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**Putting communities into the early literacy frame:  
Learning from ‘A children’s storybook writing project in Ethiopian  
community libraries’**

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**Abstract**

Studies of literacy levels in Africa highlight the number of children with no prospect of experiencing quality education: too many early school graders simply do not learn to read. This calamitous situation is largely due to lack of children’s storybooks across the estimated 1,500-2,000 African languages. National budgets barely touch the need for children to learn to read in a language familiar to them.

An overview of the many donor-funded early literacy projects shows that while these differ greatly in scale and strategy, innovations are targeted chiefly at the root of the problem, namely storybook production across multiple languages. But of course, donor-funded projects are constituted by their own terms of reference. These tend to be but segments of a broader, very African problem: “How do we develop reading for enjoyment and reading for choice in low income, low-literate schools and communities?” (Hoadley, 2018).

In addressing this question, our paper highlights the potential of a 2017/8 Community Library (CL) storybook writing project in Ethiopia (Harley, 2018). This project showed how CLs, with the support of CODE Ethiopia, successfully authored, produced and shared high-quality digital storybooks in local languages. In the current second cycle of the project, CLs are exploring ways of producing and using stories to nurture love of reading in their own contexts. The unique asset of the CL model lies in its promise of straddling community and school synergies in advancing literacy. Community, government officials, and school representatives work together – by mandate – in producing storybooks. These are invaluable resources for promoting a love of reading as well as for the formal teaching of reading. Not only are stories in a language familiar to children, their authenticity, the first layer of community quality assurance, enables children to locate themselves in the familiar microcosm of family and community.

Key words literacy, storybooks, community libraries, African languages

**Background**

“We know that millions of young people are missing out on a quality education to give them a fair start in life ...” (Welcome Note, Pan-Commonwealth Forum Conference, 2019).

UNESCO statistics tell us that 102 million youth cannot read or write a single sentence (Montoya, 2017). This tragedy is particularly acute in Africa. It is clear, from the few available studies of children’s reading ability in the early grades in African schools, that most young children get no educational start at all.

- The most recent Progress in International Reading Literacy study (PIRLS, 2016) found that 78% of South African Grade 4 children could not read for meaning in any language.

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- A study across all regions in Ethiopia found 33.9% of children unable able to read a single word of a simple Grade 2 story correctly (RTI, 2010). A further study of Grade 2 and 3 pupils in two regions found that over half of pupils were unable to read a single word correctly in the oral reading fluency section of the assessment (RTI, 2014).

There is no reason to believe that more encouraging findings would emerge from studies in other African countries.

How does one begin to think about addressing a problem of this magnitude?

### **Initiatives to improve early reading**

Research findings ranging from studies commissioned by UNESCO and the World Bank to the conventional ‘scholarly’ research coalesce into an accepted dictum: children best learn to read in a language familiar to them.

Unfortunately, in the case of many African languages, storybooks simply do not exist. With the bulk of national education funding earmarked for core textbooks, there is little or no funding for supplementary readers. In turn, this obstacle is exacerbated by Africa’s having the highest linguistic diversity in the world, some 1,500-2,000 different languages according to the most commentators. Ethiopia has about 83 languages and 200 dialects (Ethiopian Treasures, n.d.), with over 30 being used as languages of instruction (Trudell, 2016). Some other countries have more. Nigeria is usually credited with more than 500 languages.

National policies supporting the principle of children learning to read in the mother tongue thus remain well-intentioned symbolism, at best.

Donor-funded endeavours aimed at promoting early reading thus focus most heavily on the creation, production, and distribution of storybooks in local languages. This is clear from the number of websites on this topic alongside research into storybook production costs in the global South (Butcher et al, 2019). Although such projects share the aim of producing storybooks so as to promote literacy, they differ widely in matters of strategy and scale. Broadly, all fall somewhere on the continuum between:

- structured readers for schools (predominantly in print, but some also digital, employing variants of open licensing); and
- storybooks to enable reading for pleasure (mainly digital resources that anyone can use under terms of open licensing, intended mainly to promote reading for pleasure, but also with the hope that users will come to include schools and national education departments).

