CHALLENGING THE "APARTHEIDS" OF KNOWLEDGE

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Chapter 9

Wordless picturebooks and moolas: A case study of a collaborative community engagement project

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1. Introduction

In 2017, the *Dithakga tša Gobala* (Reading Champions) project was launched and hosted at the Funanani Trust Centre in Mamelodi, Tshwane. This community engagement project sought to work with members of the local community to create a series of community-authored wordless picturebooks. The methodology for this project was initially developed as part of a doctoral study. However, the doctoral study was characterised by low participant retention, especially at the Mamelodi research site. As a means to encourage participation, it was decided to link the *Dithakga tša Gobala* project to another community development project started by social workers at the Funanani Trust: the Moola Project.

This chapter describes the development of the *Dithakga tša Gobala* community engagement project from its inception as a doctoral study hosted at Funanani in 2015 to its implementation as a community engagement project linked to the Moola Project. We hope to demonstrate how partnerships and co-production can create sustainable and reciprocal community engagement projects that speak to the more specific needs of the wider community. In particular, we examine a strengths-based perspective to community engagement and emphasise the importance of choice and ownership during the development and implementation of such projects. Further, we aim to highlight the benefits of collaborations between academics and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the role that postgraduate courses can play in mobilising community engagement projects.

We start by outlining the background and context of both the inception and the development of the *Dithakga tša Gobala* project, first as a postgraduate study at Stellenbosch University and later as a community development project linked to the Moola Project. The challenges identified in each of these separate projects are discussed with reference to their specific contexts. This is followed by a description of the implementation of the 2017 *Dithakga tša Gobala* project as linked to the Moola Project. Initial findings and a subsequent discussion follow.

2. *Dithakga tša Gobala*: From study to community engagement project

The methodology used for the *Dithakga tša Gabola* project was initially conceptualised as part of a postgraduate study. Below is a brief overview of the doctoral study that led to the development and implementation of the 2017 project. The scope of this chapter does not allow for a detailed discussion of the study, but its development, methodology and main findings are outlined.

2.1 *The PhD study*

Le Roux's (2017) doctoral study followed from her MPhil study, which investigated the use of wordless picturebooks in joint parent-child reading in a controlled setting at a local pre-primary school in the Kayamandi township, Stellenbosch, South Africa. The study suggested that wordless picturebooks could be used in reading activities that could easily be practiced independently by the participants in their own homes, but that further research was needed to establish this (Le Roux & Costandius, 2013).

South Africa faces the challenge of providing appropriate reading materials to a culturally and linguistically diverse population. The result of the 2016

Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which indicated that 78% of South African Grade 4 children cannot read for meaning in any language (Spaull, 2017), is indicative of what researchers are referring to as a "national crisis of reading" (Spaull, Van der Berg, Wills, Gustafsson, & Kotz, 2016:24), in terms of which literacy development in South Africa has come under increased scrutiny.

The role of the parent as a child's first educator cannot be underestimated in this regard. Children who are read to often have better cognitive and language skills and do better at reading comprehension when they reach school-going age than children who are not read to (Martorell, Papallia & Feldman, 2014). Yet, the 2016 national survey into the reading and book reading behaviour of adult South Africans (South African Book Development Council, 2016:35) reports that "agreement about reading to children is very low – even amongst households with children". The survey noted that parents need to be empowered to create a reading culture at home. Consequently, joint reading and other cognitively stimulating activities are receiving increased attention.

Reading is a complex and multidimensional activity. The term 'literacy' has broadened from being print-centric, focusing on written text to create meaning, to one that is multimodal and focused on how meaning can be made using multiple modes, of which pictures is one (Mantei & Kervin, 2015). Because they do not contain words, the books can be enjoyed by readers of different literacy levels, from different contexts and in different languages. In a multilingual country such as South Africa, wordless picturebooks can be used by a diversity of readers because they are not dependent on text as a specific language. Only a few academic studies have dealt with the potential of this genre to address the multilingual context of South Africa or its use in parent-child reading locally, specifically in South African families where social and economic challenges exist.

