



Bringing the story home

Early literacy in the Free State

If you take the N5 west out of Harrismith, you will reach Makholokweng in about 40 minutes. It lies to the left of the highway – a vast collection of one-story brick houses organised around wide, unpaved roads, dotted with potholes. Although the electricity poles are a new addition, as is much of the water delivery infrastructure, Makholokweng has been around for years.

Nancy Tsotetsi grew up here and she loved it. She still does. “We have tradition here. We respect the elders. People know their neighbours and more importantly, they care about them.”

Nancy, who turned 26 this year, was one of the few graduates of her matric class to go onto university. As soon as she completed her undergraduate social work degree in Durban, she came home.

Nancy says she studied social work because she wants to improve her community but, despite her best efforts, she hasn’t been able to find a social work post in Makholokweng; or any other work, for that matter. Makholokweng is remote and fairly residential, with no industries or commercial farms close by. Jobs are scarce, and most people rely on social grants. Unwilling to leave her home and look for work elsewhere, Nancy signed

up as a participant of the Community Work Programme.

The Community Work Programme, or CWP, is a poverty alleviation initiative of the Department of Cooperative Governance (DCoG). Participants in CWP are paid a stipend by government to work part time, usually two days a week, doing useful work in their communities such as cleaning and tending to food gardens.

In 2015, a few months into CWP, Nancy was invited to join Nal’ibali, a national reading for enjoyment campaign which trains CWP participants to do their useful work by promoting early literacy in Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres and schools.

“Nal’ibali uses interactive storytelling to get children to enjoy reading from a very early age,” says Sithembiso Nhlapo, a Literacy Mentor at Nal’ibali. Sithembiso trained Nancy at the start of the programme, and has continued to support her and other CWP participants running Nal’ibali groups in Makholokweng through monthly visits and follow-up training.

“Joining forces with the CWP has meant that we have been able to reach 5 073 children aged 3 to 5 in the Free State. We couldn’t have achieved that alone,” he adds.

Public-private partnerships, like the one with Nal’ibali, are core to the success of CWP. “Our private partners provide the skills transfer, which enables the participants to do useful work,” says Fortunate Makhubu, DCoG’s CWP Partnerships Manager. The relationship between Nal’ibali and DCoG is facilitated by the Lima Rural Development Foundation, a non-governmental organisation working in rural development administration and project management.

“Lima works with DCOG and local leaders to identify the needs of the community. We then assist in the implementation of projects which meet those needs,” explains Nontokozi Kunene, who oversees the Nal’ibali project in the Free State on behalf of LIMA.

“The partnership is supported by the DG Murray Trust, which also works with CWP in rolling out early learning playgroups in the North West – another innovative application of CWP to ECD. We believe these projects have big potential for ECD service delivery in South Africa going forward,” she adds.

For Nancy, Nal’ibali means an opportunity to improve education outcomes in her community by addressing literacy problems at the source – during



the early years. The complex brain networks responsible for language and reading begin forming before birth. The more spoken language young children hear, the better these networks develop. Storytelling exposes children to spoken language and encourages the understanding of words.

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Recent University of Stellenbosch research found that 58% of Grade 4 learners are not able to read for meaning,

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and a third are completely illiterate. The majority of these pupils – usually from impoverished communities like Makholokweng – never catch up to their peers, forfeiting all chances of a tertiary education or upward economic mobility. The literacy crisis extends beyond the individual: Stellenbosch University estimates that it costs South Africa R450bn each year. It's a missed opportunity to build the imagination, empathy and problem-solving that the country needs.

CWP is not intended to be a long-term employment solution for individuals and Nancy, who has a degree, will probably exit the programme when she finds full time work. She is an exception, however, as most participants enter CWP with very few formal skills. For them, training programmes and work experience like Nal'ibali can form the first steps in a career path in early childhood development.

"I always knew I wanted to work with people, but Nal'ibali gave me direction towards teaching," says Malifu Moloi, the CWP coordinator for the Nal'ibali programme in Vrede, a small town in the Free State's agricultural Phumelela municipality.

Malifu is a natural performer. She's in her element when reading to a group of children or leading them into a dramatic story interpretation. "I actually used to dream about working in TV when I was younger," she says. "Unfortunately, Vrede isn't a place with those kind of opportunities."

Malifu's parents died when she was in

Nal'ibali Story Play incorporates song and dance into storytelling. In this photo, Malifu Moloi, leads the children at Khayalethu Edu Care in Vrede.

her teens, leaving no money behind for a tertiary education. She went after her dreams of public speaking by volunteering as a peer mentor for NGOs such as loveLife and Soul Buddyz, but struggled to find permanent work in Vrede, where youth unemployment tops 34%. Four years ago, she joined the CWP, and was soon leading a group of 25 participants in cleaning local ECD centres.

