

Thato, the dreamer

Story by Pirai Mazungunye

Illustrations by Yvonne Robinson

In Disteneng, just five kilometres from Polokwane, lived a girl named Thato. Thato lived with her mother, Mokgadi, in a house made of poles and iron sheets – a *mokhukhu*. Early in the morning, Thato’s mother would walk with her all the way to her primary school in Ladanna.

One morning as they passed the green shack on the corner, people were sitting outside drinking beer.

“Tlou stays here,” said Thato. “He doesn’t come to school anymore.”

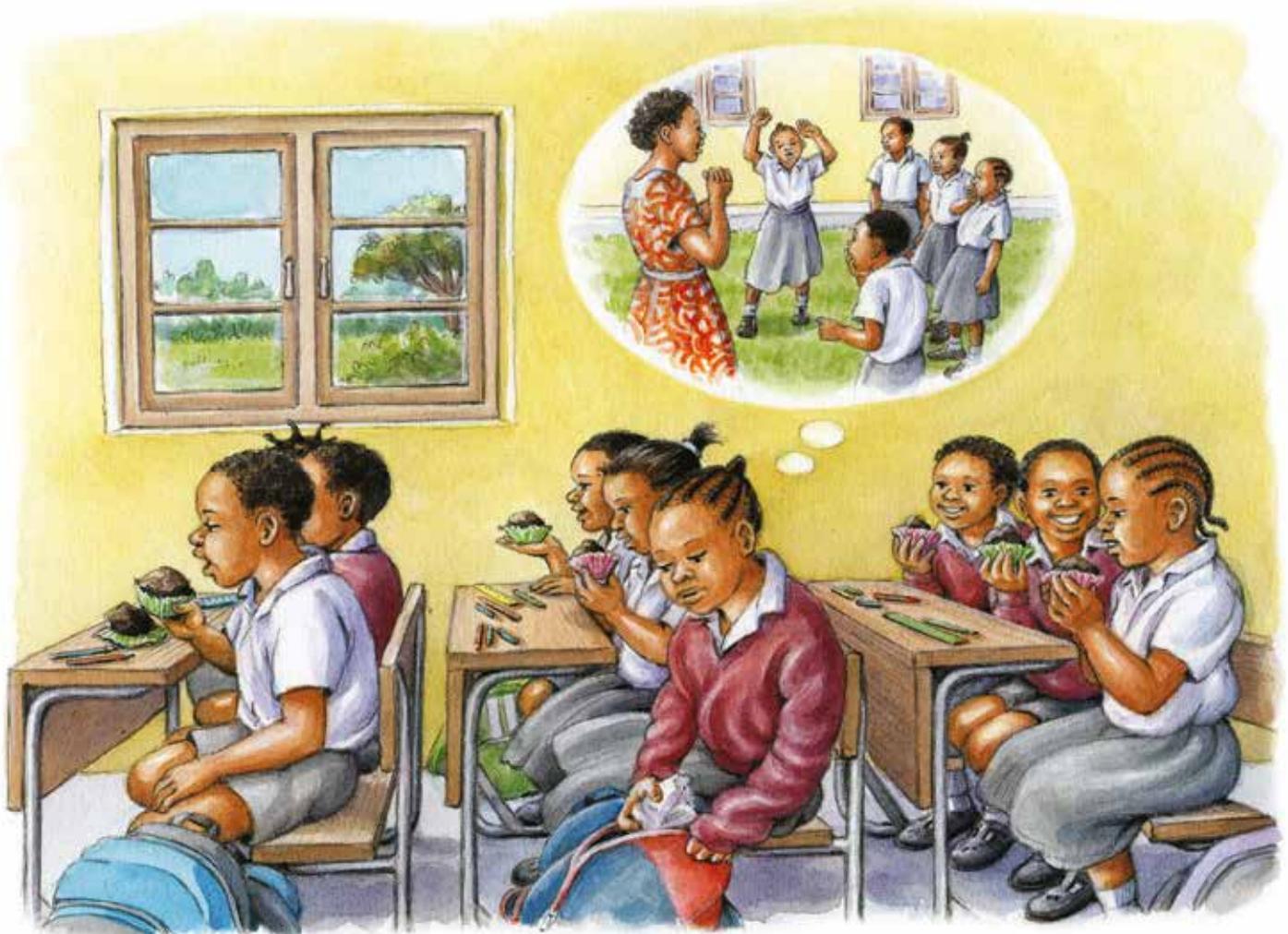
“Are you sure?” asked Mokgadi.

