

## Nal'ibali and libraries: activating reading together

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### Abstract:

*In this paper I discuss the Nal'ibali reading-for-enjoyment campaign in relation to the role of libraries and librarians in South Africa. Nal'ibali aims to re-ignite a passion for storytelling and reading among adults and children as an urgent strategic intervention to transform children's opportunities for becoming readers and writers. The campaign grows from the view that despite the fact that the majority of children continue to do really badly in school literacy learning, all children, and not only children of the English speaking elite can and should learn to become literate through personally meaningful and satisfying encounters with print. I will outline how Nal'ibali collaborates with libraries on events, training and support for reading clubs and offers materials in relevant languages as part of the campaign. Initiated by PRAESA in 2012 jointly with the DG Murray Trust, the campaign has begun to help inspire and motivate librarians to be the reading role models needed by children so that their language and literacy learning has a chance to flourish. I share ideas and challenges in the progress we are making as we nurture biliteracy and literary roots with libraries.*

### Ke words:

biliteracy, reading culture development, multilingualism, children's literature, stories.

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## Nal'ibali and libraries: activating the gift of reading together

*"The love of libraries, like most loves, must be learned."*  
Alberto Manguel. *The Library at Night*.

### Introduction

This is a wonderful opportunity to celebrate and critique our endeavors to bring children, adults and books together in vibrant and meaningful ways. In 2015, PRAESA is extraordinarily pleased and honoured to be the ALMA laureate for its efforts in reading promotion and children's literature. Our work to promote biliteracy learning and help develop children's literature is in its 3<sup>rd</sup> decade now

(Bloch et al 2010). Started in 1994, as South Africa emerged from apartheid, PRAESA founder, Neville Alexander's vision was to implement multilingual education effectively and democratically in South African schools (Alexander 1999). This of course included children's literacy teaching and learning, and came to be driven and expanded from the perspectives on emergent literacy that I gleaned from my studying and teaching in the UK. Many research and development projects grew from our insistence that language is power and that it is through purposeful use that languages are learned and develop in the case of both their oral and written forms (Bloch 2006).

Currently PRAESA drives the Nal'ibali reading-for-enjoyment campaign ([www.nalibali.org](http://www.nalibali.org)), which it initiated in 2012 jointly with the DG Murray Trust ([www.dgmt.co.za](http://www.dgmt.co.za)). Nal'ibali feels like a teenager now, rooted conceptually in PRAESA history, but increasingly independent as it reaches out and creates its own identity, forging new relationships and partnerships.

Of course, collaboration with libraries as the obvious home of books for everyone has been essential to Nal'ibali from its inception. In this presentation, I will discuss why and how we are nurturing these precious and somewhat precarious biliteracy and literary roots with libraries through the Nal'ibali campaign.

### **The power of stories for becoming readers**

Without romanticizing history, it is true enough to claim that when people learned to read in the past before schools took over the task, they tended to do this by being apprenticed to someone who could already read. And those who could read well, would often read aloud to those who couldn't. A literary mindset and way of life thus often pervaded public and private life, even if 'mass literacy' did not. It's what led Daniel Pennac to say "When someone reads aloud, they raise you to the level of the book. They give you reading as a gift" (Pennac 2008).

And this pervaded in part because of our human propensity for story. Reading aloud progressed from the oral storytelling that informed and enchanted people for millennia. So much is written about the power of stories, and how we are 'storytelling animals' (Gotschall 2012) that I need not harp on it here. The fact is we can't do without them – whether we choose neuroscience, sociology, education, psychology or a rich and complex combination of factors to explain it, it's clear that our social nature leads humans to seek out one another's stories to know and be ourselves and to develop and nurture meaning in our lives. In the seduction of the digital age, visual stories via film and TV have all but taken over as the chosen route to stories for many – yet Nal'ibali is about connecting adults and children around storytelling and reading because being literate continues to be essential for all children, and not only those of the English speaking elite. So as with language, it's not an either African languages or English situation but both-and, similarly it's neither digital /visual or print but both.

In thinking about the role of libraries and librarians today, we need to ask do we use our human propensity for story well enough to entice our children into reading via the opportunities created by libraries? We don't, in part, due to a long-entrenched confusion about what is understood by what I like to call, becoming a reader. Learning to read is part of becoming a reader, but if interpreted too narrowly in the over zealous acceptance of the 'learning to read – then reading to learn' myth<sup>1</sup>, the concentration is on skills at the expense of stories. Tragically, we've all but drowned the story baby, never mind having thrown her out with the bathwater!

