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Stories and early literacy education in Zambia: donor-initiated projects, educational policy and teacher beliefs

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ABSTRACT

Limited access to reading material written in local languages is considered a contributing factor to poor reading achievement in Sub-Saharan Africa. Several non-government projects are attempting to compensate for this by providing extensive reading material. One such project is the non-commercial, donor-initiated *African Storybook*. This article examines the premise on which *African Storybook* and similar donor-initiated projects build, namely that providing stories in local languages can significantly improve early literacy achievement. Understanding literacy as social practice, we investigate what experiences with stories inform the literacy-related beliefs of pre-service teachers in Zambia, and how these beliefs may shed light on their response to storybooks as part of early literacy education. Our data comprises a questionnaire with 26 pre-service teachers and focus group interviews with six of them. The pre-service teachers' beliefs were found to reflect their childhood experiences with stories and the Zambian official National Literacy Framework. Our findings indicate that neither their childhood experiences nor their teacher education had prepared the pre-service teachers to use stories for extensive reading in early literacy education. These findings lead us to question whether literacy delivery is best served by initiatives that are not coordinated with both national literacy policy, curriculum and local teacher beliefs.

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African storybook; early literacy education; language-in-education policy; literacy as social practice in Zambia; teacher beliefs

Introduction

Many Zambian children have limited access to reading material written in local languages and with familiar characters and contexts (Chansa-Kabali 2017), and the lack of appropriate reading material is generally identified as a key hinderance to literacy development (Krashen 2004; Töttemeyer 2011; Read 2015; Reed 2019). The Zambian government is keen to address poor reading achievement, but there are also non-government players who share these concerns. One such is the non-commercial, donor-initiated *African Storybook* (ASb), based in South Africa, as well as its younger relative *Storybooks Zambia*, which has made a selection of stories from the ASb available in Zambian languages. In this article, we examine the premise on which these and similar donor-initiated projects build by investigating the role

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of written and spoken stories in Zambia, focusing on three social domains: family, church and school (Barton & Lee, 2011; Street 1996).

Our interest in ASb emerged from our familiarity with the *Storybooks Zambia* initiative, an important component in the Literacy in Multilingual Settings (LEMS) project with which all three authors of this article are involved. LEMS is a collaboration between the University of Zambia and Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences. With the reports of the challenges reported by proponents of ASb in mind (Stranger-Johannessen 2017; Reed 2019; Stranger-Johannessen and Norton 2019), we wanted to investigate pre-service teachers' beliefs about stories in early literacy education in Zambia.

Our main sources of data are a questionnaire and focus group interviews in which we asked Zambian pre-service teachers about their beliefs and experiences of stories in their own lives and communities, and their beliefs of the role of stories in early literacy education. We were interested in their experience with both written and oral stories. Drawing on theories of teacher beliefs, which see teachers' practices as expressions of their previous experiences (Skott 2015), we pose two research questions:

- What experiences with stories inform the literacy-related beliefs of pre-service teachers in Zambia?
- How may these beliefs shed light on teachers' response to storybooks as part of early literacy education?

Policy and curriculum in early literacy education in Zambia

According to the Education Act of 2011, the Ministry of Education is 'the custodian of quality education provision and ensures that all providers adhere to the ministry's policy and regulations' (Zambian Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education, 2013, p. 1). Despite a massive expansion in school access and enrolment since Zambia signed up to the ambitious targets in the Education for All programme in 1990 (Zambian Ministry of Education, 2014), primary schools in Zambia have continued to record low literacy levels (Zambian Ministry of Education, 1996; Matafwali 2010; Tambulukani and Bus 2012; Zambian Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education, 2014). USAID (2022) for their part describes Zambian education as still 'plagued by inadequate resources, poor education quality and low progression rates'.

A key concern of literacy initiatives in multilingual Zambia has been the relationship between children's home language and the language of instruction. Current policy is that one of seven so-called 'familiar' Zambian languages be the language of instruction up to and including Grade 4. English is introduced as an oral language in the second term of Grade 2, and as a written language in the following term. Both the familiar language and English are taught until a full transition to English as the language of instruction from Grade 5. The assumption is that by the age of ten or eleven children will have acquired sufficient literacy skills in a Zambian language, as well as in English, so that on entering Grade 5 they will be capable of independent and fluent reading in English (Zambian Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education, 2013). Yet despite the endeavours of the National Literacy Framework (NLF) to control and standardise literacy teaching, it is still the case that many children are 'drifting through the school system with very low mastery of desired learning competencies' (Zambian Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 28).