“Yes. He said school is for rich people, not poor people,” Thato answered sadly. “I miss him so much. He was the only other child from Disteneng at school.”

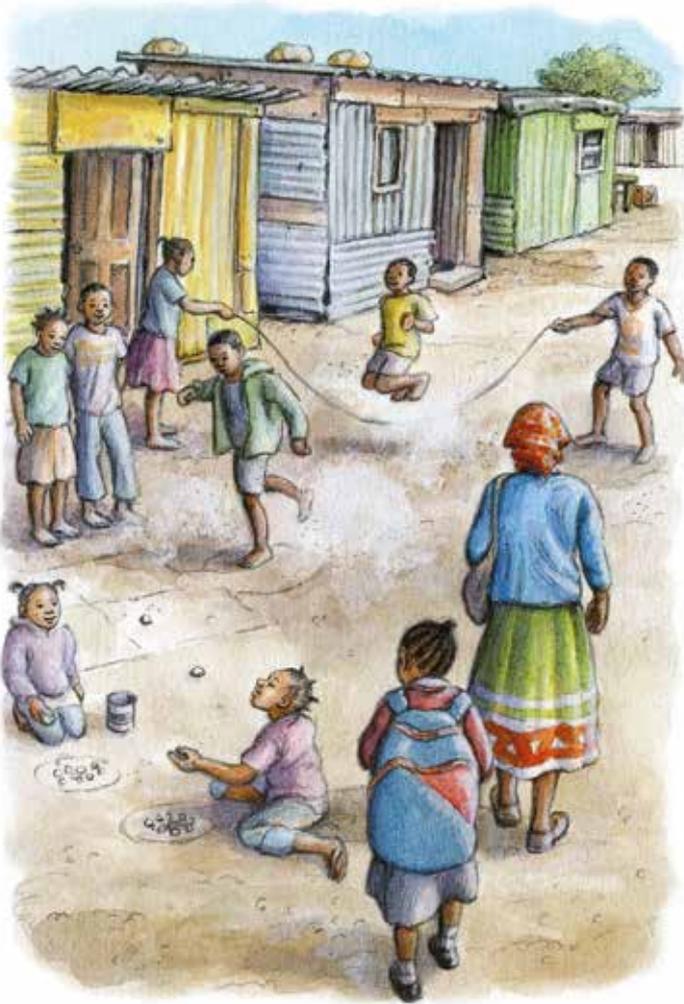
Then Thato ran ahead of her mother. Further down the road, as they got closer to Ladanna, she heard the sound of birds. In Disteneng, she only heard loud music.

Thato worked hard at school. During break time, she always did her homework because it was difficult to do it at home. But it was Grace’s birthday today and she had brought cupcakes for everyone in class. Mrs Sephuma handed out the pretty little cakes to the children. Slowly Thato ate a small piece of her cake. It had chocolate icing on top and tasted sweet. It made Thato think about her last birthday. She had not brought cakes, but had sung a song for the class. The teacher had loved it, but not the children. Some of them had sulked, while others said, “*Mokhukhu* girl! Hey, *mokhukhu* girl – the one who sees electricity across the river – where’s our cake?”

As she thought about that, Thato did not feel like eating her cupcake anymore. She wrapped what was left of it in some paper and put it in her schoolbag. Then she took out her writing book and started doing her homework.



After school, Thato walked back home behind her mother. As she got closer to the corner where the green shack was, she saw some children white with dust from head to foot. They were playing games – *kgati*, *tshere tshere* and *diketo* – in the road.



“Here comes the schoolgirl,” said one of them pointing at Thato. The children stopped playing. The girls playing *diketo* stopped singing. They looked at Thato in her school uniform that was too big for her. Thato did not mind being called the schoolgirl. It was better than the names she was called at school.

“She is back,” they all said together.

“You should come back to school,” said Thato. “We can all go to school together.”

