



Title of Project:

The African Storybook and Teacher Identity

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Final Report

Motivation for the Research

Literacy rates in early primary school remain low in Uganda, despite concerted efforts from the government and non-governmental organizations, including a new curriculum, universal primary education, and large projects to promote literacy (Piper, 2010). Government initiatives and NGO interventions include comprehensive efforts on in-service training, textbook development, local language orthography development, provision of supplementary readers, and collaboration with educational officials, including efforts to scale up interventions (e.g., Lucas, McEwan, Ngware, and Oketch, 2014; Mango Tree, n.d.; RTI International, n.d.). Like many other African countries, Uganda is a multilingual nation, which poses a challenge in providing educational materials and teacher training that can adequately meet curricular demands. Of the country's 43 recognized languages (Government of Uganda, 1992), just over 30 languages are used for instructional purposes in schools (LABE, FAWEU, & UNATU, n.d.). In most of these languages, however, reading materials are scarce, and the titles that are available in bookstores are usually unaffordable to most people. Books in English are more prevalent, but they are similarly prohibitively expensive for most Ugandans.

The lack of storybooks to support early reading development in African schools is the major driving force of the African Storybook (ASb; Welch & Glennie, 2016a, 2016b; Welch, Tembe, Wepukhulu, Baker, & Norton, 2014). The ASb was launched in 2013 by the South African organization Saide and seeks to promote multilingual literacy for young African students through the provision of openly licenced digital stories in multiple African languages, as well as English, French, and Portuguese, which are official languages on the African continent. Although literacy initiatives may help some schools and widen our understanding of literacy and teacher support, there is also a need to investigate how teachers and schools can improve with less outside support, because this is the situation in which most teachers find themselves. Most initiatives to promote early literacy focus on training teachers in a particular set of methods and



the use of textbooks to impart foundational skills, including decoding, and otherwise comprehend and construct meaning from text. Researching how teachers use stories to teach literacy in a context of limited methodological support, and what resources and circumstances influence and affect their use, will deepen understanding of teaching practices. While the ASb represents one of many literacy interventions in Africa, it stands out by offering stories in digital format that can be projected onto a screen, but also by not providing a set methodology for the use of the stories or literacy instruction (cf. Lucas et al., 2014; Sailors & Price, 2015).

The theoretical framework is based on Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment. The concept of investment is related to an understanding of identity as being variable, socially constructed and intertwined with power relations. The framework situates investment at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology, and seeks to bridge the micro, meso, and macro relationships in language learning and teaching.

Research Questions

1. In what ways is engagement with the ASb linked to wider educational practices in a small Ugandan town?
2. To what extent are teachers invested in stories from the ASb?
3. How does investment in these stories provide insight into teachers' identities in this context?

Research Methodology

The dissertation was based on case study as a research design and the use of ethnographic methods of data collection, such as interviews and participant observation. The main research site – Arua Hill Primary School, was also one of the pilot sites of the ASb. In addition to the main site, there were four other sites, two primary schools in Arua town and two libraries north of Arua, which also provided data for this research. The participants of this study were teachers, head teachers, librarians, and the centre coordinating tutor (CCT) of the district. (The CCT is a liaison between the government and a cluster of schools, who provides in-service training and otherwise supports the schools she is working with.) I interviewed all of these participants and the transcribed interviews constitute the core of my data. The data collection instruments included field notes, interviews, focus group discussions, and a questionnaire. The data were analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive coding, and the codes developed through this process served to identify salient themes.

Summary of Findings

A core aspect of the ASb implementation is the choice to use projectors to display stories, rather than the more conventional approach of using printed booklets. In making this choice, and making all its stories available under open licences, the ASb is part of a relatively young but rapidly growing trend to make educational resources openly available and focus on technology in meeting educational goals. Language issues, such as tensions between English and the local language Lugbarati, and developments in its orthography, are important aspects of the context in which the ASb operated, as recent changes in the orthography had implications for writing stories and teaching literacy in lower primary. The teachers' views of teaching and learning, providing a foundation for analysing their investment, or lack thereof, in the stories. This includes the key discourse on child-centred learning, which reflects the national curriculum as



well as international views on education. The availability of what the teachers considered relevant and appropriate materials benefitted student engagement and facilitated teachers' work, which in turn supported teachers' investment.