Addressing literacy achievement has been a key educational concern in Zambia for many years. The Primary Reading Programme in the early 2000s, funded in large part by UK Aid, led to improved reading performance that proved unsustainable once funding dried up (Kombe and Herman 2017). Central to the initial success of the Primary Reading Programme was its nationwide provision of reading material in local languages and the training of teachers in its use. The underlying principle was that the more pupils read, the more they develop their written language skills. The concept of extensive reading promotes reading for pleasure, in contrast to more teacher-led reading activities where the pupils read to answer questions, do exercises or deliberately learn new language (Munden 2021). Extensive reading is no longer an explicit focus for early literacy education in Zambia.

The Zambian Ministry of General Education currently has USAID as its main collaborative funding and development partner, and the early literacy policy in the NLF draws on the conceptualisation of literacy in other USAID initiatives for accelerating early grade reading (Chabbott 2006). Schools are required to use the so-called scientific method, targeting five key competences: phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. And while Zambia has a formal curriculum that claims to be both child-centred and outcome-based (Zambian Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education, 2013), such curricula in Sub-Saharan Africa 'are often not well delivered in practice' (Read 2015, p. 73).

The 'scientific method' for improving literacy achievement has for many years dominated the discourse on early literacy in the USA (Cervetti et al. 2020), where it is seen as particularly suited to low achievement schools and regions (Ede 2006). This method requires teachers to deliver pre-scripted lessons, which, for early literacy development, incorporate 'systematic and explicit instruction' in the five key competences mentioned above (Ede 2006, p. 340). Pre-scripted lessons in Zambia are provided for every term until the end of Grade 4 (Mwandia and Mwanza 2022, p. 13), despite inconclusive test results in the USA and the method's disregard for learners' linguistic competences and diversity (Ede 2006, p. 32). The scientific method is further reinforced by long-standing institutional practices that require teachers to submit all their lesson plans for inspection in order to demonstrate that they are following the current guidelines.

When it comes to the role of stories in early literacy teaching and learning in the seven familiar languages, factual prose texts rather than fictional stories are the central content both of the learners' textbooks and of the weekly lesson plans dedicated to literacy learning in local languages. Every week teaching must follow the same design, with each day of the week centring on one literacy-related activity: discussion and questions on Monday; listening and answering questions about a story that the teacher reads aloud on Tuesday; writing on Wednesday (typically 'fill-in-the-missing word' exercises); a much shorter decodable 'story' that learners read themselves on Thursday, and finally, on Friday, revision. A clear distinction is made between Thursday's decodable stories, which should only contain words that learners have already encountered, and Tuesday's 'Teacher Read Alouds', which are intended to increase vocabulary, improve listening comprehension and stimulate the learners' enthusiasm for reading (Zambian Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education, 2013). In the learners' book for the last term of Grade 4 (Zambian Ministry of Education, 2016), for example, colourfully illustrated texts teach life lessons through exposition or fables. Topics include HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, the importance of washing one's hands, and the importance of being prepared for challenges that the future

may bring. The concept of extensive reading or reading for pleasure does not appear as a component of this learners' book, even though this is the final year in which the language of instruction is a local language, and therefore the grade in which one might expect extensive reading to play a significant role in developing reading competence.

In their interview-based study with stakeholders in primary education in Zambia, Mwandia and Mwanza (2022) found that pre-scripted lessons were perceived as compensating for the pedagogical and linguistic shortcoming of inexperienced teachers, some of whom do not know the familiar language they are required to teach. Amongst the disadvantages of pre-scripted lessons, their lack of responsiveness and their tendency to make teachers 'lazy' were mentioned. This led Mwandia and Mwanza to conclude that teachers will only be able to make autonomous decisions about how to teach when such pre-scripted lessons are 'done away with' (2022, p. 23). One argument for a prescriptive curriculum is, as Mwandia and Mwanza (2022) found, the unpreparedness of teachers. A study carried out by research teams in six African countries, including Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya, described the way colleges of teacher education prepared students to teach early reading as 'rushed and superficial' (Akyeampong et al., 2011, p. 29). The study also noted that pre-service teachers received very little, if any, instruction in teaching early grade reading in local languages, in differentiating their reading instruction or in teaching learners how to move from decoding words to reading longer sentences, and from there to making sense of stories. In their summary of studies of teacher preparedness, Welch et al. (2014) wrote that 'it is usually assumed that teachers can apply what they have learned about teaching reading in English to teaching reading in any other language' (p. 94). This assumption is problematic, they say, because English is typically taught to older children and as a second language. Bunyi et al. (2011) found that teacher educators in Kenya had themselves no training and seldom any classroom experience of teaching early grade literacy, something which is also the case in Zambia.

