainstreaming' ASb texts through Kenya Library Services (interviewed on 20 April 2017, ASb co-ordinator). Another strategy is for ASb to participate with partners in tendering for contracts which have improving literacy as their focus, although as these contracts originate and are managed from the political north, it seems to be difficult for initiatives from the south to gain recognition (interviewed on 20 April 2017, ASb co-ordinator). To address the ongoing requests for professional development of various kinds (e.g. translating stories, originating stories, using stories with children), Harley (2016c) suggests recruiting interns – possibly from teacher education programmes – who would serve an apprenticeship by attending and then becoming involved in training sessions under the leadership of ASb personnel.

The authors of the mid-term (Janks & Harley 2015) and end of pilot phase (Gultig 2017) evaluations concur that integrating ASb into state systems (education and libraries) is one of the keys to sustainability and expansion. According to the ASb co-ordinator, although such integration has been one of the aims of the initiative from the start, it is a slow and complex process. Lessons learned thus far include the importance of identifying the right division within a government department and the importance of aligning what ASb can offer with the goals of this division. In each of the countries participating in the pilot phase, within departments of education, e-learning and innovation divisions have proved more open to new ideas and more flexible than their counterparts in curriculum and learning and teaching support materials (LTSMs). In general, library services personnel are more 'in tune' with ASb's focus on reading for pleasure than are departments of education and more appreciative of what can be achieved by 'going digital'.

Accounting for African Storybook's successes and its capacity to respond to challenges

The four factors identified are offered for consideration by organisations interested in supporting the provision and take-up of reading materials in local languages.

The affordances of a digital open licence publishing model

In its 2017 overview report to *Comic Relief*, Saide stated that by providing web tools that enabled translation and re-use on the one hand and the creation of new stories in local languages on the other, the ASb initiative has demonstrated that it is possible to quickly produce storybooks in quantities needed for learning to read (Saide 2017a:1–2). The open licence publishing model, together with the sizeable stock of images and texts on the website, makes for very cost-effective large-scale printing. For example, in 2015 the Department of Education in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal printed 5000 full colour, A4 size, 64-page story anthologies for USD1.50 per copy and 166 000 A5 black and white books for only USD0.25 per copy (Saide 2017b:4). In 2017, ASb arranged for the printing of 562 928 full colour A5 books (137 titles) to be printed and distributed to 1020 schools in South Africa's North-West Province at a total print and distribution cost of R1 320 927. This is R2.35 or $0.17 per book (Saide 2017d:3).

The affordances of a responsive website and mixed delivery methods

The ASb website enables both individual and group online and offline reading, the latter facilitated by offline or online digital projection in school classrooms, libraries or other community centres. An App has been developed and released in both Android and Internet Operating System (IOS) formats to facilitate the downloading of texts for reading offline on mobile devices. Not only can stories be read by individuals or in groups, but stories can also be created online, using either illustrations from the website's image bank or the story creator's own illustrations. Stories can also be translated or adapted online or offline.

To facilitate online creation and translation of storybooks in contexts which have intermittent connectivity, Saide is partnering with *Nucleos* and testing its portable Wi-Fi-enabled Local Area Network (LAN) server. The ASb site will be mirrored on this server, and all work done when not connected to the main site will synchronise when connectivity is restored.

Formal and informal partnerships and collaborations

As indicated earlier, ASb actively seeks partnerships for various aspects of its work, including story development and story translation on the one hand and large-scale delivery of texts on the other. With reference to story development, one example of a productive partnership is ASb's collaboration with *Imagine1Day* in Ethiopia. This organisation arranged a story development workshop for teachers, provided interpretation from Amharic or Tigrigna where necessary, organised for translation of Tigrigna storybooks into English, identified local illustrators, will print and distribute storybooks and will provide feedback to ASb on their use. ASb staff facilitated the story development workshop, edited the English version of the storybooks and worked with the illustrators before the publication of the texts that originated at the workshop (Saide 2017b:4). An example of a partnership with a focus on large-scale delivery of texts to schools is that between Saide (the ASb 'parent' organisation) and other South African NGOs with the *USAID Reading Support*

Programme, to supply 42 ASb titles in eight languages to all primary schools in two of South Africa's provinces. As partnerships with departments of education evolve, it is anticipated that these could eventually focus not only on the provision and use of texts in schools but also on the inclusion of story creation and ASb story use in teacher education programmes.