RTI International, headquartered in the United States,<sup>1</sup> and African Storybook (ASb) in South Africa are useful exemplars of initiatives at the polar ends of this continuum. Since 2008, and with international donor support, RTI has provided technical assistance in early grade reading assessment and instruction to ministries of education in dozens of low- and middle-income countries (Robledo and Gove, 2018). ASb’s vision is one of open access to picture storybooks in the languages of Africa. Storybooks are for children’s literacy, enjoyment and imagination. The website carries a scorecard of its impressive achievements: “182 languages; 1,116 storybooks; 5,599 translations” (ASb website, 21 June 2019). The table below illustrates how different these two initiatives are.

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly ‘Research Triangle Institute’.

**Table 1. Exemplars of structured readers for schools and openly licensed storybooks for pleasure**

<i>Issue</i>	<b>RTI International (exemplar of structured readers for schools approach)</b>	<b>ASb (exemplar of openly licensed storybooks on an online platform)</b>
<i>Relationship with national governments</i>	Technical assistance through bilateral agreements with governments. Agreement first; storybook last.	Through networking, ASb finds ways of working with education authorities. Storybook first; agreement last.
<i>Relationship with national curriculum</i>	Research-based: Stories are designed for the national curriculum.	Storybooks are intended to be read for pleasure.
<i>Users and contexts of storybook use</i>	Choice of book and sequencing of stories read are determined by authorities. School teachers follow dictates of the formal curriculum. Children's preferences and levels of development are not at issue.	Choice of storybook and sequencing of stories rests with children or those able to make storybooks available to them. Decisions rest on personal choice or level of child's development.
<i>Format of storybook</i>	Print.	Mainly digital, but with print options.
<i>Copyright</i>	Formerly all rights reserved. Now open licensing (CC BY <sup>2</sup> ).	Open licensing, Creative Commons (CC).
<i>Languages of storybooks</i>	Languages are limited to those specified in the bilateral.	Unlimited. Open licensing allows for translation into any language.
<i>Costs</i>	Book production costs are high. The use of international consultants could drive up costs.	Traditional design and layout costs do not apply. Illustration costs can be 'amortized' when storybooks are translated. Free to users.
<i>Risks</i>	Dominant voices: the same limited pool of authors and illustrators (see Butcher et al, 2018).	Authenticity of stories and illustrations can be compromised in translation (see Dobson et al, 2018).

These two exemplars of very different foci and strategy certainly demonstrate potential to reach very large numbers of children. In Kenya, RTI's Tusome project<sup>3</sup> will develop and distribute over 24 million English and Kiswahili textbooks, workbooks and supplementary readers to all learners in grades 1-3 by December 2019 (USAID, n.d.); and the numbers of storybooks, languages and translations on ASb tick upwards almost daily.

Each of these two initiatives has demonstrated impact in its own right. Nonetheless, as one might infer from Table 1, both approaches have limitations. ASb, for example, certainly can lead to provision for all languages, but in practice access to stories goes hand in hand with access to electricity and technology. In providing

<sup>2</sup> Creative Commons Attribution

<sup>3</sup> 'Let's Read', in Kiswahili. In 2017 the Tusome project was severely criticized by the Kenyan publishing industry because it by-passes the sector almost entirely (Daily Nation, n.d.).

storybooks in only English and Kiswahili, Tusome somewhat undermines the principle of learning to read in the mother tongue and thus unintentionally further undermines the marginality of smaller language groups.

Donor-funded projects are – by their very nature – specifically targeted and time-bound. It would be unreasonable to criticize them for falling short of meeting *all* needs, especially as they represent the most significant momentum towards meeting some needs. But this acknowledgement should not preclude identification of their limitations. Only if we do that can we begin to contemplate a more all-encompassing vision of how we might begin to meet literacy needs in Africa.

### **Moving beyond storybook provision towards a vision of meeting literacy needs**

Because provision of storybooks is such a basic imperative we are often insufficiently mindful of research into how children learn to read, and the specificity of contextual challenges in Africa.

Open Learn (Open University website, n.d.) identifies two important strategies that emerge from research on how children learn to read. These are:

- (a) the teaching of ‘bottom-up’ skills so that children use their knowledge of letters and sounds to read or decode whole words, and
- (b) ‘top-down’ strategies where children use their personal and cultural knowledge, their prior reading knowledge, and the overall meaning of the text they are reading, to predict words and sentences.