Donor-initiated projects and the African Storybook project

In parallel with nationwide educational programmes developed by the Ministry of Education and foreign aid agencies, there have been many smaller donor-initiated projects that aim to improve low literacy achievement in Sub-Saharan Africa. Such initiatives are susceptible to what researchers have termed 'project mentality' (Kombe and Herman 2017), a situation where 'those involved in a project think about their work as a) simply a specially funded project and b) their jobs as providing project-based discrete services' (Adelman and Taylor 2003, p. 10–11). Taking Zambia as their case study, Kombe and Herman (2017, p. 547) describe project mentality in the education sector as a consequence of the influx of donor innovations, innovation fatigue, the observation that donor-driven innovations tend to disappear once donor support is withdrawn, and the inability of the innovations to achieve their intended goals. Especially interesting for the current study is their argumentation that innovations related to existing government policies have a greater chance of sustainability than those that require material resources and methodologies that prove not to be sustainable once donor engagement runs out.

The donor-initiated project on which this article focuses, *African Storybook (ASb)*, originated in South Africa. Drawing on Norton's theory of investment in language learning (2013) and encouraged by some success stories about book flood initiatives, it provides a website with short, open-access, illustrated stories in what are described as 'the languages

of Africa' (www.africanstorybook.org). Its vision is to promote 'children's literacy, enjoyment and imagination' by providing easily accessible reading material from an African context, written in a wide range of languages familiar to the learners. The assumption is that access to these stories will facilitate learners' literacy development (Welch 2014; Gulere et al. 2017; Reed 2019; Stranger-Johannessen and Norton 2019).

Despite proponents of the ASb providing a predominantly positive representation of the project (Gulere et al. 2017, Stranger-Johannessen 2017; Stranger-Johannessen and Norton 2019), they do also report significant challenges. These have to do with insufficient human resources, inadequate infrastructure, and challenges with uptake in formal educational settings (Reed 2019). In his internal reporting of the development and reception of storybooks in the local language in Turkana, Kenya, Ng'asike (2017) reports that, despite following the template and procedures recommended by ASb, the project was met with resistance. 'Teachers' effort is very minimal', he says, and 'Even though there are no extra reading materials beyond textbooks, teachers limit the use of storybooks procedures.' Other studies present similar negative findings, namely that reading material, even when available, is sometimes not used by teachers. For example, Stranger-Johannessen (2017; Stranger-Johannessen and Norton 2017, 2019) builds several articles around a case study of the use of ASb in Uganda and concludes that 'despite some promising uptake and activities, there was still space for engaging students in reading skills, scaffolding writing, and other ways of promoting engagement and learning' (Stranger-Johannessen 2017, p. 33). He also found that even when teachers were mandated to use stories as part of their instruction, 'not all teachers were equally receptive. A few teachers hardly taught any stories at all, citing the requirement to adhere to the themes and content of the curriculum' (2017, p. 33). It is the aim of the present article to better understand possible reasons for this lack of engagement.

Theoretical perspectives

In our analysis of the pre-service teachers' beliefs about stories in literacy education, we draw on theories of literacy as social practice and theories of teacher beliefs. These theories have contributed to our understanding of the pre-service teachers' perspectives related to stories in formal literacy education and beyond.

Literacy as social practice

Context-based approaches that see literacy as social practice have gained in popularity in recent years (Barton & Lee, 2011; Griswold 2012; Aukerman and Schuldt 2021). While recognising the centrality of individual cognitive skills for reading and writing, context-based approaches follow in the tradition of Street (1984, 1996), moving beyond what he referred to as 'the autonomous model of literacy' and insisting instead on seeing literacy as embedded in broader socio-cultural contexts. The relationship of cognitive and cultural approaches to literacy can be variously understood. For example, the first can be seen as 'nested' in the second (Purcell-Gates et al. 2006, p. 84). Alternatively, the cognitive skills of literacy can be seen as 'always integrally and inextricably integrated with ways of talking, acting, interacting, valuing and feeling' (Gee 2001, p. 30). A key term in this theoretical approach is Heath's 'literacy events' (Heath 1982), which Barton and Lee (2011) define as 'occasions in everyday

life where the written word has a role' (p. 601). When literacy events linked to a particular situation are frequently repeated so that patterns of behaviour can be observed and described, we can speak of 'literacy practices.'

