

One size does not fit all! A case study of the development and publishing of local, multi-lingual stories for adult literacy learners in the South African context.

Who we are 2

The context of our work 3

 Language and literacy..... 4

 Economy and fall out from the global economic crisis 6

What we believe 7

 The way to picture our work... 9

What we do and how we do it..... 10

 Publishing 11

 Workshops..... 13

 Promoting Reading workshops 13

 Writing and editing workshops 14

 Promotion, Networking and Advocacy 15

The issues and challenges faced by NRP 16

 Lack of political will and resource allocation 16

 Decline in ABET Provision in the various sectors 18

 Dominance of majority languages 19

 Hegemony of English 19

 The linguistic dominance of certain African languages 20

 Reluctance to promote African languages 20

 Publishing challenges in African languages..... 21

 Attitudes to stories and fiction 22

 Stories have less value 22

My conclusions 23

Slide 1

The title of my presentation today is **One size does not fit all! A case study of the development and publishing of local, multi-lingual stories for adult literacy learners in the South African context.**

I would like to start by reading you a story.

Read *Woza Friday*

Slide 2 – Slide 16

This story is only two sentences long and yet we can all relate to it and enjoy it. Let's be honest, some weeks it will feel more relevant to us than others!

Woza Friday (which literally means - *Come on Friday* - in isiZulu) was one of the very first easy readers for adults published in 1991 by what was then the New Readers Project, based in the Centre for Adult Education at the then University of Natal.

Slide 17

Outline

I am going to give a brief introduction to the project and would like to give you some idea of the context of our work, and how we fit into it. I would then like to elaborate on the work that we do and how we go about it.

Slide 18

The second part of the presentation will cover some of the challenges that our project faces while carrying out this work, as well as some of the national and global challenges that these mirror.

Who we are

Slide 19

In 1991, this two-year donor-funded project set out to develop 30 easy readers in English and isiZulu and to compile a research report documenting that process. The staff members were unprepared for the

positive response to the new books, particularly from the NGO sector and the Library services.

It was very much a case, according to Elda Lyster, the initiator of the project, of “an idea whose time had come”. After two years, because of the positive response these new books received, New Readers Project was extended as a full-time project.

The main aims, besides producing the books themselves and documenting the process included **empowering people by valuing their stories** and **promoting a reading culture**. Some of the other included **training others in the process of book writing** and **contributing to the creation of an accessible, literate environment**.

Today, **New Readers Publishers** (NRP) as it became, is a non-profit publishing project, still based in the Centre for Adult Education and is **the only** non-profit organisation in South Africa publishing books for adults in all 11 official languages. It has two full-time staff members.

The context of our work

Slide 20

When the project started, adult literacy was seen as a tool for both sides of the political divide. There was the radical opposition movement on the one hand, (with their Freirian agenda and approach to adult literacy) and the Apartheid government on the other (although seen by many as already in its death throes) also seeing literacy as a political and election issue.

Both sides shared the idea that newly literate people should be reading the sort of material that ‘served a purpose’. These imposed ideas of literacy ran in two parallel streams but on either side there was definitely no room for stories or fiction – which ironically, were seen by both sides as luxuries or extras rather than a key part of an individual becoming a fluent reader.

In between these two groups were many active donor-funded NGOs with a functional agenda, pushing the development theme as the only valuable literacy to strive for. There was no value given by any of these

groups, to what I call ‘personal literacy’, where you choose your literacy to suit your needs.

