The African Storybook, teachers' resources, and pedagogical practices

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on the Darvin and Norton (2015) model of investment to investigate how Ugandan teachers use children's stories from the African Storybook website with minimal pedagogical support, unlike most similar interventions. Data for this case study were collected in the form of fieldnotes, interviews, and focus group discussions in a Ugandan primary school. The findings indicate that the use of stories expands the repertoire of teaching methods and topics, and that this use is influenced by teachers' social capital, financial factors, and policies. This exploration of teachers' resourcefulness, needs, and realities provides a foundation for enhancing existing practices.

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1. Introduction

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 et al., 2014; Mango Tree, n.d.; RTI International, n.d.). The success rate of such interventions has varied, but often the outcomes have been lower than expected (Ngware et al., 2014; Sailors et al., 2014; Schweisfurth, 2011), despite comprehensive programs and large investments. Further complicating the situation is the question of how scalable such efforts are (Dubeck et al., 2015), since in-service training, "train the trainer" models, providing books for individual pupils, and developing materials in languages that frequently have unrecognized or poorly established orthographies and print resources, are all resource intensive. Realistically, the hundreds of thousands of teachers in Africa are unlikely to take part in extensive training or comprehensive literacy initiatives. This further raises the question of the appropriateness of striving for "best practices", which presupposes adequate resources and satisfactory implementation, and may not sufficiently take into account existing practices and conditions. In this article I argue for

the need to shift the focus to "enhanced practices", drawing on teachers' existing knowledge and practices as a basis for improvement, rather than concentrating on idealized models that at best work as intended in a few treatment schools.

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, since this is the situation most teachers are in. Most initiatives that promote early literacy focus on training teachers in a particular set of methods and the use of textbooks to impart the foundational skills of decoding. Researching how teachers use stories to teach literacy in a context of limited support, and what resources and circumstances influence and affect their use, will deepen our understanding of teaching practices and may serve as a starting point for developing literacy initiatives and other forms of support based on teachers' needs and realities.

While the African Storybook (ASb; http://africanstorybook.org/) represents one of many literacy interventions in Africa, it stands out by offering stories in digital format that can be projected onto a screen and providing little guidance and no methodology on literacy instruction (cf. Lucas et al., 2014; Sailors and Price, 2015). This approach invites teachers to develop their own approaches to literacy instruction and story selection. For the purposes of this research, the ASb's provision of stories without explicit guidelines on their use allows us to explore how teachers integrate stories in their teaching of literacy. We can thus come to an understanding of how teachers make use of supplementary readers on their own, and the resources, conditions, and challenges they have to navigate in the process. This understanding can inform other interventions and

policies on supplementary and integrated stories in early literacy instruction in this part of the world.

In order to better understand teachers' actions, it is pertinent to conceptualize teachers' agency in relation to the structural conditions that frame their work and agency. Such a focus allows for viewing structural and agency aspects as mutually constitutive, and analyzing teachers' agency in relation to and in light of structural forces, such as material conditions and curricular demands. Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment provides such a framework, highlighting the interrelatedness of identity, capital and ideology, which together serve as a tool for analyzing language teaching and learning in the current world order. In another article (Stranger-Johannessen and Norton, in press) we discuss teacher identity in light of the ASb, drawing primarily on data from one of the teachers. This article shifts the focus to teaching practices, resources, and teachers' resourcefulness, complementing the other publication. Using this framework, this article explores ways in which teachers in an ASb pilot school use stories to promote early literacy and how teachers' use of these stories are structured.

One of the ASb's pilot sites, a primary school in Uganda, serves as a single case study in this research on teachers' use of children's stories. Specifically, the research questions informing this study are: (1) How do teachers use stories from the African Storybook to promote early literacy? (2) What structures teachers' use of stories from the African Storybook?

The African Storybook is essentially an online platform that provides Creative Commons-licenced children' stories written and illustrated by Africans, and it invites users to write and translate stories to increase the number of stories available. The ASb was developed by the South African Institute for Distance Education (Saide), based in Johannesburg, South Africa. The website went online in March 2014, just before the start of my data collection. The website currently contains more than 3300 stories (of which over 650 are unique titles) in 100 languages, and the numbers are growing. In addition to the website, ASb has also carried out pilot projects in 14 schools and other institutions such as libraries and a teacher college to further develop the website and learn how the stories are received and used by practitioners in South Africa, Kenya, Lesotho, and Uganda. In order for practitioners to access and use the stories, ASb provided the pilot sites with equipment to access and project stories onto a wall or screen. The kind of equipment the pilot sites received varied somewhat based on their needs and conditions, but typically included a laptop, Internet modem, battery-driven projector, solar panel for charging, and discretionary funds for other expenses, such as refurbishing, printing stories, or buying equipment. Other schools in Africa may not yet have access to the same technology, but as devices become cheaper and connectivity more widespread, access to free children's stories will increasingly be of great value to educators across the continent.