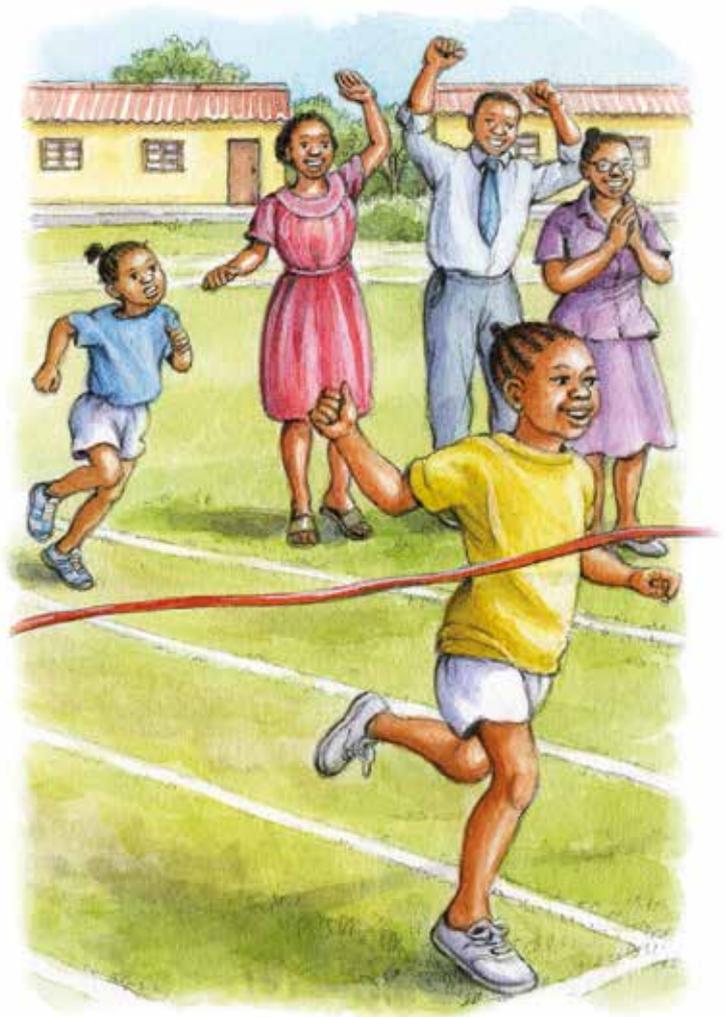
“Go to school?” they laughed. “Never! You will find nothing there!”

At school it was the same. Sometimes Thato would be upset and cry. Sometimes she would get angry and shout back, “My name is not *mokhukhu* girl! It’s Thato! Lucky you, who chose your parents! If I was asked to choose, I would choose to live in a big house!”

Some children laughed, but others said, “She is right. We did not choose where we were born. Thato is right.” And after that they only called her Thato.

“So what?” a few unkind children said. “She sang for us on her birthday. Now we will sing a song too: Thato, the *mokhukhu* girl, the dreamer.” Then they followed her around the schoolyard singing their unkind song. “Thato, the *mokhukhu* girl, the dreamer.” Over and over again.

But, things don’t stay the same forever. When Thato turned nine, she could take part in school sports. The first time her teachers saw her run, they knew that she would be a champion!



“You must practise every day after school, Thato,” Mrs Sephuma said.

Every day, Mrs Sephuma would give Thato a sandwich and some fruit when the other children were not around. Every day, Thato practised.

When it was the school sports day, Thato came first in all her races. “Now you must run for the school! You must help us win the sports competition this year,” said the principal as she gave Thato a big packet.



Thato didn't open the packet until she got home, but as soon as her mother had closed the door, Thato opened it. Inside was a pair of running shoes, running shorts and a T-shirt. Thato ran even faster in her running shoes.



It wasn't long before the same children who had called her *mokhukhu* girl started calling her the bullet girl.

"There goes the bullet girl!" they would shout as she sped past them on the sports field. And at all the races they cheered her on, chanting, "Run, Thato, the dreamer, run. Run, bullet girl!"

After two years of training every day and eating the extra food that Mrs Sephuma brought to school for her, Thato became one of the fastest runners in Limpopo.