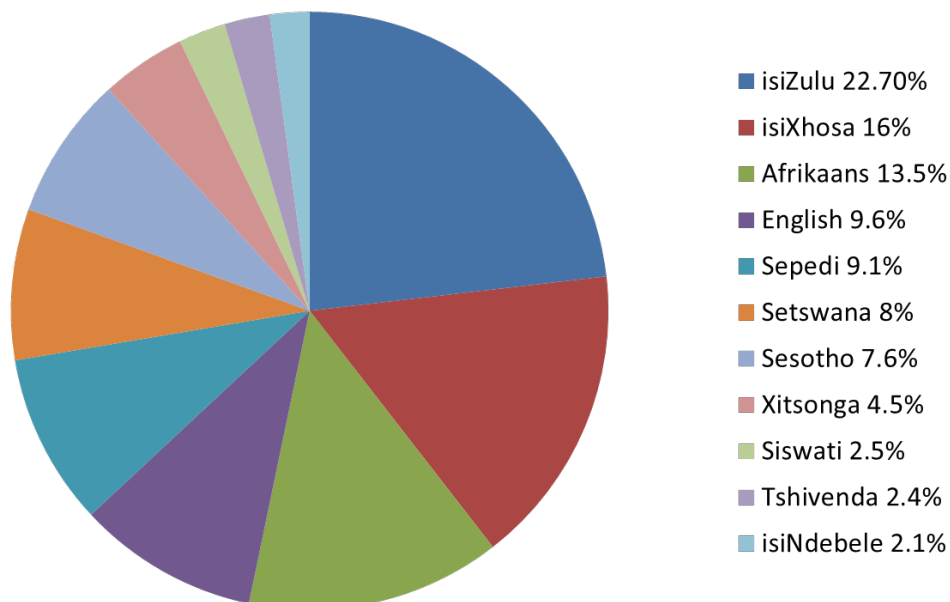
Therefore a large proportion of the material available for adult emergent readers was didactic and multi-functional. There were no books available for adults to read that were **simple enough, in African languages** and did not carry a serious **development message**.

The teaching of reading for adults was not and is not widely practiced.

Language and literacy

Slide 21

I would like to give you a brief picture of the languages that exist in South Africa today and the percentage of people who speak them as a home or first language. South Africa has a population of 51.8 million people. South Africa has an ambitious constitution in place that gives all citizens the right to a basic education and stipulates the right of all of its citizens to be educated in the language of their choice which it recognises with equal status.



Percentage of people that speak each of the official languages of South Africa (Statistics South Africa 2011)

As you can see, although English is only the home language of fewer than 10% of the population it is the most used **official language**. It is the lingua franca - for all **government business, education** as well as for **business and commerce** and the fast developing fields of **science and technology**.

Literacy rates

The official adult literacy rate for South Africa is given as 93%. However, like many developing countries the official literacy rates do not always correspond with personal experience on the ground.

There are many hundreds of thousands of people who cannot access texts and information and definitely do not have the skills, materials or leisure time to allow them to read, especially not for pleasure.

The anomalies in reported adult literacy statistics in South Africa have been analysed very carefully by Dorrit Posel **in her article *Adult literacy rates in South Africa: A comparison of different measures*** where she compares various measures of gathering information from several national household surveys and highlights the potential variations that can occur in these rates, based on the different sets of information used.

One size does not fit all in the area of literacy statistics; there are too many variables to be taken into account.

Despite Education in South Africa receiving a significant portion of the national budget (21%), schooling in South Africa is in crisis and the historical legacy of an unequal quality of schooling has not begun to be addressed in any distinguishable way. Only a tiny proportion of this enormous budget of **R 233 billion** rand is used to buy books leaving 85% of schools in South Africa with no functioning libraries.

Slide 22

The on-going challenges in the schooling system means that the problem of adult illiteracy is likely to grow and although the Department of Education has a strong rhetorical commitment to Adult Basic Education and Training – ABET (recently this term has changed to AET Adult Education and Training) - there seems to be no immediate solution to the growing number of adults who cannot read and write.

Economy and fall out from the global economic crisis

As you are all aware, the current global economic crisis has had a profound effect on donor funding world-wide.

Added to this is the envisioned coming of age of South Africa's democracy – with the anniversary of twenty years of majority rule next year in 2014. This anniversary heralds significant withdrawal of funding from Government and NGO programmes alike from abroad **directly based** on South Africa's transformation and development over the past 20 years.

