Nal'ibali Story Powered Schools – cohort 1
Qualitative research report: executive summary

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i. Background

Nal'ibali's Story Powered Schools project seeks to grow a culture of reading in 720 rural schools over three years in the Eastern Cape (EC) and KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) provinces. The project focuses on nurturing a love of reading for joy, in mother tongue and English, to spark children's potential and unlock their capacity to learn.

ii. Method and scope

Two members of Nal'ibali's internal research and innovation team visited 10 schools from the 2017 (year 1) cohort: four schools in September 2017 and six schools in March 2018. The schools were selected through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling, to ensure a range of schools from all four project districts were visited. The sample included those that were "flying" and those who were struggling to adopt the programme.

The research employed a combination of semi-structured interviews and observation. The researchers conducted 29 interviews or focus groups with a total of 54 stakeholders, including 7 principals or deputy principals, 32 teachers, 8 community members and 7 Nal'ibali staff members. They also observed a variety of activities at schools, including 5 whole-school assemblies where reading activities took place, 4 classroom activities, and 2 reading clubs.

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Read to Lead
A Reading Nation is a Leading Nation

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FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

nalibali
It starts with a story...
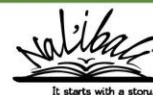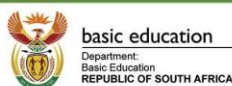
Interviews were recorded,[1] translated and transcribed, and coded. The activities and learning environment were documented on an observation checklist; these were cross-checked with what stakeholders reported in interviews and with Nal'ibali's M&E data.

iii. Findings

a. Degree and diversity of programme take-up

While the degree and nature of project "take up" and the extent of schools' creativity and initiative varied, all schools described and demonstrated some elements of a reading culture taking root.

Key findings included:

- **Books and hanging libraries:** Each Story Powered School received five hanging libraries, each with 30 books – one each for Grades R through 4. We learned that:

    o Nal'ibali significantly increased and improved the selection of high-quality, mother-tongue reading material in schools.

    o Adults and children love and value the books: they are perceived to be of high quality, visually appealing, largely age-appropriate and in the right mix of languages.

    o Hanging library use was reported at 9 of 10 schools. Books appeared to be well-used at 4 schools, somewhat used at 2 schools, and new or nearly new at 3 schools.

    o Hanging libraries are used in school libraries and in classrooms; they don't appear to move around within schools as much as we envisaged they might.

    o By and large, check-out systems have struggled to take hold: only two schools were able to show evidence of a book check-out system. Many schools said the books do not leave school property because they are afraid the books will disappear or become damaged.

    o Teachers and principals perceived that Nal'ibali expects schools to use libraries in a certain way. There is a need to showcase different examples of good practice, rather than "one right way", in engagement with schools.

- **Supplement use:** Each Story Powered School received a batch of bilingual Nal'ibali reading supplements, every two weeks during the school term. The supplements included cut-out-and-keep storybooks, activities, puzzles and games, and informational articles. We found that:

    o Supplements are widely used at schools, and in creative ways. All 10 schools reported using them in class, and we saw evidence of supplement use at every school but two.[2]

    o Cut-out-and-keep books are by far the most popular.

    o Supplements are owned and taken home by children: all 10 schools reported or demonstrated that children take supplements home.

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[1] Two interviews were not recorded due to lack of a backup recording device; instead, notes were taken in the interview and transcribed.

[2] At one of these schools, we did not get to see classrooms or the library. At the other, we only saw brand-new supplements stacked on a classroom desk – although this suggests that supplement use was likely.

- Supplements are often used by older children as well, and not all teachers think they are age-appropriate for small children.

- Most schools are happy with the number of supplements received.

- In contrast to books, teachers did not seem afraid of "ruining" supplement cut-out-and-keep books, and we observed more creativity and initiative in how these were used.

- **Print-rich environments:** Nal'ibali resources were displayed at all schools. We saw print-rich content that was meaningful, relevant, and in children's mother tongue at 8 of 9 schools, and saw children's work displayed at 7 of 9 schools. The reading club showcase in particular motivated schools to create print-rich environments, and to document and celebrate reading club activities.

- **Reading clubs:** We only observed reading clubs at two schools. However, based on what was reported in interviews, we learned that:

  - Story Sparkers ran clubs at 6 schools, teachers ran clubs at 6 schools, and community members ran clubs in at least 4 schools.

  - Some clubs were mixed-age, while some were single-grade.

  - At a few schools, teachers chose which children would participate in reading clubs. At most schools, membership appeared to either be voluntary, or mandatory (where whole classes are enrolled as reading clubs).

  - Most take place during school; after-school activities are not possible at most schools, due to scholar transport arrangements and safety concerns.

  - Of 6 schools visited in early March 2018, only two had sustained/re-activated reading clubs in Year 2 of the project.