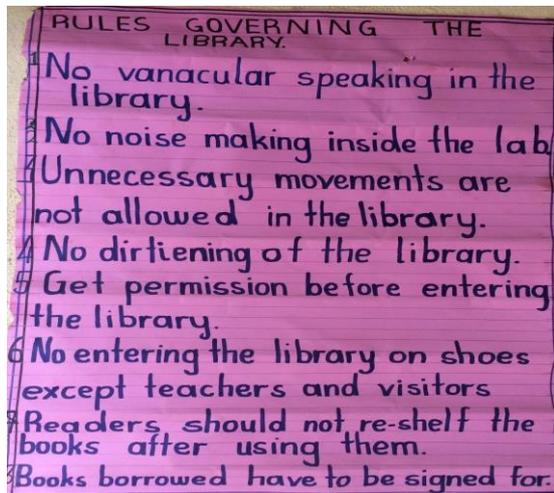
Key, however, is that children need a *balanced* approach that exposes them to both strategies. Such balance is not easily achieved. As seen above, RTI is embedded in strategy (a); and with its aim of reading for pleasure, ASb is more strongly positioned to promote (b). Schools indeed have a bureaucratic accountability for (a); and libraries for (b).

There is widespread evidence suggesting that a balance of ‘bottom up’ and ‘top down’ strategies is even more difficult to achieve when the balance of power in storybook creation rests with education authorities and schools. In South Africa, for example, government control over which resources can be purchased in the educational system using government-allocated funds has been problematic (see Butcher et al, 2019). In ASb, there were examples of education authorities preoccupied with issues of correctness of orthography in ways that could undermine the fundamental premise that stories should be in the language that is familiar to language communities. Also, there were instances of authorities not authorizing for use some of the stories that were most popular with children (Janks & Harley, 2015).

Teachers too are understandably oriented to ‘teaching to the syllabus’. Reading for enjoyment or ‘top down’ strategies for teaching reading are not part of the curriculum in their own right. According to a head teacher in Kenya, teachers can use the stories in ‘curriculum time’ – if these are integrated with the lesson topic. A prolific writer of storybooks in a small rural Kenyan school used this very pretext to ‘smuggle’ storybook reading into his lessons (Janks and Harley, 2015, p.71). As the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation website points out, teachers lack the agency and resources they need to reach all their learners; and schools are restricted in what, how, and when they can improve.

Rule number one in Figure 1 below is a depressing symbol of how a project aimed at promoting mother tongue reading can be undermined when a community library is situated within, and is managed by, a school.

Figure 1. Notice board in a Ugandan community library housed in a school



It is interesting that ASb, which has successfully located storybook writing in both schools and libraries, separates the two operationally:

*Our school-based hubs are demonstrating innovative ways of using the storybooks in schools; and our library-based hubs are showing how hundreds of children can enjoy our stories each day, even in very poor communities (Saide, 2016, p.4).*

One ASb library made a deliberate choice to work outside of the school system so as not to be inhibited by scripted curriculum requirements.

In extending its gaze beyond school and into community, PIRLS<sup>4</sup> (2016) asks and answers the question:

*How do children become good readers?*

- *Having parents who often engage them in early literacy activities*
- *Attending pre-primary education.*

High rates of adult illiteracy and paucity of pre-primary schools in Africa limit the usefulness of these precepts. What other strategies can take their place? And then there is the toughest and most contextually pertinent question of all:

*How do we develop reading for enjoyment and reading for choice in low income, low-literate schools and communities? (Hoadley, 2018).*

Amongst the many innovative projects in the field, one small-scale initiative warrants attention because of its potential in relation to Hoadley's question.

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<sup>4</sup> Progress in International Reading Literacy Study.

## The Community Libraries Project in Ethiopia

### The first and second cycles of the project

CODE Ethiopia, an NGO based in Addis Ababa, works with 97 community libraries in the rural districts of Ethiopia. These libraries have all been subject to CODE Ethiopia's well-established model of training. Librarians, teachers, and school directors participate in three-day workshops in Addis Ababa, after which they assume responsibility for training others in their respective communities. CODE Ethiopia's training includes attention to community stories. Following training, CODE Ethiopia serves as a resource to the libraries and their communities (Butcher et al, 2019, p.13). These libraries are now run by the local communities themselves.