There is little doubt that literacy materials such as Storybooks are important for literacy development. Research has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of reading (Clark and Rumbold, 2006; Garan and DeVoogd, 2008; Krashen, 2004). Equipping classrooms with books is a way of making stories available to children, and some studies report on the success of such book floods (Elley, 1991, 2000; Mangubhai, 2001; McGill-Franzen et al., 1999; see also Kevane and Sissao, 2008). In Uganda, however, Storybooks (and textbooks) are often lacking, particularly in local languages (Dent and Goodman, 2015; Ssentanda, 2014). Since the introduction of schooling, teachers have relied heavily on chalk and talk as their main resource for teaching literacy (and other subjects), and thus have had little opportunity to develop teaching methodologies for using Storybooks in their teaching. This is slowly changing, as education, particularly primary education, is receiving increasing support and attention from governments and donors (Altinyelken, 2010a).

The last two decades have seen a boost in primary education across sub-Saharan Africa, starting with higher enrolment rates in many countries, which paved the way for a shift in focus towards quality education (Gove and Wetterberg, 2011). This shift has entailed a greater focus on the language of instruction, since lack of understanding of the language of instruction makes literacy development, and a meaningful education more generally, much harder (Trudell, 2013). This shift also increased the attention towards other aspects of quality education, such as class size, teacher training, textbooks, and other literacy materials. While considerable efforts in Uganda went towards building more schools in the mid-2000s to meet the goal of universal primary education, the focus is now on the above-mentioned quality aspects, as well school leadership and other features of education (Lucas et al., 2014).

In 2000 and 2002 the Minds Across African Schools Club (MAASC) in Uganda gave 150 poorly resourced schools in and around Kampala a library-in-a-box, containing 300 non-textbook reading materials. The researchers found that the books were often left in the box unused (Muwanga et al., 2007). These and other experiences of non-use or limited use of Storybooks has led several scholars to point out that some teacher training may be necessary, or at least beneficial to increase the use and potential of Storybooks, as research from the United States indicates (McGill-Franzen et al., 1999).

Several interventions in Africa have coupled provision of supplementary readers with an element of teacher training. A project in South Africa provided 60 schools with 300 books each, but an evaluation of 20 of the schools showed that books were not used much, which was attributed to lack of training (Nassimbeni and Desmond, 2011). In response to that the teachers received training, which gave some positive effects, but still one quarter of the schools did not display the books in a library or classroom collection. In an intervention in rural South Africa that included teacher training, three preschools were given 120 children's books. This improved children's performance on several measures, but the teachers did not use the Storybooks as often as they were asked to, and one school hardly used them at all (Pretorius and Machet, 2008). A literacy intervention in Malawi equipped teachers in 1000 schools with about 4000 books per school in English and Chichewa. The teachers were coached in methods such as read-alouds, guided reading, word, and comprehension strategy teaching. Although the coaching model was successful in changing teachers' beliefs, it had little effect on their actual practice (Sailors et al., 2014).

In South Africa, READ Educational Trust provided many books and trained teachers in how to use these books in local languages, and the schools (including control schools) were compared for reading results. The schools with books, especially the high-implementing schools, performed best in reading in the local language and English (Sailors et al., 2010). Ngware et al. (2014) report on an impact evaluation of an early literacy and numeracy intervention in Kenya and Uganda carried out by Aga Khan Foundation from 2009 to 2011. They found that there was no indication of improvement of numeracy in any of the countries, and a small increase in literacy levels in Uganda only. They further suggest that prior experience with interventions that have not shown results might create indifference or lack of expectations with the schools that participated.

These studies point to different outcomes of initiatives where teachers have been trained and given books, suggesting that local differences, and perhaps differences between interventions, play a central role in their success. But we are also left with the question of *how* teachers use stories in their teaching, and why they