The ideological model of literacy that Street proposes offers a more culturally sensitive understanding of literacy than does a cognitive, skills-based approach. This makes it well-suited to donors and researchers whose interests take them to unfamiliar contexts. Viewing literacy as social practice means that:

Instead of privileging the particular practices familiar in their own culture, researchers now suspend judgement as to what constitutes literacy among the people they are working with until they are able to understand what it means to the people themselves, and from which social contexts reading and writing derive their meaning. (Street 1996, pp. 2–3)

Literacy practices occur in different social domains, such as work, home and school which, at least in theory, are characterised by stable but different norms, ways of behaving and ways of using language (Barton & Lee, 2011). Purcell-Gates (1993) in the USA and Prinsloo and Breier (1996) in South Africa are early examples of studies of literacy as social practice. Since these first studies, much research has been carried out on literacy practices in the home and the workplace. A domain that has received relatively little attention, but that is relevant for this study, is the church. Openjuru and Lyster (2007) argue that the paucity of such studies may be because religious literacy practices 'do not relate directly to national development concerns and can also be negatively associated with colonialism and evangelism' (p. 97), even though, as their ethnographic study in a Christian community in rural Uganda clearly indicates, church-related literacy practices could helpfully inform literacy education in school.

For our purposes, it is the relationship between Zambian pre-service teachers' experience with and understanding of stories and their beliefs about early literacy education that are in focus. Seeing these beliefs as being formed by their lived experience constitutes 'a powerful way of conceptualising the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help shape' (Barton et al. 2007, p. 15). An approach to literacy as social practice informs our endeavour to position ASb in relation to Zambian educational policy and teacher beliefs.

Teacher beliefs

An emic perspective on the role of stories in literacy education means that it is the pre-service teachers' beliefs that are the object of study. The investigation of teacher beliefs can be considered part of the broader body of research on teacher cognition (Fives and Gill 2015). Research into teacher beliefs has since its inception been a rather sprawling field of research, and different definitions of the term have been proposed. We follow Skott (2015) in defining teacher beliefs as 'individual, subjectively true, value-laden mental constructs that are the relatively stable results of substantial social experiences and that have significant impact on one's interpretations of and contributions to classroom practice' (p. 19). In other words, we understand teachers' professional assessments and practices in the classroom as to a great extent based on their previous experiences from the teachers' personal life. Phipps and Borg (2009) have argued that the teachers' cognition, including their beliefs, is already established before they commence their teacher education and is greatly influenced by their previous

experiences as learners. These pre-established beliefs function as a filter through which new information is interpreted, and this filter can potentially be more important for teachers' classroom practices than formal teacher education (Phipps and Borg 2009; Borg 2018).

The understanding of teachers' beliefs as being largely formed before their formal professional education needs to be modified in light of findings indicating that pre-service teachers to a great extent adapt to the ideals and practices of the particular field placement school and of their supervising teacher during field placement (Edwards and Protheroe 2003; Haugan 2014; Iversen 2020). This means that after they transition into teaching, their beliefs of the potential of stories in literacy education will be influenced by the approach to literacy education at the school where they work. This assumption is supported by previous studies of the relationship between teachers' personal experience of storytelling, and the roles they identify for storytelling and literacy in the classroom (Mottley & Telfer, 1997; Nguyen et al. 2016). In contrast to these studies, it is not our intention or within our competence to suggest changes to teacher education in Zambia. Rather we are concerned to describe some of the social experiences and beliefs that the pre-service teachers in the current study bring with them, experiences and beliefs that necessarily influence how they may or may not engage with stories as literacy educators. Such an approach to the study of literacy practices has not yet been taken in the Zambian context, as far as we are aware.

Method

As previously mentioned, this study grew out of the LEMS project, a collaboration between the University of Zambia and Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences. The objective of the current study, which has been approved by the National Centre for Research Data in Norway, is to investigate Zambian pre-service teachers' perspectives on stories in literacy education. This interest led us to formulate the following two research questions:

- What experiences with stories inform the literacy-related beliefs of pre-service teachers in Zambia?
- How may these beliefs shed light on teachers' response to storybooks as part of early literacy education?

These research questions were investigated through a review of the Zambian National Literacy Framework (Zambian Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education, 2013), and a selection of government-approved learner textbooks and teacher's guides developed in accordance with the NLF. Furthermore, we conducted an exploratory questionnaire with 26 respondents, followed by two focus group interviews with six focal participants. The questionnaire and interview data serve as the main sources of data for our analysis, while the review of policy documents and textbooks contributed to contextualise our analysis.

Data collection and participants

The Zambian co-author of this article is a teacher educator, who knows the Zambian education system and Zambian teacher education well. The two Norwegian co-authors are also teacher educators, with academic and school experience in language, literature and literacy

education. To develop a common understanding of the research context, it was necessary for the Norwegian authors to review current policies for literacy education and how these policies are reflected in the government-approved textbooks used for early literacy education in Zambian schools.