- **Classroom activities:** Nal'ibali encourages all schools to encourage regular DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) periods. All schools reported that they set aside dedicated reading time weekly, though the time, form, frequency and name of these periods varied. The line between reading clubs and DEAR time is often blurred or unclear.

b. Positive changes reported

Stakeholders consistently reported positive changes in awareness, knowledge, attitudes, behaviour and skills. The benefits extended to different groups: educators, parents, children and Story Sparkers.

Key findings included:

- **Awareness:**
  - Most **teachers** were aware that reading is important, but some grew more aware of the importance of reading *for enjoyment*. A few teachers grew more aware of the power of *iintsomi* (folktales) specifically.

  - **Parent** awareness of the importance of reading and being involved in their children also increased, through community training and parent meetings. In some instances, this led to parents transferring their children from non-Nal'ibali schools into Nal'ibali schools.

- o **Children's** awareness also shifted, as they have realised that reading can be *fun*.

- **Knowledge:**
  - o **Teachers:** Teachers learned new strategies and activities at Nal'ibali training. They displayed sound understanding of what reading for enjoyment is and how to encourage it. Teachers also noted strong links between reading for enjoyment and curriculum objectives, which they saw as a strength of the programme.

  - o When asked, most teachers said they had shared what they learned at Nal'ibali training with other teachers and with parents. At most schools, it was not only trained "Big 5" teachers who were active; other teachers were active as well.

- **Attitudes:**
  - o A number of **teachers** reported that Nal'ibali has made teaching easier, more enjoyable and less stressful, and reignited their own interest in reading. This was especially noted in trilingual Maluti schools, where having the same resource in three languages was very helpful. One school initially had a negative attitude towards the "extra work", but ultimately embraced Nal'ibali once it saw the programme's benefits.

  - o Children are more excited about reading. Some attributed these shifts to the Story Sparkers' presence and energy at schools and to Nal'ibali's high-quality reading materials.

- **Behaviours and practices:**
  - o **Reading culture as a school habit:** Nal'ibali has activated or reinvigorated a range of literacy activities in schools, including DEAR/reading period, before-school and during-school assemblies, reading-for-enjoyment in class, and reading clubs. Personally meaningful and satisfying reading and writing is reported to be taking place. In particular, Nal'ibali has turned the "theory" of a reading period or "DEAR time" into practice by reactivating timetabled reading periods that were not happening consistently. These activities appear to be largely habitual, not sporadic or ad hoc, although in some instances momentum has waned as schools have entered the new year without regular Story Sparker visits.

  - o **Independent reading:** Children are reported to read more often, more regularly throughout the school day, and of their own initiative. The range and quality of reading materials provided by Nal'ibali is a key enabling factor.

  - o **Increased interest in school:** Excitement around reading has made learners more willing to do their homework, and reduced absenteeism and late-coming.

  - o **Parent involvement:** Some schools report that parents have become more involved in their children's education and literacy development. The supplement's bilingual, interactive nature helps build bridges between schools and homes.

- **Reading, writing and storytelling skills**:
  - o Schools consistently report that children's reading, writing, public speaking and confidence have improved since Nal'ibali came to the school. More specifically, stakeholders noted improvements in reading fluency, writing with meaning, English skills, multilingualism, memory skills, storytelling, spelling, vocabulary, and motor skills.

- o At some schools, researchers also observed children reading aloud, telling and dramatizing stories with impressive fluency and confidence.

  - o Stakeholders attributed these improvements to a number of elements of the programme, including reading clubs; more opportunities to hear and tell stories; dramatizing; books; and supplements.

- **Additional changes:** Stakeholders also reported that:
  - o Relationships between teachers and children are more familial and nurturing.

  - o Through Nal'ibali activities, adults have been able to identify children who are struggling, academically and in home situations, and find ways to support them. Reading clubs also create spaces for learners with difficult home lives to feel free and take a break from stress.

  - o Nal'ibali approaches and reading materials make it easier to support children of differing abilities – including fast learners, shy children, and children with special needs.

  - o Two schools attributed increased enrolment in 2018 to Nal'ibali, as parents in the area have witnessed the reading and public speaking skills of children at these schools. At one school, 232 additional learners enrolled in 2018. Children from non-Nal'ibali schools also attend holiday programmes.

  - o The programme is in high demand at non-participating schools.

  - o Story Sparkers and community members have seen their status elevated in communities, and are greeted with respect and gratitude.

  - o The programme has reawakened and invigorated existing reading culture and volunteer activities.

c. Constructive feedback and recommendations

Stakeholder feedback and recommendations from the research team include:

- **Recommendations for project design:**
  - o **Review the project resourcing strategy.** Some users reported that the hanging library units are difficult to hang, are not stable and fall down, and make it difficult to find the books you want because books are stored behind one another in pockets. Reading boxes, bookshelves or cupboards for classrooms were suggested as alternatives. Nal'ibali may want to test these and gather more focused feedback before procuring libraries for 2019. Nal'ibali should also seek to provide 42 titles per grade instead of 30 if possible within budget; consider 'top-up' books for schools during the reduced support phase; and support schools to use strategies to keep books fresh and exciting, such as swapping between grades. More stationery and T-shirts were also requested.