This goes back to the issue of discrepancies, and one size not fitting all, despite our relatively high ranking on the various GDP per capita scales, South Africa has a very high Gini co-efficient (at 60.3). This measure of income distribution shows that we are in fact one of the most unequal societies in the world.

The fall-out from the global economic downturn has had a serious knock-on effect on our national economy.

At the local level, within poor families, having to face increased financial pressures, **with regard to transport costs and the effect this has had on the cost of even the most basic of foodstuffs**, lower priority is given to adult literacy needs as parents/adults prioritise meagre resources into getting children to school.

NRP received significant donor funding for the first 8 – 10 years of its existence but gradually this has tailed off. This situation mirrors the national situation where donor funding of literacy projects has more or less come to an end. With the emergence of the AIDs crisis in the 1980s, donor focus shifted to those NGOs involved in health and specifically those working within the field of HIV/AIDs. With more than 5 million people in South Africa testing positive for HIV, literacy slipped down the priority scale for local and foreign donors. **The current new health issue attracting a lot of focus in the country is that of male circumcision – with new funding for research in this field.** Added to this is the fact that South Africa is not the flavour of the decade any more.

What we believe

Slide 23

At NRP we believe that simple, easy-to-read stories are the most accessible way for emergent adult readers to approach text.

You become a fluent reader by reading

We believe that you become a fluent reader by reading, preferably in your mother tongue and preferably reading something that you can identify with. In the NRP Research Report, Lyster noted that with many learners, having never read any books before that weren't workbooks or children's books, "there was a strong identification with some of the stories". In fact some of the comments made by adults seeing the new books for the first time were:

"She must have known me because this story is about me" and

"That was my mother they were talking about".

Learners need to read a variety of books

We believe that learners should have access to books with the correct level of difficulty. As you all know it is very intimidating for a learner to be given a book that is far too dense in terms of text – conversely, it is exciting for a learner who is making progress to be challenged with a book that has new words and more of them on the page than they are used to.

We aim to publish a wide variety of genres to contribute to a body of stories that encourage imagination, identification, empathy and creativity. Just as many fluent readers have preferences in terms of genres, so new readers should be given the options to discover just what sort of books appeal to them. If you have never read a mystery or a romance or drama, how do you know if you will enjoy it or not?

Reading has to be meaningful from the beginning

As you saw with the story *Woza Friday*, very few words and sentences can make up a recognisable story even a very simple story. There is

nothing more boring than teaching adults (or children for that matter) a series of words and sounds out of context.

The teacher/facilitator/librarian is the best role model for fluent and varied reading

This is why we are committed to the workshop process in terms of promoting reading. If the teacher loves to read, it makes sense that the learners will follow this example. **The reading habits of fluent readers include reading widely so this too can be imparted to the learners.**

Slide 24

Learners do not have to be word perfect before they can move on to the next book or level

Drilling the same book over and over until a learner is word perfect is a punishment and it will definitely not make the experience enjoyable. In good fiction, whether it has a more or less difficult level of text the plot should carry you along and **not** letting learners read (or be read to) until they know all the words in the story kills the process dead. **How many times do you as a fluent reader gloss over words that you do not understand? I admit I am very lazy about using a dictionary; I often simply ask someone what a word means or get a rough idea from the context and move on.**

Learners should not be corrected all the time

Not only does this process sap the confidence of a less than fluent reader, it also ensures that the thread of the story is lost – and therefore the anticipation and enjoyment.

Reading is fun

It comes without any of the implications of ‘a serious business’ and allows everyone, in spite of their literacy levels, to have an opinion about a story that is as valid as anyone else’s. You build your personal literacy, it is something that belongs to you, and with it you can read whatever YOU choose to read.

The more fluently you read, the more you enjoy it!