In 2018, CODE Ethiopia worked with Neil Butcher & Associates (NBA) on a project<sup>5</sup> to collaborate with local librarians, teachers, and communities in developing and writing openly licensed stories for young children. The formal evaluation of the first cycle of this project in Ethiopia (Harley, 2018) showed how Community Library (CL) management structures – which by mandate include representation of community, local schools and government officials – successfully authored, produced and shared 85 storybooks from five libraries in two local languages, Amharic and Afaan Oromoo. Elders were particularly inspired by the way these stories drew on oral tradition and local culture in bonding schools and communities. Supported by CODE Ethiopia, CLs took ownership of story writing, and CODE Ethiopia quality assured and digitized the storybooks.<sup>6</sup> With the training-of-trainers system being 'cascaded', the project acquired momentum of its own in ways that augur well for scalability.

In the current second cycle of the project, CLs are exploring ways of using their stories to nurture love of reading in their own settings. Six libraries are currently participating in this project. Community members in each library, including elders, teachers, parents, school children, and librarians have developed criteria for evaluating which stories will be submitted for the project. Librarians will also ask children to evaluate what stories they enjoy, and why. As with the first cycle of the project, all of the stories will be loaded on the CE community-library tablets and some mounted online, carrying a CC BY licence.

### Strengths of the CL model

The CL model is an instructive example of how reading for enjoyment and reading for choice can be initiated and nurtured in low income, low-literate schools and communities. We also argue that the creation of openly licensed storybooks in community libraries provides a model with potential to nullify, or at least limit, the risks and limitations of other models for promoting early reading exemplified in the continuum in Table 1 above. This argument is based on two notable strengths of the CL model.

#### (a) CL management structure

School and community synergies are promoted and balanced through the mandated structure of CL management committees. How this works in practice is illustrated in the following quote from the evaluation:

*Sheno [a small town] provided the clearest example of a structured team of writers at work. Groups of ten (including teachers, local community members and woreda<sup>7</sup> officials who had been trained by the trainers) would meet to discuss ideas for a story. This usually took a full morning. As explained by the School Principal who was part of the site-visit discussion: "Local society generated ideas – then teachers wrote the ideas in clear language" (Harley, 2018, p. 30).*

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<sup>5</sup> Funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> It was always intended that storybooks would be mounted on the ASb and StoryWeaver platforms. Although stories in PDF format have been uploaded to tablets, there were technical difficulties when it came to transferring these to online repositories.

<sup>7</sup> 'Woreda' is a third-level administrative division in Ethiopia (managed by a local government), equivalent to a district with an average population of 100,000. (WoredaNet-Ethiopian Government Network, n.d.).

That the CLs provide a bridgehead into working relationships with schools was also evident in the structured sessions learners from local schools have in the CLs. There is every chance that teachers will make the most of hardcopies of storybooks when these become available.

The strength of the CL model is that it has a single hub: the CL itself. This hub brings together the two institutions that should surely best work in complementary ways to achieve a balance of benefits from formal school learning and love of reading. But as we have seen, there is evidence suggesting that the balance of story-writing power should reside with CLs. A further compelling reason follows.

#### (b) Storybook authenticity and quality

It is widely acknowledged that stories children experience should include those in which they can see themselves and their worlds, implying the microsystem of family and close community. This need for authentic stories is closely linked to one of the trickiest issues that storybook creation projects grapple with – how we understand and monitor quality.

“Quality cannot be defined – except through adaptation to your situation and context” Stracke (2016). The second major strength of the CL model is the authenticity of storybooks resulting from the eagerness of deep rural communities, and elders in particular, to tell their stories. The more tightly knit and cohesive the community, the stronger the embrace. Project evaluation encountered this eagerness across all sites expressed in the words of one village storyteller who explained: ‘We were motivated to write and express our cultures according to our context. Amharic. From the oral stories that were not written before’ (Harley, 2018, p.13).

Underlying this need to render oral stories into written form is the traditional social function of storytelling: elders see their stories as important because they are the message system for the community’s cultural/moral values (Finnegan, 2012). Ethiopian folklore includes stories about creation, animal fables, inheritance stories, story cycles of cunning tricksters, ethnic origins or folk history, and moral tales to teach good manners or acceptable social behaviour (Ethiopian Folktales, n.d.). Topics of this kind lend themselves to the relay of norms and values.