  - o **Sustain support – face-to-face as well as digital.** Most schools we visited in 2018 pleaded for continued support from Nal'ibali's Story Sparkers, even if less often. Schools also requested refresher training and mentoring visits. There is a strong desire to be 'seen' and 'touched' by Nal'ibali to remain motivated. Though there is interest in SMS and remote support, face-to-face interaction remains critical. Nal'ibali may

want to retain its trained, experienced Story Sparkers part-time to provide occasional face-to-face support. It should continue seeking opportunities to link to stipended programmes like the Community Work Programme, to support sustainability of community member involvement, and encourage schools to invite people involved in these schemes to community training from the outset.

- o **Expand the target age group.** The majority of schools asked Nal'ibali to make the programme available to older age groups as well – some schools have already done this, to varying degrees. If the project goal is to transform an entire school's culture of reading, Nal'ibali may want to reconsider the explicit Grade R to 4 focus when communicating to schools (even if these parameters are still used for target-setting and budgeting).

- o **Reduce expectation of after-school activities.** These are rare due to transport and safety issues.

- o **Strengthen incentive programmes.** The reading club showcase was an effective incentive, and a number of respondents said stronger incentive programmes would motivate participation.

- **Recommendations for project implementation:**

  - o **Deepen the programme in existing areas in Year 3**. There is already substantial demand in these areas; Nal'ibali already has relationships with district officials; and as a matter of fairness, it should offer the programme to schools which served as external evaluation control schools in 2017-18.

  - o **Develop communities of practice for principals and Big 5 teachers**. This can be achieved by incorporating Nal'ibali into existing principals' meetings and circuit meetings, and is a strong strategy to encourage sustainability.

  - o **Involve older learners to run reading clubs and activities.**

  - o **Make sure books are engaging and pitched to the audience.** A few teachers asked for more short, simple books for Grades R to 2, including books that appeal to children who have not yet learned to read.

  - o **Use local suppliers for transportation and catering.** This can otherwise create resentment and ill will towards Nal'ibali.

  - o **Improve reading club showcase design and adjudication.** Concerns were raised about limiting participation to 15 learners and fairness of adjudication. The showcase has been redesigned for 2018.

  - o **Reduce number of M&E forms**. Teacher use of M&E forms was very low in 2017. In 2018, this has been redesigned to minimise expectations of teachers and volunteers, and rely primarily on Nal'ibali staff to collect programme monitoring data.

  - o **Plan ahead, keep our word, and ensure transport money is paid on time.** Last-minute planning, last-minute changes to plans, and insufficient communication with principals has made Story Sparkers' jobs difficult at times. More thorough advance planning has been done for 2018.

- **Recommendations for communicating the programme:**

    o **Clarify that there is not "one right way" to be a Story Powered School.** While we witnessed creative interpretations of the "Story Powered Schools" concept, in some instances, schools seemed to be waiting for "permission to innovate." In trying to ensure that they ran Story Powered Schools "the right way", they lost some opportunities to deepen reading culture, by integrating Nal'ibali materials into existing ways of working or extending Nal'ibali activities to all grades. Nal'ibali should clarify to schools that they may extend the programme to older learners; that Nal'ibali does not limit the number of reading clubs; and that there is not "one right way" to use hanging libraries. It should share diverse examples of "good practice" with schools in training and ongoing visits, and bring schools together to share best practices and ideas.

    o **Clarify criteria for "what makes a reading club a reading club."** While many reading clubs take place during class time with full classes of learners, Nal'ibali should continue to stress key reading club principles, such as voluntary participation; and creation of a free space where there are no wrong answers and creativity is encouraged.

    o **Provide more clarity around what happens in Year 2 of the programme.** Teachers and principals at most schools visited in 2018 expressed uncertainty about what would happen in year 2 of the project. For example, schools were not sure if they could/should continue running reading clubs; if they would continue to receive supplements or receive more books; if community members should keep participating; and whether their Story Sparker would continue visiting in 2018. There was a strong plea for continued support, and two offers to pay for Story Sparkers' transport from school budgets. Nal'ibali should explore opportunities to sustain face-to-face support, even if less frequent or intensive.

    o **Ensure front-line staff are empowered to answer frequently-asked questions.** This includes questions related to resourcing, school selection and hiring.

d. Conclusion

While there is still plenty of room for improvement, a culture of reading is unequivocally taking root at the schools we visited. The training, Story Sparker support and reading materials provided to schools are of excellent quality. These have spurred changes in knowledge, attitudes and practice, and schools report that children's reading skills are improving as a result.

There is enormous potential for schools to take ownership of and sustain the programme, especially if tweaks are made to project design, implementation and communication, "permission to innovate" is given, and Nal'ibali's contact with schools is sustained.

Community volunteers, our Story Sparker and one of our researchers show off isiXhosa autobiographies written by Grade 4 reading club children in Bizana, Eastern Cape.