Wordless picturebooks allow for a story to be read by interpreting the images (Beckett, 2012), using speech and language to express thoughts and ideas about the story (Nodelman, 1988) and gestures to point to images. They require very little in terms of translation, as only the title and publisher's peritext is written language and parents are able to tailor their interpretation of the story to be relevant to their child's daily life and context (Le Roux, 2017). Further, it can be argued that wordless picturebooks provide children who have not yet learned to decode written text with an opportunity to experience the enjoyment of reading and storytelling through an accessible medium.

It is from this context that Le Roux's (2017) doctoral studies, with funding from the NRF, focused on the use and creation of wordless picturebooks to foster a love of reading in South African homes. The study shifted the research site

from the controlled setting of a preschool centre to participant homes and focused predominantly on participant experience of joint reading activities using wordless picturebooks in the home. The study received ethical clearance from Stellenbosch University's Ethics Committee: Human Research (HUMANIORA).

In addition to the reading programme, the study piloted a methodology for creating wordless picturebooks from content sourced from local communities. The aim was to discover what themes would arise from stories collected from participants if an economically viable model of book creation could be developed using this approach. At the time the study was conducted, very few local wordless picturebooks were available.

Both reading and book creation components of the study were hosted at two of the Funanani Trust's Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres in Mamelodi and Soshanguve. This allowed for the then student researcher to receive support and guidance not only from her supervisor, but also from experts within the organisation and allowed a safe and private meeting area where primary data could be collected.

In addition to data collected on the reading experiences of the participants, the study facilitated the creation of 18 wordless picturebooks that were authored by parents and their children who took part in the project. Parents and children were invited to tell a story in a manner with which they were comfortable (writing, drawing, singing, voice recording, dancing, etc.). The participants chose to illustrate their books and used emergent reading strategies to co-create a story. The parents documented this story, and with the child's original illustrations, this was given to illustrators to interpret and to illustrate into a 12-page wordless picturebook. These prototype wordless picturebooks functioned as a means to investigate how content gathered from local communities could be used in the production of South African wordless picturebooks. These prototype books were by no means completed products, but served as a means to test the proposed methodology for running book creation projects.

The data indicated that the majority of the participants responded positively to the wordless picturebooks. The adult participants' perception of reading as an activity, and of their child as a reader, changed noticeably after the introduction of the wordless picturebooks in their homes. Reading went from being an activity that would often frustrate parents to one that they could enjoy with their children at home, and where both adult and child could participate in the creation of a story. The adult participants reported feeling that their children could understand and actively take part in the reading activity using the wordless picturebooks, as opposed to having to read to their children (Le Roux, 2017).

Themes that emerged from the participant-authored picturebooks dealt predominantly with the children's immediate environments. Very few of the parents added more details to their children's stories, and as such, the illustrated books were very basic, containing little detail. Consequently, the illustrators found it difficult to create an engaging narrative. Illustrators needed to elaborate on the stories by adding visual elements or deciding on key events using the drawings and story provided by the participants as a starting point. The children were also very young, aged between 3 and 6 years old; they could not be expected to produce a narrative that could be used as is, and as such, the narratives were very basic. The findings indicated that story collection workshops may subsequently need to consider including older children and their parents to have more engaging narratives emerge through the process and to allow more time for narrative development. The workshops were described by all participants as being a positive experience and they enjoyed having access to art and craft materials (Le Roux, 2017).

A small number of participants found these books "too easy" compared to the other books used during the reading programme, but all participants expressed a sense of pride when discussing their own books and were impressed that their names appeared on the front cover and that they were the authors of the story. One participant said "We were excited! Am I actually reading a book that my child wrote? It was very exciting!" The pride experienced by participants when receiving a copy of their book was an important aspect of the research. Confidence in reading can be linked with self-confidence and motivation, and the creation of participant-authored books consequently fulfilled another aim: to give people confidence in their own ability to tell stories and create books.

The prototype books were pilot-tested at a third, unrelated research site. Feedback again indicated that the books were very easy to use, but that they were enjoyed by both adult and child readers.

2.2 Problem identification: Participant retention

Although data was collected from 39 participants in total, the reading programme and book creation project were characterised by low participant retention, especially at the Mamelodi research site. Twelve participant pairs, consisting of a parent/primary caregiver and a three- to six-year-old child, volunteered for the project (i.e. a total of 24 participants). Of the 12, six participant pairs attended only the initial focus group discussion and consequently did not take part in the complete reading programme or book creation part of the project. Only two participant pairs attended every session. Participants who missed one session would often make plans to attend the next one and continue with the programme.