Once the technical process of reading becomes automatic and natural, the real business and joy of reading takes off! The letters and words blur and there is that magical moment when you forget you ARE reading, the story just flows into you and time passes until – the bell goes, or the door slams and you are back in real time. This is what we want everyone to have the opportunity to experience – we believe it is everyone's right to aim to become a fluent reader.

Slide 25

The way to picture our work...

A way to visualise our work is if you picture a person who is illiterate being bombarded by a rainstorm of text which runs down into a virtual river of literacy. This person often feels excluded, insecure, embarrassed and resentful and is usually poor.... the pressure to 'become literate' pushes this river on, flowing across the road ahead.

These pressures include the pressure to be included, to attend class (to find the time and the money for transport), to understand, to progress, to succeed, there is also a pressure to put food on the table, all of these make the water seem treacherous.

All the reading materials provided are found in this fast flowing river, but they are difficult to grab hold of for a new reader as they can be intimidating (too long with too much small writing), they can be complex they can be in a language they don't understand or conversely this material could also be childish, and look boring – **I believe this is where NRP's materials fit in.**

Slide 26

We have a variation of this picture in South Africa too, in our deep rural areas, the same pressures apply in terms of gaining access to literacy and putting food on the table, but in some of the most remote and underdeveloped areas, there is often hardly any text to be seen.

I see our books as stepping stones across the water. Adults can read a story in their mother tongue, it is not too difficult, it is relevant and

perhaps even locally based. Once learners feel that they can ford the literacy river they can then access other materials.



What we do and how we do it

Slide 27

NRP continues with the original aims of the project – set out over 20 years ago and our work can be broken up into three interconnected areas, the **development and publishing of stories**, the **running of workshops**, and the **promotion of reading for pleasure and advocacy around adult literacy**.

To give you a practical example of how this work intersects, I would like to introduce you to one of our titles *Ke nyala mang?*, written by a first

language Setswana speaker Mr Sello Motete at a Writers' Workshop held in 2000. We have since translated this story into Sepedi and also into English.

I have also chosen to put up slides of the original language to avoid you reaching the climax of the story before I reveal it!

Read *Who shall I marry* and have book on slides in Setswana.

Slides 28 – 39

Ask questions about predicting the outcome etc.

Back to Slide 27

Publishing

One important step in the development of its stories was the process of testing NRP undertook. NRP staff decided testing and evaluation by potential readers for all its manuscripts, (to apply to the content, language and the illustrations) to ensure maximum readability and comprehension by any potential independent reader.

Like all publishers, we are very aware of the levels of difficulty and of choosing formats and layouts that are appropriate in terms of the size of font, suitable original illustrations and book sizes that do not leave newly literate adults feeling that they are reading children's books.

We believe in publishing stories without the imposition of censorship or moralising, for example *Who shall I marry?* is adult in terms of content – and with its couple of serious twists it evokes some very strong reactions.

Slide 40

Just because they are new to reading, adults should not be subjected to child-like plots and unsophisticated themes.

This story also supports our belief in the importance of African language publishing and the right of adults to have access to reading material in their own language.

African language publishing has its own difficulties including regional variations and linguistic complexity. In terms of the testing required, we

often have to test a new story at different sites to ensure that we get a genuine spread of responses.

As with many other languages there are also the issues of cultural taboos to take into account – which will vary in sensitivity from area to area, notably from a rural to urban setting.

As an example, one of the titles also developed in the early days of the project (Ngingenzenjani uma kuyimi? Usizo nge-AIDS) was a story about a couple who discover they are infected with the AIDS virus. Lyster, in the Research report of 1995, explains that “Sexuality in any language is complex and delicate” But she goes on to explain that isiZulu, without any tradition of written information about sex presented very particular problems. Its oral tradition is “extremely circumspect” when talking about these matters therefore extreme care had to be taken to choose terminology that did not offend the potential audience of adult new readers. In terms of the terminology eventually chosen, Lyster says they went with “unambiguous but euphemistic” rather than going with terminology that was “explicit but offensive”. For example, the term ‘ukuya ocansini’ was used for sexual intercourse, when in fact literally it means ‘to go to the mat’.