As part of the LEMS, an exploratory questionnaire regarding the use of storybooks in local languages for literacy education was disseminated among a randomly selected third-year class of pre-service primary school teachers at a teacher education college in a larger urban centre in Zambia. The 26 respondents (9 men and 17 women) were among the 148 students who took the course *Literacy and Language Education* at the college in the spring of 2021. As part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to comment on example texts and how these could be used in early literacy instruction. Although the questionnaire focused on the use of stories in literacy education, the participants were also asked about their childhood experiences with stories, including questions about who told the stories, what stories they were told, and where.

Based on the richness of their answers, six pre-service teachers – three women and three men, different linguistic backgrounds – were invited to participate in two separate focus groups, with three participants in each group. Participants were informed that the main topic for the focus group was their experiences with stories. Asking them about stories in a Zambian context was an attempt to shed light on some of the social practices in which literacy learning is embedded (e.g. Street 1984, 1996; Barton & Lee, 2011). At the time of the focus group interviews, the participants had graduated and returned to their hometowns and villages throughout Zambia, and so the interviews were carried out digitally. The first interview lasted for 76 minutes, while the second lasted for 75 minutes, and both were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Since the data collection was limited to an exploratory questionnaire and focus group interviews, and did not involve observations, the researchers could only analyse the pre-service teachers reported experiences, beliefs and practices.

The 26 respondents to the questionnaire were in their third and final year of primary language teacher education, enrolled at a teacher education college in Zambia. At the time of the interviews some months later, the six participants had just completed their teacher education and were awaiting the results of their final exams. None of them had yet been employed as teachers. We therefore describe all the participants as pre-service teachers.

Data analysis and research ethics

Initially, the researchers analysed the 26 participants' responses to questions 3 and 6 in the questionnaire, which asked about their earlier experiences of stories and storytelling and how they would use storybooks in local languages in early literacy education. In order to reduce, organise and identify significant themes in the responses, we conducted an inductive thematic analysis (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 83–85). Thematic analysis can be defined as 'a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data' (Clarke and Braun 2017, p. 297). Specifically, we first condensed and categorised the responses in a table, including direct quotations. The transcriptions of the focus group interviews also underwent an inductive thematic coding (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 83–85), which led us to revise the initial categories. We eventually ended up with three key themes: experiences with stories in different social domains; stories for moral and social education; and stories for literacy education.

The researchers' positionality constituted an ethical dilemma, as we had a clear ambition to take an emic perspective. However, in both the questionnaire and the interviews the participants knew that their answers would be studied by their own teacher educator. The fact that the participants were not anonymous to the researchers, might have led some of them to perceive the questionnaire as an assessment of what they had been taught. This possibility constitutes a limitation of the study. In the presentation of findings, the participants have been given pseudonyms.

Findings

In the following sections, we present the results of the thematic analysis. First, we present the pre-service teachers' experience with stories from before enrolling in teacher education. Second, we present the pre-service teachers' beliefs about stories for moral and social education. Finally, we present the pre-service teachers' perspectives on the relevance of stories for literacy education. Our questions about 'stories' prompted responses primarily about oral stories, something we had not foreseen when we developed the questionnaire.

Experiences with stories in different social domains

The respondents' personal experiences with stories were important in both the questionnaire and the interviews because these experiences are likely to influence how they perceive stories in their professional practice as teachers (Skott 2015; Borg 2018). The pre-service teachers described rich experiences with storytelling from their childhood and adolescence:

Excerpt 1. Focus group interview 2:

Researcher: (...) could you tell us *who* told you stories when you were a kid?

Namakau: At church, our leader [of] the youth movement used to tell us stories. At school, our teachers used to tell us stories. And at home our elders used to tell us stories.

As Namakau exemplifies in the excerpt above, the pre-service teachers associated their experiences to three distinct social domains: home, church and school. In the home domain, all the pre-service teachers referred to oral stories; only one of them mentioned being read to as a child. In fact, the participants talked much more about oral stories than the questions in the questionnaire had presupposed. The oral stories were usually told by elders, when people gathered around a gender-segregated fire in the evening, as well as during important holidays. The elders who told the stories could be a grandparent, a parent, an aunt or uncle or an older sibling:

Excerpt 2. Focus group interview 1:

Researcher: (...) Did you hear this same story many times?

Chikondi: Yes, I did. Yeah, with this story, I could hear it severally. Some elders used to narrate it.

Researcher: When you say elders, who were the elders?

Chikondi: In those days we could sit around the fire. Uncles, grandfather, and our elder brothers. Yes, our uncles, our elder brothers, our grandfathers. They are the ones who could narrate us.

Researcher: And they were narrated in KiKaonde?

Chikondi: Yes, they were narrated in KiKaonde.