However, some of them did not return after missing one session and only returned to collect the printed versions of their own wordless picturebooks. Reasons for non-attendance varied and included illness and work opportunities or responsibilities. In some instances, no reason for non-attendance was volunteered. Only five books were created at the Mamelodi site, compared to 13 at the Soshanguve site.

Lack of parental involvement in projects such as this is a common phenomenon in South Africa. Wessels, Lester and Ward (2016:1) report that structural barriers are often the main reasons for low parent involvement in parenting programmes, reporting that "[w]hile being a parent can be demanding in any context, parents in South Africa typically face a great number of challenges. These challenges relate especially to poverty, which can make parenting in a positive way much more difficult." All research sites included in the doctoral study were based in areas characterised by poverty and high unemployment. It is therefore increasingly important that researchers and community engagement facilitators who work with parents and children understand the context in which participants live and support parents in their role as caregivers.

In terms of understanding the context of non-participation, other underlying issues (such as issues of power, race, class and economic relations) which could play a role in projects like this also need to be considered. The student researcher acknowledged her position as a white woman and the contextual differences that needed to be acknowledged alongside this. Harvey (2013) encourages reflecting on one's own identity as integral to any research. Positions of power are also emphasised by Das (2010), as social science research is based on human interaction. Gottfried (in Das, 2010:5) explains that: "The process of conducting enquiry based on relationships introduces issues of power where the researcher-researched relationship is also guided by larger social structures." South Africa is still troubled by the legacy of apartheid, and, as such, the student researcher's identity as a white person working with black participants needed to be both acknowledged and carefully negotiated. This was another reason why no prescriptions were given to the participants in terms of how or when to use the books, just as no prescriptions were given regarding the stories collected during the workshops.

Respect was the guiding principle for the research, and therefore the creation of the prototype books, which relied wholly on the participants, was an attempt to remove any preconceived ideas about what books to provide in reading programmes. Further, the reliance on research participants to be actively involved in the creation of stories and content is one of the aspects of this study that sought

to empower communities through their participation in this project, but the risk of the participants responding in ways that 'please' the researcher, rather than reporting on their true experience, still existed due to the aforementioned contextual factors. Throughout the research, the participants were encouraged to be honest about how they experienced using the wordless picturebooks. Interpreters were made available at all times and the participants' preference in terms of how the project was managed and what language they preferred to speak was respected above anything else.

3. The Moola Project

3.1 *The Funanani Trust*

The Funanani Trust was founded as a community-based NGO in 1998. Today, the trust operates three centres in the greater Tshwane district of South Africa, through which it sources and coordinates the distribution of resources and programmes that are run from its centres.

The social welfare sector's response to South Africa's transformation to a genuine democracy is embedded in the White Paper for Social Welfare, which was adopted in 1997. The Board of Trustees at the Funanani Trust used the guiding principles outlined in this white paper as a foundation for the activities of each of its centres. These included principles such as people-centred policies, investment in human capital, accessibility and appropriateness of programmes. Through their offering, the trust aims to address the structural inequality that was established by the apartheid history of South Africa.

The trust mobilises volunteers to become involved at grassroots level with children, families and communities in need. The programmes hosted on site are predominantly focused on young children, the youth, their families and the surrounding community. The organisation is guided by the principle belief that by focusing on the child and the family, the community can benefit from these programmes. As such, the organisation centres most of its efforts on programmes that assist, develop and benefit children.

Funanani's Soshanguve and Mamelodi centres are located in impoverished communities in and around Tshwane and focus on orphaned and vulnerable children and their families. Both locations have an ECD centre which provides preschool education to these children at no cost. Children are also provided with a healthy breakfast and lunch every day as well as a morning and afternoon snack. The centre is committed to providing a physically and emotionally safe environment where learners can develop, grow and learn while having fun in order to prepare them to successfully navigate through their primary school

years. Further, the trust provides family support services to the families of the children in the programmes (Funanani, 2018).