Responsiveness and creativity of African Storybook staff

Both the mid-term and end of pilot evaluations of the ASb initiative highlighted the key role of its core staff members in responding creatively to challenges as they arise. One example of an initiative, which has both pedagogic and cost benefits, is 'colour-in' versions of some storybooks. *A 'Newsflash'* in May 2017 advised users of the ASb website of the availability of the colour-in versions and accompanied the announcement with the following pedagogic information (Saide 2017c):

> Colouring in pictures has the following benefits for young learners: it is useful for developing fine motor skills and hand-eye co-ordination (for getting ready to write and improving writing); it is an opportunity to learn or reinforce colours; it promotes imaginative visual responses to reading story text; and it is a fun and creative activity! (p. 1)

In addition to the external evaluations of the ASb initiative, the core staff have raised and responded to a series of research questions around the use of the website and the development and use of storybooks and are using their findings, together with those from the evaluations, to inform their ongoing work.

The evaluations and the case studies highlight the achievements of the initiative in enlarging ASb's footprint in Africa and beyond and, in doing so, countering some of the effects of linguistic colonialism and contributing to global literacy. They also identify what has been achieved at what might be termed the meso-political level, in terms of advocacy of OER in general and ASb in particular.

The greatest ongoing challenges are at the macro-political level of engagement with national and provincial governments and government departments that oversee school curricula, teacher education curricula and library provision because it is in these departments that decisions are made about 'which language resources should count in schooling, which languages to use as languages of instruction, and how language should be taught' – all of which are 'key to achieving social justice in education' (McKinney 2017:4). If decisions at the macro-level recognise that learners' languages are an important resource for learning to read and for learning in general, that open access OER offer cost-effective possibilities for provision of high-quality and high-interest texts in both local and global languages, and that pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes should prepare teachers for using these texts optimally, then it is likely to be easier for ASb and similar initiatives to secure the funding that will enable them to sustain and expand their pioneering work. Another macro-political challenge is that of achieving recognition of the value of local contextual knowledge and experience by international funding agencies who award tenders for literacy development.

The African Storybook initiative as a model to be emulated or adapted?

What do the ASb initiative and the evaluations of its first four years of operation offer to departments of education, teacher educators, teachers, community librarians, materials developers and disseminators, NGOs and individuals concerned with early literacy development inside and outside the classroom? Threaded through the extracts from external evaluations and internal accounts of ASb's work are evidence of its personnel doing the following:

- embracing and using in creative and cost-effective ways, the affordances of new technologies for creating new texts, for versioning existing texts in many languages; for reading texts and for communicating with widely dispersed interested individuals, organisations and institutions
- aiming for long-term quality but recognising the value of text quantity – as many texts as possible in as many languages even if in the short term these may include language structures or vocabulary items that are contested by language experts
- wherever possible, developing partnerships to take forward ASb's work – particularly in terms of extending its reach into formal contexts
- valuing external evaluation as a guide to improvement
- believing passionately in the value of the initiative and working tirelessly to strengthen it.

Each of these has implications for 'take-up' of the ASb initiative as a model. For new technologies to be used creatively and cost-effectively an organisation must employ staff with the expertise to drive this part of the initiative (as Saide has done) and needs to develop knowledge of what is doable in a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural contexts (as Saide has done through its in-country co-ordinators and some of its partners). Heated debates about the correct written forms of many of the languages of Africa have sometimes resulted in the rejection of texts that could be of value to learners, when there are alternative possibilities such as flagging that a text is written in a version of a language spoken in one part of a country. Teachers' and learners' interest in linguistic variety could be stimulated by reading multiple versions of a story: arguably it is better to adopt an inclusive attitude to texts rather than an exclusive one while working towards quality assurance of all texts. Partnerships of the kinds outlined in this paper are vital. One area in which more needs to be done is for providers of texts in local languages to partner with teacher educators and providers of teacher professional development courses, so that awareness of these texts and understanding of how to use them with learners becomes part of the literacy curriculum in initial teacher education and in teacher professional

development workshops. The mid-term and end of pilot phase evaluations provided Saide with a great deal of useful information to guide the way forward and thus need to be part of the budget of organisations aiming to do similar work. The evaluations of the ASb initiative have been both very complementary about what its personnel have achieved and simultaneously concerned about 'burn out', recommending that expansion needs to be 'partner-driven'. In any long-term initiative to develop and disseminate materials, organisations also need to include staff mentoring and succession planning.

If individuals, NGOs, universities, libraries or government departments have an interest in promoting young learners' literacy in local languages but doubt their capacity to emulate or adapt the ASb model, they may find it useful to contact the ASb team at Saide to work out a partnership arrangement of some kind.

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