As one can see from the excerpt above and as other respondents confirmed, stories associated with the home domain were told in a local language, familiar to everyone involved. When the pre-service teachers described their memories from these storytelling sessions around the fire at night with their elders, they emphasized moral education as an important rationale for this kind of storytelling.

In addition to their experiences with stories from the home domain, the pre-service teachers also mentioned the use of stories in Sunday school and in church. These biblical stories were meant to convey moral values and virtues:

Excerpt 3. Focus group interview 1:

Jessy: (...) At church, during Sunday school or when we go to learn as children, they would tell us stories and I remember a story told one time of love. (...) So, they would talk about certain virtues and values they would teach. Or they would bring up a story and then they would share a story and ask what have you learned? Who was wrong in this story? (...) And then he would explain. So, like that. The stories in the Bible, they would teach us about love, about obedience, about good life, about respect. A lot of things. So, stories were also good. They also bring us something, some morals, actually. Some values, which were taught at home, at church they would also explain using the stories in the Bible. So, we could see some connection and would relate and think. So, when you grow up you understand this is how things should be.

Similar to their experiences with stories from the home domain, the pre-service teachers once again emphasized the importance of moral education as a key aspect of their engagement with stories in church. As Jessy explained, ‘the stories were good’ because they taught her morals and values. These morals and values corresponded with the morals and values that had been instilled in her at home.

Finally, the pre-service teachers talked about their experience with stories from school. Most of them reported that their teachers had told them stories, and Namakau explained that they would introduce stories to teach them valuable lessons:

Excerpt 4. Focus group interview 2:

Namakau: Well, the main purpose was to teach us some lessons. There are a lot of lessons that were there in storytelling (...) I specifically reviewed this story because I was looking at my daughter and the way she behaves when she sees plants. She loves flowers a lot. (...) So, the story is also in that line about a girl called Kalai. She was only seven years old, she used to live in the village. She loved plants. She would talk to the trees; she would talk to the flowers, and she would talk to plants. Just plants generally, yes. So, I love such stories because they teach us lessons on how to relate with different things that we come across, how to relate to animals, how to relate to plants and how to just interact within ourselves.

Namakau explained that this particular story had come from a book. After many years, she had succeeded in finding a copy of the same book because she wanted her own daughter to learn from the story that she had heard when she was little.

Based on the findings from the questionnaire and the subsequent interviews, it seems that the pre-service teachers had extensive experiences with stories from their childhood

and adolescence. While they mostly listened to stories told in their local language at home and in church in order to learn valuable lessons, teachers in school occasionally introduced stories to improve reading fluency in higher grades. Primarily, however, teachers too used stories to teach important moral and social lessons. In the following, we will present what potential the pre-service teachers considered stories to have in literacy and moral education.

Stories for moral and social education

As already touched upon in the analysis of the respondents' experiences with stories, especially in Excerpts 3 and 4, the most salient theme throughout the empirical data was that moral lessons could be learned from stories. Mary wrote in the questionnaire that the stories she remembered from childhood 'were meant to teach and was not written anywhere.' The stories their elders told them around the fire, the biblical stories they heard at church and the stories they encountered in school all derived their value from their potential to teach moral values:

Excerpt 5. Questionnaire response:

Chisomo: I had a wonderful experience with stories as a child because I loved to sit with the elders and listen to their wisdom.

Excerpt 6. Focus group interview 1:

Jessy: When we were growing up there were little stories that we shared with us. And most, some of them were about teaching us morals and good values.

As exemplified through excerpts 5 and 6, when the pre-service teachers responded freely about their experiences with stories, they highlighted the wisdom, morals and values they were exposed to through these stories. In her response in the questionnaire, Jessy described the stories she heard in her upbringing as 'beautiful' and in the focus group interview, we asked her about this particular choice of word:

Excerpt 7. Focus group interview 1:

Researcher: Why are they beautiful? What is beautiful?

Jessy: Because we are learning something from them. Some beautiful values that have shaped us and that we share with others. Experience from others, so I call them beautiful because they were teaching us something. And I know most of who have grown up, have learned something from these stories. They were not just stories, but stories with values. So, I call them beautiful because of that.

To Jessy, the stories derived their beauty from the values they taught the listeners. Often, the morals that were taught through the stories also had a religious purpose, namely, to draw the listeners closer to God:

Excerpt 8. Focus group interview 2:

Namakau: So, the stories in the Bible are very interesting because you know, you know, they enhance your faith in God. Yes. So, you feel like you get closer to God, and they are very interesting in that they teach a lot of lessons ...