All the children enrolled at the centres are from homes where one or sometimes both biological parents are absent, deceased or unemployed. A condition of enrolment is that the child is from a 'vulnerable' family that does not have the means to provide preschool education (King, personal communication, May 3, 2016). The families' vulnerability also extends to their financial situation. Their income is generally in the form of grants received from government (Holtzhausen, personal communication, May 3, 2016).

In addition to offering educational programmes, the Funanani Trust also assisted struggling families by providing them with pre-packed food parcels, mainly consisting of donated products such as non-perishable food products, on a monthly basis. Although the products met the basic needs of the service users, there was no room for meeting the individual needs of the community. This well-meant assistance unintentionally gave rise to high levels of dependency and passivity among recipients of the food parcels. As a means to address these unintended consequences, and in line with a developmental approach to social work, the social workers at the organisation developed the Moola Project (Claassens, Holtzhauzen, & Mzayidume, personal communication, March 30, 2016).

3.2 *Moola Project: Approach and initial findings*

The Moola Project uses developmental social work theories as guiding principles. Although no standard definition of developmental social work exists, Midgley (2010) outlines several common themes that function as the foundation for a systematic conceptual perspective of developmental social work. These are outlined as including "agreements about the importance of facilitating change, the use of strengths, empowerment and capacity enhancement, the notion of self-determination and client participation, and a commitment to equality and social justice" (Midgley, 2010:13). Through a focus on the above-mentioned themes, developmental social work seeks to encourage social change through a focus on the individual, the environment and the interaction between them (Patel, 2015).

Patel (2015:127) further describes the aim of social work in addition to seeking social change as follows:

... social work from a developmental perspective aims to balance needs with resources and promotes the optimal use of opportunities presented by the wider social environment and through tapping the assets, strengths and inner resources

within the client groups themselves and the environment. It is concerned less with what people cannot do, but with what they can do.

The Moola Project demonstrates the above-mentioned themes by moving away from deficit centredness and focusing on the inherent strengths of community members, making a shift from 'giving' people resources to empowering them to use their own inherent capacities to meet their needs.

In summary, the Moola Project works on a points-based system. Service users are awarded points, referred to as 'moolas', for participating in activities hosted by Funanani at either of its centres. Activities include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Volunteering at the Funanani ECD centre in Soshanguve and Mamelodi
- Attending group work facilitated by Funanani care workers and student social workers
- Attending any training opportunities provided by Funanani (depending on availability of opportunities)
- Participating in competitions, such as gardening competitions, launched by Funanani care workers, who visit the homes of participants weekly
- Daily attendance of the Funanani ECD centre in Soshanguve and Mamelodi (for participants' children)
- Attending parent meetings at either ECD centre.

To date, some of the training opportunities have included parenting groups with social workers and social work students; financial skills development, including a focus on creating savings; and practical life skills workshops that help participants build the capacity to deal with stressful situations.

The points earned by service users can then be used at the Moola Shop as currency to purchase goods of their choice. Commodities available at the shop include basic non-perishable food items, baby food, toiletries, cleaning materials, clothing, furniture, appliances and so forth. These commodities are all allocated predetermined Moola points, and service users are provided with a printout of all available items in the shop. The system also allows for service users to order any item that is not available on the list or that is too big to be stored at the physical Moola Shop (e.g. furniture and appliances). Service users are also encouraged to ask Funanani staff about any specific products that they need. Service users who are not able to visit the shop due to medical conditions, distance or frailty are not excluded from this service. They can order according to their needs and the care workers will deliver the order at home.

The Moola Project was implemented in Soshanguve in 2016 and in Mamelodi in 2017. The two communities differ vastly, and, as a result, the two Moola Shops contain different items, which are curated based on input from the service users who help identify their specific needs.

Interviews conducted with service users after the implementation of the Moola Project indicate that it has brought about several evident changes in the community, including a sense of own decision-making power being restored, choices given back to people and the restoration of the worth and dignity of the participants.

Before its implementation, care workers delivered the pre-packed food parcels to service users' homes. This handout system could be seen as disempowering, especially as the recipients had no choice regarding what household items they received. The social workers noticed that there was very little parental involvement at the centres. Very few parents attended parent meetings with the ECD centre staff or took part in group work sessions with social workers or social work students.