With regards to the marketing and distribution of NRP’s books, particularly in African languages, one of the challenges is that they are not bought by the people who will read them. As Philip Altbach talks about in his book ‘Publishing in African Languages: Challenges & Prospects’ this incongruity is one of the major problems faced by African language publishers, he discusses how the “small and predominantly impoverished reading public ...has limited purchasing power and low literacy rates of readers”. This means that NRP is under pressure to market the books in several different ways and to different audiences.

To ensure access to the books by as many people as possible we have a tiered pricing system in place which enables wealthier organisations in the private sector and training industry to subsidise the cost of books for NGOs and individuals. The average book price to NGOs is less than R 30 – which converts to just under 3 ½ Australian dollars.

Slide 41

Workshops



Promoting Reading workshops

After New Readers Project published its first 30 books and began selling them what became clear was that having them available in classrooms and libraries was simply not enough. Interaction with participants in the writers' workshops confirmed that even those participants with formal education qualifications had very little understanding of, or appreciation for the benefits of reading. The literacy teachers were completely unused to promoting stories and often resorted to the outdated methods of teaching reading still employed in many primary schools.

As often happens with new resources, they were seen as precious and so were locked away in cupboards and not used at all, and when they were used they were often used in a way that was completely counter to the notion of reading for pleasure.

NRP staff began offering workshops to promote reading – helping teachers and librarians to use the new books to read for pleasure. These workshops are free and for participants who often have very limited resources available to them, the book pack they receive containing

several titles (usually between 6 and 10 books together with notes), form a useful starter pack to take back into their own classrooms.

Slide 42

NRP staff use an experiential model for these workshops, which involves reading stories to and with the participants. The main point we try and get across is that if they read and enjoy reading – there is a much better chance they can encourage their learners to read. Often the response to these workshops is one of surprise.

Slide 43

At the Jozi Book Fair last year, (an annual event held in downtown Johannesburg) we ran a workshop for teachers, out of the 12 people that arrived, there was only 1 teacher, and she was the mother of one of the organisers and had been a pre-school teacher 30 years before. Yet we started reading stories, and the discussions that followed became more and more animated.

At the end of the session a young woman from Namibia who works as a social worker with rural farm workers and their families approached me and said that she was told she **had** to come to the workshop, and came reluctantly, but she really loved it and didn't know that reading could be such fun! This is the local angle of our work, the very personal story that I feel we cater to.

The main content areas covered in these workshops are: why we believe reading is important and the principles we base our work on.

Many of NRP's books were developed in our specialised **Writing and Editing Workshops**.

Slide 44

Writing and editing workshops

These are intensive, residential workshops which usually run over 4 to 5 days and demand a serious commitment both by NRP and the participants. They were introduced to train potential writers to produce original stories in their mother tongue and to increase the number of good stories available to adult new readers, particularly in African languages.

Participants are exposed to a range of stories as many of the people who attend have never learnt about the key points of good fiction and have never really thought about the structure of a story and considered what makes it 'good'.

Slide 45

Thinking about *Who shall I marry?* for example, we would discuss the characters (the part the mother played for e.g.), the plot and in this story how to keep the element of surprise. We discuss different genres and we also talk a lot about the audience they will be writing for.

The workshops also attempt to impart editing skills to participants. Many people travel great distances to attend these workshops.

Slide 46

Approximately 150 people have attended a Writers' and Editors' workshop to date. I particularly like the comment from one of our isiXhosa speaking participants from July 2011 (pictured here) who said

"..We all did not mind to work on a Sunday afternoon, till 22.00h on some days and while having dinner on other occasions. It was worthwhile and we LOVED it..."