"Nal'ibali approached us in 2014. After the first day of their Story Play training, I knew it was for me. This wasn't about monotone reading to bored children. This was fun! We perform the story with the kids, we sing, we engage their imagination. We bring the story home."

"The other important thing about Nal'ibali is that we read and tell stories in the children's home language, because that's the language children learn best in."

Malifu and her team introduced Nal'ibali into the ECD centres they were cleaning. "They didn't have literacy curricula before. Now that the difference the programme has made for children entering Grade R is clear, all the ECD centres want Nal'ibali," says Malifu.

Jessie Sigasa, the head at one of the centres where Malifu introduced the programme, agrees. "Nal'ibali is preparing children for Grade R. We can see it in the

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Nal'ibali Early Literacy in the Free State by numbers

215

CWP participants

100

ECD centres

5073

Children taking part in Nal'ibali Story Play

reports of the children who attended the programme last year. They are doing better than the others in their class."

"But for us, it's about more than just literacy. We had some very shy children here. They worried us because they didn't want to take part in the group activities. It was hard to get them to smile. During Nal'ibali Story Play, they forgot to be shy and just joined in the fun with the others. Now they are starting to come out of their shells and it makes us happy," adds Jessie.

Malifu has noted a change in her CWP team as well – the cleaners-turned-Nal'ibali storytellers. "They are different now, this work is important. We are empowering children. I would rather make a child smile than pick up a broom and sweep the floor."

Veronica Maduna, who is taking part in Nal'ibali in nearby Warden, had a similar experience. "I saw one of the children from the centre, walking down the street with his

mom. He greeted me with 'Hello, Miss!'. I could see his mom was surprised. I know she is thinking, 'A Miss in CWP overalls?'. But it's good for the parents to know that we don't just clean the streets. It felt good. That's dignity."

Parents are an important part of Nal'ibali, which means that the work of the CWP participants reaches beyond the centre. "We need to change reading behaviour in the home," says Nancy from Makhholokweng. "We are speaking to parents about it at the ECD centre meetings. Nal'ibali produces newspaper supplements filled with children's stories. We cut them out and put them in the children's backpacks to take home."

Nancy's drive to get parents reading to their children hasn't been easy. "People don't have much access to books here," she says. No newspapers or magazines are sold or distributed in the community. The first and only library opened in 2009 – a 3mx2m prefab room, which was greeted with some suspicion. "There was a mentality that libraries are for 'educated' people," says Nancy. "Fortunately, that's starting to change."

Through her involvement in Nal'ibali, Nancy Tsoetsi has become an early literacy advocate in her community.



She says people are discouraged from education. As a start, it's logistically difficult. The closest secondary school is a 45-minute walk away. There is one taxi shuttle, but it prioritises the younger pupils, or at least those of them who can afford the fare.

Taking part in Nal'ibali through the CWP inspired Nancy to join another Nal'ibali initiative, called FUNda Leader.

"FUNda Leaders are literacy advocates. They mobilise community members by initiating storytelling and reading activities in the streets, in churches, in clinics – anywhere where people gather," says Sithembiso.

"There are no monetary incentives for FUNda Leaders, although we do assist them with training and resources where we can. These are passionate people who recognise the importance of exposing upcoming generations to reading and breaking the cycles of poverty. The incentive is individual desire to make a lasting change in the place where they live."

Many of the CWP participants running Nal'ibali groups in the Free State have become FUNda leaders, and are organising reading and storytelling activities for older children (and even adults) after their paid-for work in CWP ends for the day. The majority are women like Nancy, Malifu and Veronica – in their 20s and early 30s, with young children of their own and the enthusiasm to create a wave of change that will sweep their own growing families along into a better educated South Africa.

However, Nal'ibali is changing the older generation as well. Majafita Malinga is 52 years old, she is a CWP participant, working with Nal'ibali at an ECD centre outside Harrismith. Majafita left school in Grade 10, after being left with the responsibility of looking after her younger siblings. She has spent the years since working as a part-time domestic worker, and later, cleaning drains as a CWP participant.

"I had an aunt who was a nurse so when



Majafita Malinga with the children at Khanya Day Care Centre, Harrismith, where she works.

"Every parent dreams that their children don't end up the same way as them. This is why I am doing this for the children here. I am helping to build better people of tomorrow."

I was younger, that was what I dreamed about – being a nurse. Unfortunately, none of my dreams came true. The best I could do was to focus on being a good parent, although that's been difficult," says Majafita.

"When they announced that there was this Nal'ibali programme, I decided to apply to take part. I love children and raising my own children has been the main source of joy in my own life," she says. "The training was intimidating at first. I dropped out of school so many years ago, and I haven't

been inside a classroom in a long time. I honestly did not believe I would learn a new skill at my age, but I did."

Since finishing the training, Majafita does Nal'ibali activities with the children in the centre in the mornings, and she reads to school children in the local library in the afternoons.

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The CWP Nal'ibali programme is a joint initiative between the following organisations:



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