Interviews with service users indicated that they preferred being able to choose what products they received, with one service user saying: "I prefer the Moola, because then you can choose what you want. With the Moola it helps us because we come out of the home and meet other people."

The Moola Project allowed for more contact between Funanani staff and community members, which previously mostly took place when food parcels were being delivered. Consequently, parents became more involved at the ECD centres, which also allowed staff and care workers to learn more about the parents and the community and to identify more specific needs with which they could help. One participant noted that it also strengthened her ties with other community members, saying: "I like to volunteer because I meet other women at the centre and we get to share life experiences and encourage each other." Midgley (2010) states that social justice in development social work should reflect the belief that those who receive services from social workers not only have the right to make their own decisions, but also need to benefit from the support and the services received. This approach also recognises the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

The importance of parental involvement at the ECD centres extends beyond the contact with Funanani staff to include fostering feelings of support in their children. Children can see their parents speaking to teachers and staff at the Funanani ECD centres and this may lead to them feeling supported and encouraged at school. Hornby (2011) refers to extensive international research that

supports the role that parental involvement may have on improving both academic performance and social outcomes for children.

From this perspective, the Moola Project tries to break down some of the barriers that often lead to lack of parental involvement within school environments. Barriers – including parents' current context, their beliefs in terms of parental involvement and class, race or gender (Hornby, 2011) – can be broken down by creating accessible programmes that parents could choose from, learn skills from and also benefit from in terms of being able to use the moolas earned to provide for their families. One service user said: "The Moola Project has made me feel valuable in my family as I can also contribute."

As an example, service users who took part in a group work session stated that they struggled to feed their children during the school holidays when they did not receive breakfast or lunch from the ECD centre. Together, the service users shared ideas and came up with a menu that each household could use to cook meals for their families, using their Moola points, items available from the Moola Shop and their social grants.

The training opportunities, group work and projects offered by the Funanani Trust as part of the Moola Project aim to forge partnerships with parents that go beyond simply meeting the statutory requirements set out by government policies. They also aim to provide parents with training and skills development opportunities that will allow them to be more involved in their children's education, to build self-confidence and self-esteem and to generate coping mechanisms to deal with the contextual problems that they face on a daily basis. They furthermore aspire to foster economic inclusion by giving service users a means to purchase goods and services of their choice and to have confidence in their earning capabilities after their children leave the ECD centre for primary school.

4. Implementation of the *Dithakga tša Gobala* project

In 2017, the *Dithakga tša Gobala* project was launched with the aim of working with members of the Mamelodi community to create six community-authored wordless picturebooks. Due to the relationship that had been developed during the doctoral study, Funanani was again approached as a site from which to run the community engagement project. However, based on the previous project run at the site, there were obvious concerns about participant retention at the Mamelodi centre, where the project would be based. Project sponsors were aware that contextual factors often play a role in the outcomes of community

engagement projects, but as community participation formed an integral part of the project, participant retention became a major part of the project planning.

Although the project involved the creation of a product in the form of a word-less picturebook that would be given to the participants at the end of the project, it could not be assumed that that alone would be enough to motivate the participants to complete the project. Initial interviews with volunteers indicated that the majority neither read often at home nor owned any books. The majority indicated that their parents did not read with them when they were growing up. The Bible and magazines were the only reading materials that were consistently available in their homes, and the volunteers reported that they generally did not have reading materials for their children in their homes unless an older, school-going child brought books home from school. Many of the volunteers did not read with their preschool children, and those who did stated that it was difficult to get their younger children to concentrate on reading, one stating that they would not read: "[u]nless you [the parent] promise them something. If you promise them, then they will do it". Another said: "I have to be serious, take her, put her, and be serious about reading. It makes it difficult – you have to tell her, 'now we need to read.'"

For one participant in particular, reading had not been a positive experience growing up. She explained as follows:

It was difficult for me, when like the teachers would say, come and stand in front and read for us. So when, I enjoyed to take a book ... but it was difficult for me to say some words and I was afraid. ... It was very painful. And so I try to read with my child because I don't want him to [go through the same thing].