Yet motivation and know-how to do the tough and complex work of learning to read (and write) comes most easily when a child becomes riveted over time to meaningful stories contained in writing and in what books hold for them. It's also tough and complex work for a baby to learn to speak. But their immature oral babbling becomes conventional talk over a relatively short space of time because they are absolutely intent on communicating – using their emerging language capabilities and knowledge as they learn how to share ideas with others. Learning to to read and write can be very

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<sup>1</sup> Coming from Harvard professor Jean Chall in the 1990's who said "In K–3 children are learning to read, and in 4–12 children are reading to learn" (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Chall and Jacobs, 2003).

similar (Goodman & Goodman 2014). Children entranced by stories find the energy and commitment to learn how print works and how to shape it for themselves because they want to use it – they sense it’s social power for them.

So literariness promotes literacy. The desire for story and knowledge leads learning momentum, rather than following it. The two need to be finely intertwined to make readers and writers of us. The role of adults, especially adults who are custodians of storybooks, is a truly significant one. Through Nal’ibali’s training of librarians<sup>2</sup>, many librarians are now excited about resurrecting themselves as knowledgeable and magnificent storybook readers and motivators. But this will take time, persistence and resources. Training to do this invites participants into a relaxed non-formal play, song and story related experience, taking them back to early story and book related memories and then involving them in a range of practical explorations and discussions to inspire, motivate and help equip them with enough to feel they can start a reading club/reading sessions with children. The idea is to apprentice people into behaviour and practices that they see as desirable, want to be part of and want to shape for themselves. Training is thus intended as an essential aspect of a web of support which includes digital information and stories, advocacy and events and fundamentally coming to belong to a national network of reading clubs.

### **Stories in African languages and English**

At the heart of a modern multilingual democracy must surely be citizens, young and old, who can express themselves effortlessly - carefully, creatively and critically. This has to mean using your own language/s effectively – both orally and in the high status functions of print. But an enormous systemic stumbling block trips up most children<sup>3</sup> as they strive to learn at school – the requirement to use English for all writing, reading and assessment after just three years. PRAESA’s stance has always been that biliteracy is desirable and necessary in societies like South Africa, which have both individual and societal multilingualism as the norm (Bloch & Alexander 2003). And it is perfectly within the capabilities of all young children to become biliterate if we create and mediate appropriate conditions of learning (Cambourne 1995) and resources.

Nal’ibali produces a bilingual newspaper supplement bi-monthly in several newspapers in combinations of English and each of Xhosa, Zulu, Afrikaans, Sesotho and Sepedi<sup>4</sup>. Currently 2610 copies of the supplement are delivered for free to 15 participating libraries every fortnight to use in library programmes or reading clubs, in communities served by these libraries, or to distribute to parents and members of the public who visit the libraries to take home with them. Since 2012, 20 million supplements have been published in partnership with Times Media, and have hit South Africa’s streets, featuring 170 stories, 200 literacy activities for children and 262 information-sharing items for adults on literacy.

Everyone who wants to run a story session is equipped to do so. Addressed to adults, each supplement contains information on an aspect of literacy development, features a ‘story star’ or reading club, as well as stories with related suggestions. Some stories, the ‘cut-out and keep’ ones, are abridged version of existing storybooks, offered in partnership with publishers. As many of the stories still only exist in English book form, a vibrant translation process is in constant progress. This happens with the entire supplement, including the back page story that is commissioned as a ‘read aloud’ story. Thus Nal’ibali supports the publishing industry - writers, translators and editors - and contributes extensively to the body of translations available in South African languages<sup>5</sup>.

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In 2013, 116 librarians and in 2014, 255 librarians were trained to activate reading for enjoyment by the Nalibali program.

<sup>3</sup> The same block trips up many adults – teachers and librarians too.

<sup>4</sup> All 11 languages should be used: the basic issue is funding.

<sup>5</sup> All back copies of the supplement are freely available to download on [www.nalibali.org](http://www.nalibali.org).