Several factors that contribute to facilitating or circumscribing the use of stories and teachers' investment in their use. Economic factors of working as a teacher in Arua also had a strong presence in the teachers' lives, and impinged on their work with and investment in the ASb in several ways. While financial conditions and constraints were of concern, ideological tensions had perhaps a stronger influence on the teachers' daily professional work. The teachers were facing "[p]ressure from outside and pressure from here!" Demands, disagreements, and lack of clarity regarding exams, language of instruction, and student performance often placed the teachers in a catch-22 situation, with divergent demands and expectations from different stakeholders, including the question of whether to teach in English or Lugbarati.

With the introduction of the ASb, some of the teachers started identifying as writers and translators as their own stories, poems, and translations were published on the ASb website. With access to the ASb stories, some teachers also expressed that they saw teaching in a new light, and took the opportunity that the stories afforded to address important issues, such as gender roles and personal safety. The teachers were already experienced with multimodal ways of teaching, and built on these practices with the introduction of the stories and the digital tools.

Social and cultural capital served as a resource for the teachers and facilitated the use of stories, and the teachers' capital increased through their interactions and learning through the use of the computer and stories from the ASb. Ideological practices regarding language, assessment, and supervision affect teachers' investment in the ASb and its stories, which in turn affect the understanding of their uptake of the stories and teaching practices in general. Four teacher identities were identified in the data: (a) teacher as writer and translator, (b) teacher as change agent, (c) teacher as multimodal, multiliterate educator, and (d) teacher as digital educator. With reference to Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, the teaching of ASb stories intersected with the teachers' social and cultural capital, while ideological practices of mother tongue usage, assessment, and supervision had bearings on the teachers' use of stories and their investment in them. Some of the teachers bridged what was sometimes seen as a gap between the curriculum and the teaching of stories, and embraced the ASb stories and their own creativity and identities in the process.

Implications

This research addresses gaps in the literature by investigating how an online platform can effectively provide stories to remote classrooms, and how teachers respond to stories and develop a sense of ownership and pedagogical practice through using stories to teach English and the local language literacy. Lessons learnt from this will inform other teachers and educators working with stories to teach and develop literacy in Africa and beyond as well as policy makers on how an online repository can serve as a hub for children's stories.

As this research has demonstrated, the ASb successfully builds on and extends the oral tradition of storytelling. Creation and translation are also important for the teachers who use the stories in their teaching, as they become known online and in their communities. The digital interface between global distribution of stories (receiving and submitting) and local practices of telling and using stories for teaching was central to the relative success of the ASb, providing a



space for a range of identities at the interface of the familiar and the new. The teaching of stories was not a major departure from other ways of teaching, but typically involved individual students reading and pointing to words, which the teachers considered child-centred learning. The use of stories did expand the amount of reading that took place, however, and in some cases helped the teachers reconsider the place of reading in school – to something that rightfully belonged to all subjects, not just English and literacy. Because the stories are all in English (as well as multiple other languages), the ASb website extended the English competence of multilingual teachers as they engaged with a story and reflected on how to mediate and/or translate stories from English into local African languages. This was a meaningful exercise that enhanced language learning as well as professional development.

These findings may serve as a starting point for building on teachers' knowledge, understanding, and practices to meaningfully, respectfully, and effectively achieve change for young readers in poorly resourced African communities. My findings suggest that educational policy needs to recognize the realities that teachers and schools are facing and the limitations of large-scale, top-down interventions, and instead support teachers through building on their current knowledge and practices to improve literacy rates and stimulating classroom practices. Such a shift from perceived “best practices” to “enhanced practices” (cf. Guthrie, 2011; see also Dubeck et al., 2015) requires an understanding of what teachers do, and how they do it, and what structures their teaching practices, which this dissertation has addressed.



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