When considering the reading history and context of the volunteers, it can be argued that it might have been difficult for them to imagine what their own books would look like, and it could not be assumed that the production of a book was necessarily a motivating factor in itself.

As a means to encourage participant retention, the *Dithakga tša Gobala* project was positioned as a programme offering linked to the Moola Project, which, as previously explained, had been implemented at the Mamelodi centre in the beginning of 2017, as shown in **Figure 1**. Parents who volunteered for the project would receive Moola points for each session that they attended. The project ran from April to November 2017.

Figure 1: A timeline of the development of each project before the collaboration in 2017

4.1 Methodology

Instead of circulating existing wordless picturebooks, of which there are very few available, the project aimed to give communities ownership of the reading materials that would be circulated in their community. This was done by sourcing the content for the books from the community itself. The collaboration between the Moola and book creation projects aimed to engage service users as partners in the development of reading material that could be enjoyed at home by the service users and other parents with their children. In this way, the service users would be active decision makers in terms of the books they made.

An introduction served to inform the community members of the project and to recruit volunteers. It was explained that project participation was linked to the Moola Project and that participants would receive Moola points for every session attended. Six community members volunteered for the project and together decided on *Dithakga tša Gobala*, which is Sepedi for Reading Champions, as a project name. The main aims of the project were identified as fostering a culture of reading in their community and sharing stories so that other parents could enjoy reading with their children. The project made of use of a participatory design approach. According to Collin and Swist (2016), Participatory Design [PD] underlines stakeholders' knowledge, rights to representation and determination over what is designed. Importantly, the stakeholders they refer to can include the future users of an intervention, rather than only researchers or designers. Knowledge in PD is produced through a process of mutual learning that takes place between all participants. Kolko (2012:104) defines PD as: "... a broad label for creative activities that are done with end users—where designers act as facilitators or visual translators ..."

This type of approach allowed the volunteers to direct the project and to give feedback and input regarding the development of the final product. The approach also created a space for the volunteers to share stories in a manner with which they were comfortable. In this way, the project aimed to harness the volunteers' strengths, knowledge and skills in the creation of books that could be used in their immediate community. The participants actively decided on the days they would meet and on the format the meetings would take.

The *Dithakga tša Gobala* did not go through any formal ethical clearance procedures, as it was implemented outside of the university context as a follow-up of the PhD study. However, the same ethical principles that governed Le Roux's PhD study were followed, and all forms were developed with the assistance of social workers based at Funanani. Participation in this project was voluntary, and the participants were free to withdraw from the project at any time, with no negative consequences. Informed consent was given by all the participants, and children and their parents were required to sign assent forms. Because the books were made available publicly, the participants could choose to have their names appear on the cover and copyright information of the book, or they could choose to remain anonymous authors.

Where participant names would appear on the books, responses in any reports were coded to keep individual answers, opinions and feedback confidential. The participants were all aware that reports on the project would be written and gave consent for their responses to be used. Prior to the project, the participants all signed contributor agreement forms, which allowed the books to be licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Licence (Creative Commons, 2018). This allows anyone to share the books in any format and to adapt the content of the books for any purpose. All participants were made aware of the implications of this, and agreed that their stories, concepts and illustrations may be used in this manner.

In order to collect stories from the participants, two story collection workshops were hosted on site at Funanani. These workshops allowed the six participants to work with their children, younger siblings or nephews/nieces to create and document a story. The children were between the ages of three and six years old and enrolled at the Funanani ECD centre. Participants could choose how they wanted to document their story, and a variety of materials was provided for them to do so. All participants used drawing and writing as a primary means of documentation (**Figure 2**), while voice recordings, photographs and video recordings were used as secondary means of documentation, depending on participant preference.

Data collected from the workshops were scanned and transcribed and sent to six South African illustrators. They used this data as the starting point for the illustration of 16-page wordless picturebooks. Three final-year illustration students and three working illustrators illustrated the books for the project. Data from the workshops ranged from being very specific about the details of the story and its representation to being very open to interpretation.

Figure 2: An example of visual reference material sent to illustrators

In order to ensure that the participants felt that they could give their honest opinion on the visual interpretation of their story, they provided feedback on the illustrations through the facilitators (the project manager and the social worker on site). The participants were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the illustration drafts (**Figure 3**) and the final illustrations before the books went to print.