The analysis presented so far indicates that the pre-service teachers' immediate understanding of the purpose and value of stories is to teach the listener or reader an important lesson, usually related to good morals. Although this purpose clearly was the pre-service teachers' primary concern, they were also able to relate stories to literacy education when they were explicitly asked to do so, both in the questionnaire and during the focus group interviews.

Stories for literacy education

As previously mentioned, in the pre-service teachers' own accounts of their experiences with stories from their childhood and adolescence, literacy was not an immediately salient theme. Nevertheless, when asked about how stories could be used in literacy education, they consistently connected stories to the literacy curriculum of Zambian schools and often referred to 'the five key skills to literacy' or 'the sound of the day', sometimes listing them, as in the two excerpts below:

Excerpt 9. Questionnaire response:

Mukela: You can use them to teach oral literacy in local languages by using five key skills to literacy also in English.

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Vocabulary
- Oral reading fluency
- Comprehension

Excerpt 10. Questionnaire response:

Sibandé: When teaching Grade 3 using storybook in English, the most important thing that a teacher must focus on are the 5 key skills to literacy which are (...)

Most frequently mentioned of these skills was 'the sound of the day', the prescribed strategy for teaching phonemic awareness:

Excerpt 11. Focus group interview 2:

Joackim: You bring that decodable story and then from there you generate the sound of the day. You know the sound of the *what?* – the sound of the day.

In the Zambian context, as previously mentioned, decodable stories are very simple texts containing short sentences where the learners practice decoding particular sounds in isolation and in combination with other sounds. The pre-service teachers in this study were very concerned with developing learners' literacy skills in accordance with the government's prescribed method of instruction. This concern led them to emphasise technical aspects of decoding over reading fluency and comprehension.

Regardless of which languages they were written in, stories were considered to be an instrument for literacy development. In fact, the respondents did not distinguish between the potential contribution of stories in English and in the familiar languages, seeing both as apparently parallel tools in literacy development. An illustrative statement was the following:

Excerpt 12. Questionnaire response:

Mulenga: A story book in [familiar] language can be used the same way a story in English language can be used.

When the researchers encouraged the pre-service teachers to imagine a magical airplane dropping all the multilingual books they could wish for and asked them to explain what they would do with such books, the respondents again referred to ‘the sound of the day’:

Excerpt 13. Focus group interview 1:

Joackim: In classroom, the way, maybe if we have enough books for local language, usually, for me I would relate them to the sound of the day, of course. Relate them to the sound of the day.

Although most of the pre-service teachers were, like Joackim, concerned with the teaching of the sound of the day, a less frequent theme was the potential of stories for advancing learners’ reading fluency, comprehension and as a tool for classroom management, as can be seen from excerpts 14 and 15:

Excerpt 14. Focus group interview 1:

Jessy: Maybe during free time, maybe when a learner is done with work, you can give a learner a book to read. If there is an interesting story, he will keep quiet and learn something.

When asked to comment on the content of an example text, one pre-service teacher answered in this way:

Excerpt 15. Questionnaire response:

Mukela: The content and the language use were suitable for Grade 3. The reason is that (...) it was just for fun or to develop the reading fluency of the learners after learning the sounds.

Excerpts 14 and 15 illustrate that, when prompted, two of the pre-service teachers meant that reading ‘just for fun’ can engage learners and develop their reading fluency, a position that aligns with the understanding of oral reading fluency in the NLF. But even for these two respondents reading for fun or fluency is something extra, something that comes ‘after’ or ‘maybe during free time’. In general, the pre-service teachers showed little engagement with the concept of extensive reading, despite our prompting. This may reflect both their personal lack of experience with extensive reading, but also the lack of training in how to develop reading fluency that characterised their teacher education.

Discussion and concluding remarks

In this article we have investigated what experiences with stories inform the literacy-related beliefs of pre-service teachers in Zambia and how these beliefs may shed light on teachers’ response to storybooks as part of early literacy education. Our analysis suggests that the beliefs and experiences of pre-service teachers regarding stories are first and foremost grounded in storytelling in the social domains of family, church and school. In these domains, stories are valued for the lessons that can be learnt from them, a finding that is in line with other studies that consider the role of stories in African societies (Okpewho 1992; Finnegan 2007; Munden 2010; Cancel 2013). Our findings lead us to

argue that the use of stories in early literacy education should be informed by an understanding of the functions, values and practices associated with stories in family, church and school.

The pre-service teachers' beliefs about stories in early literacy education reflect their experiences with stories from different social domains, including their teacher education and field placement experiences (e.g. Phipps and Borg 2009). When stories were explicitly mentioned as part of early literacy education, the pre-service teachers usually connected them to the NLE, typically the five key competences and the sound of the day. Thus, the pre-service teachers' responses correspond with the pre-scripted lessons found in the textbooks and teacher's guides we initially reviewed. These findings suggest that they tended not to consider reading for pleasure – extensive reading – as a part of early literacy instruction. Nor did they report engagement with stories as part of their teacher education or field placement.