Slide 47

Promotion, Networking and Advocacy

Having our base in the Centre for Adult Education lends weight to the work we do, the project has a sound academic base and this legitimacy

is taken into the various areas of our work such as the workshops. This foundation allows participants to see reading, and particularly the reading of enjoyable fiction, as a valuable and worthwhile activity.

NRP is linked to various organisations across the country, including the Reading Association of South Africa, the Centre for the Book and the Libraries Association of South Africa. We are involved in different ways with many of the national and provincial campaigns run to promote reading and literacy. NRP also has a database of contacts and customers that we use to put various people in the field in touch with each other.

NRP contributes to the University's community engagement goals. As part of our commitment to these goals we give books away to reading programmes and initiatives as well as to community projects and individuals. To date NRP has given away over 92 000 books, (an average of just over 4000 books per year of our existence!) which staff consider a great privilege.

Slide 48

I would like to talk briefly about the

The issues and challenges faced by NRP

Lack of political will and resource allocation

This project arose out of a need to provide materials for adults in a country with exceptionally high adult illiteracy rates and although Elda Lyster, in her PhD thesis discussed the proliferation of ABET materials published in the optimistic years just pre- and post-1994 in South Africa, she went on to say “ This was due to a, in retrospect, naïve belief that the state was poised for a dramatic increase in ABET provision which would make the publication of ABET materialscommercially viable.” (Lyster p. 114)

Unfortunately this commitment by government was not forthcoming on any level remotely near the one anticipated.

Government has not put sufficient resources into teaching adults to read and write. According to the 2011 Report of the Department of Higher

Education and Training task team on Community Education and Training Centres, ABET receives less than 1% of the education budget.

There have been several national and provincial mass literacy campaigns launched in South Africa in the past 15 years and they have all been problematic in different ways and have not delivered as they promised.

This one size fits all approach seems to be the pattern of all the mass literacy campaigns and this has been, in effect, their major weakness. There has been no provision made for post-literacy strategies in any of these campaigns with the result that literacy, if gained, is very soon lost.

As we know, it is much cheaper per learner to run a mass literacy campaign than for government to commit to addressing the individual problem areas in the adult education sector as a whole.

- For example, you can print one workbook per learner that is copied and translated en masse, bringing the printing costs down to very little,
- you can use a volunteer educator system where the volunteers are paid a proportionally tiny stipend instead of injecting significant and appropriate funding and energy into training adult educators for a long-term commitment to the sector,
- you can make it 'community based' where – using the rationale of learners not having to travel to attend class, you can continue to neglect the administration of the sites and maintenance of the buildings that should make up the network of adult education facilities.

There are no reading books utilised in these campaigns, in some of them there are some paragraphs of text built into the workbooks for reading - making it difficult for educators to promote reading amongst their learners.

Decline in ABET Provision in the various sectors

According to NRP's statistics, private sector companies in South Africa have gradually cut back on ABET provision over the past 10 years or so.

Slide 49

In 2002 when I joined the Project there were many different companies that bought our readers for their in-house ABET classes, which involved for the most part, a commitment by management to allow their workers/learners a pre-arranged number of hours off per week to attend these classes, held on the property. These companies were invested in the literacy needs of their least educated employees with ABET facilitators employed by the company.

But again, one size does not fit all in the ABET process, there were many variables in play for these adults now back in the classroom – some after a significant period of time. So depending on their prior level of education and other issues around their skills levels at work and the demands of their various shifts, many of these ABET learners took far longer to pass each level required.

Many companies moved over to employing an external service provider to see their learners through the process. Very few of these service providers used readers as an additional resource.

The way that some companies have managed to get out of their commitment to staff with low levels of literacy, is to implement policies, not always legal, that stipulate they only employ new staff who have a Matric certificate.

The NGO sector in South Africa, as I mentioned in terms of the context of our work, has been severely affected by funding cuts.

The current aid paradigm in which wealthy nations send aid to the South, no longer corresponds with the current global economic climate and the decisions then by international donors like the UK Department for International Development (DfID) – will severely affect the role that NGOs, like NRP, can play in promoting the health, literacy and well-being of the most vulnerable members of South African society.