Figure 3: Example of participant drawing and the illustrator's interpretation in the draft, followed by the final illustration

By the end of the project, six community-authored wordless picturebooks were produced. All books were given an ISBN for the printed and e-book versions,

which were registered with the National Library of South Africa. In this way, the ownership of the books (and the project) remains with the participants.

4.2 Distribution

The project participants were each given a set of 10 copies of each book (60 books in total) to distribute in their communities in a manner that they preferred. They reported giving their set of books to under-resourced crèches and day care centres in Mamelodi, or donating them to the school that their older children attended. Over 3 000 printed copies of the books were circulated to the concept authors, the ECD centre and Grade R classes at Funanani and to other reading organisations, schools and not-for-profit organisations that work with children. Positive reaction to the material was received from the majority of the beneficiaries, and data on how the books have been used will be collected throughout 2018.

The licensing of the books allowed for the books to be used beyond the scope of the project. Print files were made available to several organisations, who have started creating their own content using the illustrations. Two of the books were used as newspaper or magazine 'pull-out books' which readers can cut out and assemble by themselves. Illustrations were also appropriated by the South Africa Sign Language Material Development Unit in the Department of General Linguistics at Stellenbosch University.

5. Findings and discussion

It should be noted that findings discussed in this section pertain only to the *Dithakga tša Gobala* project and not to the earlier mentioned PhD study. The initial findings indicate that the collaboration with the Moola Project made a difference in participation, attendance and motivation in the book creation project. All six participants who volunteered for the project as well as their children attended the majority of the sessions. In cases where a participant could not attend, other arrangements were made, for example sending the rough illustration work home with the child participant and then conducting feedback sessions telephonically.

This was an important distinction between the PhD study and the *Dithakga tša Gobala* project. Whereas some participants in the PhD study simply did not arrive for a session, *Dithakga tša Gobala* participants who were unable to attend a session informed the facilitator, social worker or another participant as such, rather than simply not attending.

The participants took ownership of the project, deciding on the name, outcomes and organisation of the project. Feedback from interviews conducted

after the completion of the project indicated that the project provided the participants with a sense of empowerment and raised their sense of self-worth. Quotes such as: "It gave me an opportunity to show to other people that I have a potential to do something which I didn't know that I can do", "I experienced something that I did not know I can do" and "I am proud of myself now, I can tell people that I have a book and that I can do something" are evidence of the positive impact that the project had on the participants' self-concept.

The methodology used allowed for the participants to actively decide on the days they would meet and what format the meetings would take, which may have allowed for the participants to have more control and power over the project. The context in which the participants live is complex, characterised by difficulties that extend beyond their economic status to include underlying issues of power, race, class and economic relations, and may play a bigger role than is often anticipated. The reasons for high or low participant retention could be very straightforward, such as employment opportunities and responsibilities or transport, but could also extend to include feelings of, for instance, disempowerment or incapacitation. By focusing on active participation in decision-making processes during the project, it was hoped that we would discourage feelings of disempowerment that can be caused when participants are passive recipients of a process or product. We aimed to engage with the community as partners and active decision makers in both product and process.

Dithakga tša Gobala project participants reported that they felt as if they could make decisions about their own books. During feedback sessions, some participants added personal touches to their story, for example adding their child's favourite toy to a scene, or requesting that something from their immediate context be included. One parent described her involvement in the illustrations in the book:

I changed a few things before [the book] went to final print, I had a chance to go through what was there already – I got a chance to say "Why can't we do things this way?" ... I had a chance to say something about how I think the book should be like.

One participant made major changes to the illustrations, indicating that she felt the illustrations were not relevant to her community or could be misunderstood. She explained that she did not feel she would be able to tell her children enough about a scene depicting space travel, and that she would prefer to see illustrations that were more relevant to her context and that she could talk to her children about.

The collaboration with illustrators proved to be successful, and the parents were able to follow the progression of their book during feedback sessions. After receiving printed copies of their completed books (**Figure 4**), one parent said: "[The illustrations are] too much [nice]! It was nice, even though I didn't know I can make something like that, but the illustrators, they make it perfect." Another said that the illustrations and the books as a whole were: "even more than I expected". The feedback sessions proved to be valuable to both participants and illustrators, both parties noting that it was a learning experience for them. This is typical of the participation design process, which emphasises mutual learning between designers and users (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013).