When neither their experiences from childhood and adolescence, nor their teacher education and field placement have prepared the pre-service teachers to introduce reading for pleasure as part of early literacy education, it is hardly surprising that they do not readily see a role for stories, apart from those stories that are incorporated in pre-scripted lessons. This would be the case even were other stories easily accessible and affordable. Fives and Buehl (2012, pp. 478–479) have explained how teachers' beliefs can contribute to filter out information teachers do not see as relevant. Thus, even when donors promote the use of storybooks in early literacy education, it is likely that teachers will filter out such a suggestion when it does not correspond with their beliefs about stories, either in their private or their professional lives.

One provider of storybooks in local languages aimed at improving early literacy achievement, is the *African Storybook* (ASb) project. When discussing the implementation of ASb in teacher education institutions in South Africa and Kenya, Reed (2019) reports that 'there is as yet no evidence of student teachers or newly qualified teachers using ASb materials in the classroom' (p. 5). The ASb's own external accountability report identifies the problem in these terms:

The ASb's biggest challenge is at the heart of their 'concept': reading for pleasure. No-one denies that this is important but, as ASb are finding, cash and time-strapped institutions in Africa argue that while the basics [...] are not in place, 'reading for pleasure' and 'trans-languaging' literacy approaches remain a 'luxury'. (Gultig 2017, p. 112)

This last point is worth noting, since it suggests that initiatives such as ASb are perceived as irrelevant to local and national educational *and* storytelling practices. Based on our analysis and the findings presented above, we question whether pre-service teachers whose beliefs about the purpose of stories were formed in local, Zambian social domains can reasonably be expected to introduce reading for pleasure as part of their literacy instruction in schools (see Mwandia and Mwanza 2022). Indeed, we question whether it is right to decontextualise stories, disregarding the social practices where storytelling is a tool for moral and social education, and require teachers to put them into service as tools for formal literacy development in educational and institutional contexts for which they were not intended.

In studies on the implementation of ASb, teachers are sometimes blamed for their limited engagement with the stories (see for example Ng'asike 2017). However, the prescriptive

practices that are typical of early literacy education in Zambia do not encourage individual teachers to introduce innovative methods or non-prescribed learning materials. Rather than blaming teachers, we suggest that literacy initiatives need to take local policies and teachers' perspectives as their point of departure. Even when teachers are not blamed, concern about their lack of engagement has been raised by proponents of the project. Reed (2019), for example, admits that although the ASb has aimed at integrating the use of storybooks in local education and library systems, uptake 'is a slow and complex process' (p. 6). As a response to this challenge, Reed (2019) suggests that:

Pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes should prepare teachers for using these texts optimally, then it is likely to be easier for ASb and similar initiatives to secure the funding that will enable them to sustain and expand their pioneering work. (p. 7)

Remarkably, Reed is here arguing that teacher education institutions across Africa need to change so that they better align with the objectives of the ASb project! Yet her recommendation in fact corresponds with other reviews of the project, which have also emphasised the need to provide teachers with the necessary education to employ stories in their literacy teaching (Ng'asike 2017; Stranger-Johannessen 2017). We would make the opposite case, namely that it is donor-initiated literacy projects that must take the local context, including educational policies and teacher beliefs, into consideration before developing reading material in local languages (e.g. Barton & Lee, 2011; Street 1996). If this is not done, such initiatives are unlikely to be sustainable (e.g. Kombe and Herman 2017; Mwandia and Mwanza 2022).

Despite this argument, we do not dispute the importance of access to appropriate reading materials for early literacy development, nor do we wish to undermine initiatives that make reading material available to schools and communities that have limited access to such material. We do, however, question some of the assumptions that underly these initiatives, exemplifying our concerns with reference to an initiative with which we are familiar: ASb and its progeny *Storybooks Zambia*. These initiatives see themselves as compensating for weaknesses in national literacy delivery in sub-Saharan African countries. We question whether national literacy delivery, and its attendant need for appropriate reading materials, is best served by initiatives, however well-intentioned, that are not coordinated with national literacy policy, curriculum and local teacher beliefs. Our study underlines the conclusion drawn by Aukerman and Schuldt (2021) that 'what counts as good reading (or as good instruction) is [...] social, cultural, and historical' (p. 86). And that sustainable development can succeed only when it is premised on acknowledging and supporting rather than over-riding or even dismantling teachers' professional experience and competence.

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