With regards to the Government ABET sector, there is not really a downward trend in terms the books sold by NRP as there has never been a significant commitment to this initiative. The total number of recorded books sold to this sector since the project began is only 18 and a half thousand - less than 10% of the total number of books ever sold!

Dominance of majority languages

Slide 50

“The self-esteem, self-confidence, potential creativity and spontaneity that come with being able to use the language(s) that have shaped one from early childhood (one’s mother tongue) is the foundation of all democratic polities and institutions. To be denied the use of this language is the very meaning of oppression.” Neville Alexander

Hegemony of English

The effect that the dominance of English has over has over the other languages in South Africa has a profound effect on the sales of NRPs books.

In a country with only 9.6% of first language English speakers, this dominance skews our sales figures dramatically as you can see in this diagram.

Slide 51

Number of books sold per language – from NRP Database

In terms of getting our African language books into the hands of the learners, unfortunately the same holds true in the ABET training sector where most training organisations/service providers only teach adults in English and will only buy English readers for their learners.

Slide 52

Books sold to training organisations / educational service providers by NRP 1991 - 2013

NRP has not sold any African language readers to any commercial training organisations since May of 2009.

Slide 53

The linguistic dominance of certain African languages

This is a controversial area of discussion and scholarship in South Africa. There is strong feeling from some sides about the dominance of isiZulu over the other African languages.

This of course makes logical sense in terms of the statistics, with 22% of the population using isiZulu as a stated first language, but unfortunately it is impossible to separate out language from culture and the perceived dominance of isiZulu does elicit rumblings of political dominance from some quarters. Historically, many of the eminent struggle leaders of the ANC came from the Eastern Cape/Border area where isiXhosa is the dominant language and as the leadership has changed over the past decade, the groundswell of support by isiZulu speakers for the isiZulu speaking leadership is significant but understandable.

Interestingly, Zulu will be a compulsory course for all first year students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal from next year starting with all undergraduates. With 60% of the student body speaking Zulu, Management feels “the institution has an obligation to ensure linguistic choices result in effective learning solutions” (Renuka Vithal in the Mercury 16 May 2013)

Reluctance to promote African languages

We can publish African language books that new readers need but the challenge is to get the books into the hands of the learners. With the end of the official apartheid bilingual language policy (of English and Afrikaans) in 1994 there was so much hope to a strong commitment to the promotion of African languages, however, this has not been very apparent, particularly not for us as publishers.

There is the lack of government buy-in as I have mentioned, but also an interesting point is that many African language speakers in South Africa did not want their own children learning to read and write in their home language. Philip Altbach talks about the strong appeal of “world languages” to national elites, but I feel in South Africa it is more widespread than this. It seems that parents feel that the children will have better choices if they leapfrog directly to English, particularly as they see those who do speak English breaking out of the poverty trap.

Perhaps as a response to this trend, an interesting development is that in May this year the National Department of Basic Education announced that all primary school pupils will have to learn an African language – as soon as 2014. This news has brought mixed responses – the criticisms are mainly practically based, namely there is concern that with the lack of qualified teachers already posing a threat to education, the demands on staff will be too much to cope with.

Also, according to staff members within the University of KZN's School of Education, there was a widely acknowledged shortage of African language teachers coming out of teacher education programmes, particularly for the lower grades, with the vast majority of the existing teachers having received their training in either English or Afrikaans.

Publishing challenges in African languages

There are many challenges in African language publishing but if we choose the example of just one particular South African language that we publish in – namely isiZulu (Zulu) a few particular challenges jump out. The isiZulu written language, like many other Southern African languages is a relatively modern written language (despite a long oral tradition) with the first recorded written Zulu Bible translation appearing in 1883.

There are about 11.5 million South Africans who use isiZulu as their first language and the province of KwaZulu-Natal is predominantly a Zulu speaking province.