All participants felt that the project should be continued, and the feedback suggested that they had a vested interest in seeing it continue. This is also evident in the participation of 2018's project, with four of the six participants acting as project mentors to new project participants, even though their children are no longer enrolled in the Funanani ECD centre.

Figure 4: Example of a completed wordless picturebook from the project, Serepana

Feedback was collected from the wider community by sending a set of books and a questionnaire with open-ended questions home with children from the ECD centre who reside in the Mamelodi community. The forms included questions pertaining to the experience of reading the books at home. Although only 13 of the 38 forms were returned, feedback from these indicated that the books were well received and enjoyed. Most of the positive feedback on the books were linked to educational outcomes. Quotes such as: "to teach my baby to learn

more" and "they are educating our kids" were frequent. The opportunity for children to use their imagination was also emphasised, with one respondent noting that she liked that fact that "children can use their imagination without being told that they are wrong, because the books have no words". The books offered a safe, enjoyable and non-threatening reading experience for participants of different literacy levels and diverse language groups.

The feedback forms also indicated that parents who had children in the ECD class but did not take part in the project felt that the concept authors needed to be supported and the book creation project continued. Future feedback is planned and will take place in the form of interviews conducted by care workers from the Funanani Trust.

6. Conclusion

The *Dithakga tša Gobala* project continued in 2018. Participants from the previous year have taken up roles as mentors to new project volunteers and have decided on ways in which to carry the project forward. The project is again linked with the Moola Project, and to date (30 July 2018), the project has resulted in four new books created at the Mamelodi centre. More data on continuing participation and the medium- and long-term effects of the intervention, in terms of the project itself and the books created, will need to be collected before it can be established whether the projects, on their own and as a collaboration, have a lasting impact on service users at the Funanani Trust. Both the product of this project (the wordless picturebooks) and the process should undergo continued scrutiny and investigation with the community as active participants in decisions made on project structure and implementation.

We believe that the development of the *Dithakga tša Gobala* project demonstrates how public universities can mobilise the development of ongoing community engagement projects by encouraging responsible research within local communities. The methodologies encouraged specifically by the supervisors at Stellenbosch University required that, even after the study was completed, the student researcher followed up on the findings and responded to the feedback and findings of her doctoral study. In this way, the practical component of the degree served to foster a relationship between the institution, the student and the NGO (Funanani), and it can be argued that relationships such as these enable stakeholders to create interventions and devise projects that include and benefit the community. Perhaps the Moola Project could investigate how they, by giving service users a choice of projects in which to participate, might allow for the

community to develop projects and interventions that address their direct needs, rather than interventions coming from outside the community.

The methodology developed through this cooperation also allows for its continuing contribution in the space of higher education, specifically with the inclusion of student illustrators in the project. The methodology is also currently being used and adapted by an MA Art Education student at Stellenbosch University, with the project scope being extended to include members of the Kayamandi community. This allows for stories to be sourced and books to be created beyond the scope of what the *Dithakga tša Gobala* project and its associated not-for-profit company could achieve on their own. The project as such also demonstrates how studies conducted with the support of NGOs and universities can collaborate in the development of resources and methodologies for university students.

The project has benefitted the immediate community through making resources for reading available to families that make use of services at the Funanani Trust, other day care centres in the area and other, unrelated projects.

The authors believe that this collaborative project demonstrates how partnership and co-production between not-for-profit organisations, HEIs and local communities can create sustainable and reciprocal community engagement that functions to the benefit of more specific needs of the wider community. The learning that took place for the student researcher during the development of the *Dithakga tša Gobala* project was valuable because it emphasised reflection on the role of the researcher and, later, on the facilitator of community engagement projects. The study, which encouraged the student to consider and reflect on input and feedback from the research participants and their community, the research supervisors and experts and professionals in NGOs, allowed for the development of a collaborative approach not only to research, but also to the further development and implementation of the methodology in collaboration with others. This learning shaped the central approach used for the *Dithakga tša Gobala* project.

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