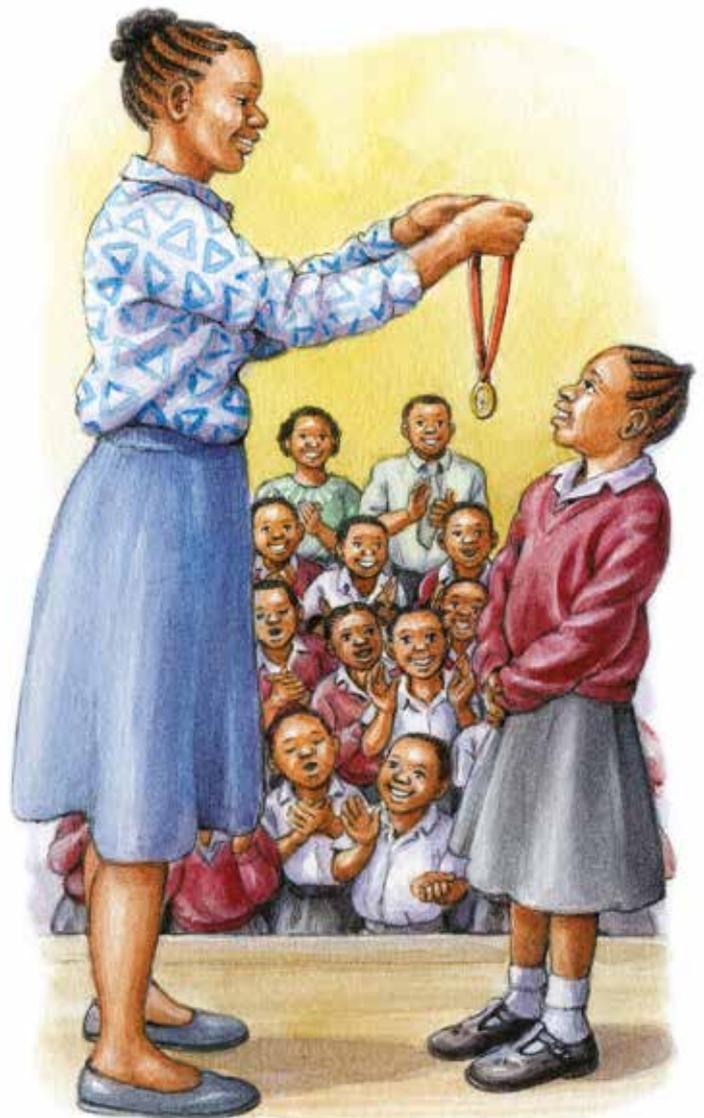
One day Thato ran up to her mother as she waited at the school gate. "Mom, mom!" she shouted. "I'm on the Limpopo team! I'm going to Cape Town with the team!"

The principal gave Thato more packets. There was one with running shoes and running clothes. The T-shirts all had Limpopo's emblem on them. There was also a packet with a cap, jeans and a jacket. And there was a small packet with a plastic bank card that had spending money for the trip to Cape Town.

When the time came for the Limpopo team to go to Cape Town, a big bus with soft seats and dark windows came to fetch Thato at her school. She hugged Mokgadi goodbye and climbed up the steps of the bus. As she turned to wave goodbye, she saw Tlou standing next to her mother. Behind him, stood her dusty friends from Disteneng.

She remembered how they used to call her the school girl. She smiled. "You should come back to school," she said.

Thato was the fastest one hundred metre runner in her age group. They wrote about her in the local newspaper and talked about her on the radio. They called her a golden girl in waiting. At school Thato was given a medal at assembly. All the children and teachers clapped for her. And they sang a song over and over again, "Thato, the golden girl, the dreamer."



Get story active!

Here are some ideas for using the story on pages 1 to 3 with the children in your class and/or your reading club. Choose the ideas that best suit the ages and interests of the children.

- ★ Before you read the story, ask the children what they dream of doing when they grow up. Then introduce the story by saying that you are going to share a story with them about a child who was a dreamer.
- ★ After you have read the story, discuss the issue of bullying with the children. Here are some questions you can ask.
 - Why do you think the children called Thato names like *mokhukhu* girl?
 - What would you have done if you were Thato?
 - What would you have done if you were there when they called Thato names?
 - Do you think a person is a bully if they call someone else names?

- ★ Take the children outside and divide them into groups. Ask each group to decide on a short game they would like to play and then let all the groups play their games. After about ten minutes, ask one person from each group to move on to another group and teach their game to the new group. Keep doing this until the groups have played all the games.
- ★ Suggest that the children draw a picture of their favourite part of the story and then copy the story text under their picture. They can add texture to their pictures by pasting on small pieces of fabric, coloured paper from magazine pictures, cardboard, glitter or sand.
- ★ Suggest that the children write the newspaper report about Thato. They could write this on their own or you could do it altogether as shared writing.

About the Story Powered Schools project

Nal'ibali (isiXhosa for "here's the story") is a national reading-for-enjoyment campaign to spark children's potential through storytelling and reading.

Story Powered Schools is a pilot project bringing the Nal'ibali reading-for-enjoyment campaign's proven approach to literacy development to selected schools in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. Endorsed by the Department of Education, it has been made possible by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The schools that are part of the Story Powered Schools project are committed to sparking their learners' potential through storytelling and reading. They use the power of stories to inspire their learners to want to read and write.