Huge number of people that speak the language with linguistic borders with several other African languages.

Large geographical size of the province –leads to **huge variations in dialects, accents and even vocabulary** between the furthest points on this Zulu-speaking map.

The Zulu language and culture are intrinsically linked and for NRP, **publishing in this language, like all the African languages, has proved challenging.**

The area covers **rural land** as well as **many small market towns and also** some of the largest areas of **urban sprawl in Southern**

Africa. As with most languages there are the challenges of **slang and contemporary usage versus the more traditional and standard forms - the gap between Urban Zulu and Standard Zulu.**

We have 22 stories in isiZulu and for each one published we required several months of preparation before the books were print ready.

This means a lot of time is spent with language advisors, from various areas and backgrounds, until a story emerges where the terminology is seen as authentic, the characters are seen to behave in a natural way and most importantly the majority of Zulu speaking readers understand it.

Attitudes to stories and fiction

Slide 49 again

Stories have less value

When my colleagues ran a Writing and Editing workshop in Uganda in 2011 for 28 participants from Uganda and Ethiopia, one of the Ethiopian participants asked this question with reference to reading and writing stories “What does this have to do with development?”

One of the things we have found whether it is running promoting reading workshops or trying to sell our books to government departments, is that stories are often seen as **frivolous and a waste of time**. They are seen as not as useful or as valuable as reading materials that cover development issues and non-fiction.

Given the lack of government funding and political will for adult literacy as a whole, one can see where this type of fiction particularly is not a very popular or well-promoted area. **Reading for adults is only seen as a tool for readers to gain access to development information in the areas of, for example, health, agriculture, housing, sanitation and poverty alleviation.**

I view this the opposite way around. I see reading fiction, accessible and easy-to read and in one’s own language, as the stepping stones into learning to read for its own sake. The intrinsic motivation to read is the one that keeps you reading, extrinsic factors simply don’t push the same

buttons! What is it about stories that make them so universally appealing? It is the anticipation, how will the plot unfold and how will the various characters respond to or affect this process. Having stories to read that are accessible and fun is in itself an incentive to read more.

I need to add that the Ethiopian man I mentioned earlier – was pleasantly surprised by the workshop content. There is a real sense of needing permission to enjoy oneself in the serious world of adult education and literacy and the content and structure of the workshops legitimise the process in some way!

Slide 54

My conclusions

Looking back 22 years to 1991 and at the original aims of the project, there are some boxes that can be ticked with confidence. 150 people have attended one of the 'Writing and Editing workshops' - thus training others in the process of book writing has on a small scale, been realised.

From a core of 30 readers, there are now 107 titles in the NRP catalogue, 66 of them in an African language which is a notable contribution to an accessible body of work for newly literate adults.

Also, 608 people have attended one of the 'Promoting Reading workshops' and gone away from it with a set of books and a lot of practical advice about promoting a love of reading in their own communities.

Slide 55

Despite all the hope for the ABET sector with the new post-1994 regime, sadly many millions of adults in South Africa do still not have the literacy skills to read and write in their own language.

One of the on-going challenges is getting books directly into the hands of the learners themselves. One of the ways NRP is addressing this is through an arrangement with an organisation called FunDza which has a mobi site that loads stories onto the instant messaging/social network Mxit.

Given that so many people that have cell phones do not have access to libraries or books, this online library of free stories is a way to spark a love of reading and several of NRPs books are available.

NRP stories speak to the local and encourage a personal response and this is what we see as extremely important. Each learner has their own story which is completely unique, yes they may fit into a wide range of statistics in a national and global picture but until they are given reading options that let them bring their own experiences into the classroom, they will not develop their personal literacy.

Your level of literacy or education does NOT determine the relevance or importance of your opinion.

I want to challenge the idea that adults need just enough literacy to gain access to the information that we think they need. Stories are the way to give people power to read what they want to read.

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