One of the most satisfying aspects of the campaign is to see time and time again, children ‘making’ their own storybooks, which they can hear being brought to life in the session and then take home to share in their family settings. The ‘throwaway’ quality of the supplement and its contents is helping to bring people closer to storybooks as there needs be no anxiety of ‘spoiling’ or ‘dirtying’ precious commodities. One of the challenges is how to ensure ‘good enough’ use of the supplements and their stories, and this constantly brings us to the significance of understanding reading and writing as social practices (Street 1984, Barton 1994) and learning as apprenticeships and the unceasing imperative for ongoing connection and support.

Of course, being paper, many of the stories ‘die’ before long, and my suggestion to the Department of Arts and Culture is to order - in all 11 languages – multiple storybook copies of picture books featured by Nal’ibali for all public libraries. Could the Department of Education do the same thing for school libraries? This would be an impressive collaborative move to support and sustain reading habits. African language speaking young readers deserve the pleasure and satisfaction of saying “Ah! I remember this book!” and then being able to borrow and reread it in a good quality, mother tongue, durable version. Such whetting and then deepening reading appetites also enables the public (children and adults) to increasingly making decisions about our literary tastes and which stories we appreciate most, and this leads to confidence in using the growing treasury of children’s literature in South Africa.

We’ve found out that the language use preference for reading and writing by many young African language speaking reading club members is an intelligent and logical response to an inadequate situation. They know that to advance is to read and write English and so they choose to listen to stories in mother tongue, but develop their own reading and writing in English.<sup>6</sup> However, although learning a language of power (English in this instance) is useful, even essential, it is a very different endeavour to imbibing or creating a story. It is hard work to do so in a language you are trying to make sense of and I believe because this is often such a singular focus of what happens, it is what tends to keep most children from ultimately becoming seasoned readers and writers.

So while listening regularly to stories in a well-known language is undoubtedly positive, those who find the power within themselves to counter the charm of English alone, and get down to reading in their mother tongue too, stand to gain far more intellectually and emotionally. Passionate librarians can be inspiring role models who not only suggest and share great texts with youngsters of all ages, but also champion the urgent message that reading in mother tongue and bilingually makes a well rounded education possible.

### **Advocating for the library within and without**

In a sense, because we are all custodians of stories, we are also all librarians. Each of us has an inner library, and through Nal’ibali we’re in story spring-cleaning and replenishing mode, shining up old, forgotten tales, discarding ones we don’t relate to any more, and filling up our conceptual shelves with new ones.

Training and mentoring workshops are always participatory and include times to explore how to recognize and choose stories for different situations and individuals, how to read aloud, discuss with children, etc. The potential for our inner libraries to grow also comes through Nal’ibali Radio, in partnership with the SABC<sup>7</sup>. Three times a week, stories in all 11 languages are transmitted across the country<sup>8</sup>. In these ways, both children and adults are able to reconnect to the power and value of stories for their lives. And they are wanting access to more, story-by-story and book-by-book.

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<sup>6</sup> This is what we often observe and hear anecdotally and also what a small research study in Cape Town by a visiting Public Policy MA student from Edinburgh University, MinTzu Lee recently suggested.

<sup>7</sup> Children’s stories are broadcast on all SABC public radio stations. Three new stories are aired weekly in 11 languages to a potential weekly audience reach of 2.3 million listeners. All stories are open source and available to download on on [www.nalibali.org](http://www.nalibali.org).

<sup>8</sup> All stories are available for free download on [www.nalibali.org](http://www.nalibali.org).

Of course real libraries in communities across South Africa are exactly the precious places where more reading material should be found and used - and to be deliberately provocative: in order to rejuvenate, expand and deepen reading habits, we could do worse than make paper Mache art work from many of the dusty, often largely irrelevant old English books that continue to line too many library shelves. It is only with use that they have any point at all.

In actual fact reading habits have been and continue to live in South Africa, though often hidden and neglected<sup>9</sup> and often restricted to certain groups of people and particular uses. It seems true to say that the majority of children have had their literary development opportunities hidden so effectively as to render them invisible. This is even often the case in current debates about inclusion and exclusion in the post apartheid literary landscape – yet it is in this space where potential for growth of new readers and writers should be most obvious – and where some progress is taking place. We know that buildings and the books in them come to life through people. Neil Gaiman reflecting on his childhood memories of librarians says:

*“They liked books and they liked the books being read. They taught me how to order books from other libraries on inter-library loans. They had no snobbery about anything I read. They just seemed to like that there was this wide-eyed little boy who loved to read, and would talk to me about the books I was reading, they would find me other books in a series, they would help. They treated me as another reader – nothing less or more.”*

Nal’ibali supports librarians to become increasingly knowledgeable and engaged so that children want to spend time with them. Helping set up and run reading clubs is one way and continuing through holiday programmes is extremely popular and important too. They offer children the chance to have personally satisfying times with stories and like – minded people.