While most of the stories generated in the CL project were of this kind, with a clear ‘message’, one centre surprised with its focus on the local environment. One such story, for example, was a story about bees and flowers, pollination and propagation. It was a very readable, attractively illustrated story based on the natural sciences. This change of theme is interesting as an example of how story-writing can broaden its genre. In particular, this example shows how readers can be nurtured into developing concepts from real-world lessons. There is a clear connection here with the principles of STEM<sup>8</sup> education that encourages learners to make interdisciplinary connections between school, community, and work. STEM has many advocates because of its potential to foster inquiring minds and logical reasoning. If CLs could be encouraged to produce more stories of this type, children reading for pleasure could thus also learn some of the instrumental knowledge and skills that schools often convey in somewhat dull ways.

CL committees’ insistence that stories convey ‘true’ cultural messages is in fact their first layer of quality assurance. This is very different to the standard technical measures of quality employed by most storybook-generating projects. There were also further layers of quality assurance in the CL project. Once completed in digital format, stories were shared with other project CLs for their comment and advice. And CODE Ethiopia lends its own experience and expertise to quality oversight.

Of course, all of this is not to say that there should be an exclusive focus on communities’ own stories. Children benefit from other genres. And other innovative ways have been found for producing stories quickly and in relatively cost-effective ways. Book Dash is a South African NGO that harnesses teams of volunteer authors, illustrators, designers, and editors to create storybooks in one-day book-making events (Butcher et al, 2019).

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<sup>8</sup> Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

As one of its strategies for generating new storybooks, ASb has run story-writing competitions for children in some project libraries (Saide, 2016).

But, as far as we know, the CL model stands out because it produces stories in which children are truly able to locate themselves in the familiar microcosm of their families and communities.

## Discussion and conclusion

'Digital disruption' is often cited as the exciting new means of generating change. The CL project outlined in this paper is possibly a disrupter in the sense that its storybooks are ultimately openly licensed under a CC BY licence and loaded onto tablets in the CLs, with the possibility of these being mounted on digital online platforms. However, we see digital technologies as secondary in introducing the joys of reading to greater numbers of children in Africa, particularly because of limited Internet access and lack of electricity in many of these sites. The primary case made for disruption in this paper is that of the need to go back to the commons in the broadest social sense. This means making the community and community libraries the organizational power base and fulcrum of the drive to generate storybooks and to promote their use. It is a case for the restitution/restoration of parent and community rights. With school representatives on CL management committees as well as being part of story writing, there is hope that local storybooks will find a place in school classrooms where children learn to read. With the system of cascade training in place, such practices can spread to teachers in other schools.

While we have focused on the project as it played out in Ethiopia, it is replicable. True, other countries do not have CODE Ethiopia's organizational expertise, experience, and capacity of working with libraries since 1994. On the other hand, CODE Ethiopia has contributed to the template that is now available: and it has proven training materials and procedures for 'cascade' training.

One must acknowledge that storybooks in local and sometimes marginalized language communities could work in ways that are at odds with political imperatives that seek to build nationhood around common identities – and selected common languages. At the same time, the model brings a different kind of political advantage. For a country like South Africa, eleven official languages creates a problem of diversity. The CL model brings with it prospects of turning the 'problem' into a resource for helping to advance literacy.

Finally, we return to the Conference theme. The CL model we have outlined has potential to give young children a fairer start by initiating them into the joy of reading in their own language. That is the essential first step that many African children are unlikely to experience. But poorer communities, by definition, do not have the resources to set up a model of this kind. Nor do they have powerful voices to leverage donor support in the way that higher education can, and does, in respect of digital disruption and benefits to be accrued from the fourth industrial revolution. However, it is rare in higher education publications to see an article carrying a title such as the recent 'Innovation for the public good in a deeply unequal society' (Czemowietz, 2019).

Our paper hopes to marshal research findings into a voice for community libraries as centres for fostering children's love of reading. It is one small voice, but we believe it is necessary. "[T]here appears to be an ongoing trend in literacy donor funding to spend money through international initiatives, rather than building local content creation (Butcher et al, 2019, p. 31). We argue for local content creation in community libraries.

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