A sense of the enthusiasm and engagement comes through the reflections of some Nal’ibali Mentors. A Limpopo Mentor reflects below on a recent holiday programme she supported with librarians at a local library.

*“Our day2 holiday program was pretty awesome despite the terrible weather, the children still came in numbers  
We had our holiday program, we had 57 children of different ages at  
XX library we played different games, sang songs and rhymes, they mostly enjoyed rhymes such as I am a tea-pot, games such as mutswala.  
We read aloud hyena and the seven little kids (we read it in English and sepedi) The children absolutely loved it, they were very engaging particularly during the post-reading discussions and questions about the goats, the granny and the hyena. We had drawing, writing activities where children came up with songs sang during the meal time between gogo and her little kids, they wrote letters to hyena, to gogo, to the seven children and to the authors”.*  
(Rinae Sikhwari)

Two Western Cape Mentors reflect below on library outreach events during Library Week 2015:

*“....We had over 100 children which we divided them into groups, we sang songs, rhymes then I read them a story. What was so nice about it the children had an opportunity to choose books to read for themselves also reading aloud using pictures even some young kid volunteered himself came and ask if he could read the book? I told him yes. He read the book so nice even he asked some open ended questions to some kids if what they think will happen next using pictures.”*  
(Thando Mkoyi)

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<sup>9</sup> For detail, see Archie L. Dick’s fascinating book published in 2012 by UKZN, ‘The Hidden History of South Africa’s Book and Reading Cultures’.

*“This week we had a library week it was very exciting to meet with new people and see the good things that they do out there and the challenges that they face each and every day . It was very sad when were at school at XX school, they didn’t have books it was very sad for me.”*

(Thabisa Nomkhonwana)

The Nal’ibali supplement regularly features content about the benefits of using the library. This has included articles such as “Five ways to make the most of your community library” and a poster outlining “10 reasons to love your library” during SA Library Week in 2015. In addition, Nal’ibali Mentors frequently visit schools and hold community dialogues with parents and caregivers encouraging families to join the library and get a library card.

### **Let us develop and equip ourselves in literacy# developing and protecting our children#<sup>10</sup>**

It is extraordinarily worthwhile for librarians to realize the vital role they have to play in children’s early literary and literacy education. Our aim is for reading, or story clubs in libraries to proliferate. With ongoing engagement many more librarians will develop essential awareness and insights that they need to feel passionate and equipped for the task, especially those about:

- *Uses of reading and writing:* awareness of one’s personal uses and preferences for reading and writing in daily life, understanding more about who reads and writes with children in families served by the library and what family interests and practices are with print;
- *Languages of reading and writing:* knowing one’s own language choices and which language/s are used for various purposes, appreciating more about the ways children and their families use and want to use languages for reading and writing;
- *The literary - literacy issue:* understanding the role of children’s literature for literacy teaching and learning, appreciating the ways that teachers view their literacy teaching role.

Such awareness and insight demands and nudges action; can we re-imagine the goal of learning, as Barbara Rogoff suggests, to involve a paradigm shift from seeing it as acquiring knowledge and skills, to

*“...transforming participation to contribute and belong in the community. Such transformation involves learning to collaborate with consideration and responsibility, as well as gaining information and skills.”*

(Rogoff et al 2014)

It is ‘observing and pitching in’ (ibid) with powerful demonstrations of reading and writing that teaches the love of libraries referred to by Albert Manguel. And day in and day out, we have to find innovative and supportive ways to be part of this gradual but awe-inspiring movement. Join us and the many inspiring adults who are taking courageous, essential and loving steps to becoming people who know and care enough to lead children on their imaginative and intellectual journeys into stories books, reading and writing.

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<sup>10</sup> With thanks to Thando Mkoyi for these two recent digital # quotes.

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