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One teacher's journey through creating culturally-sensitive instructional material for village and orphaned students in sierra leone

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ONE TEACHER'S JOURNEY THROUGH CREATING CULTURALLY-SENSITIVE
INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL FOR VILLAGE AND ORPHAN STUDENTS
IN SIERRA LEONE

by

Jesica E. Shearhod

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Education
in the College of Education
and in The Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring term 2012

Thesis Chair: Dr. Karen Biraimah

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Abstract

My first experience teaching, in Sierra Leone in July of 2010, is where I realized that most elementary students were illiterate and lacked the foundational skills in order to learn how to read. I decided to return the following year in May of 2011 to undertake a project to provide culturally-sensitive literacy materials for village and orphaned children in the form of storybooks. The school site for this thesis is Children of the Nations (COTN) which is a school of 98 orphaned and 1,488 village students that range from 4years-20 years of age. The titles of the two books produced by this thesis are: *What's Up* and ABC's of Sierra Leone. These books are culturally relevant to the students who helped in creating them and includes pictures and words that students can identify.

This study will 1) provide insights into history and literacy development issues of Sierra Leone from the perspective of a Western educator; 2) examine modern factors affecting literacy development; 3) describe my teaching experience in Sierra Leone with multiage children learning English; and 4) explore the notion of creating culturally-sensitive instructional materials for village and orphan students in Sierra Leone.

Dedication

To the Lord who has directed me.

To my family and friends who have encouraged me.

To my professors who took a special interest in me.

To all of the students at COTN School in Sierra Leone who are my inspiration .

Acknowledgment

I express sincere thanks and gratitude to my chair Dr. Karen Biraimah and my committee members Dr. Roberts and Dr. Verkler. All three of you have played a unique role in affecting my life while at the University of Central Florida. You took a special interest in me (as you do most of your students) and as a result made me want to achieve more and, work harder to reach goals I never thought would be possible.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

My first experience teaching school in Sierra Leone in July of 2010, is where I realized that most elementary students were illiterate in English and lacked the foundational skills needed to read. I decided to return the following year to undertake a project that would provide culturally-sensitive literacy materials for these village and orphaned students in the form of storybooks.

This study will 1) provide insights into history and literacy development issues of Sierra Leone from the perspective of a Western educator; 2) examine modern factors affecting literacy development; 3) describe my teaching experience in Sierra Leone with multi-age children learning English; and 4) explore the notion of creating culturally-sensitive instructional materials for village and orphan students in Sierra Leone. Chapter One will give a personal rationale for why I created the material, explain why it is important to provide culturally-sensitive materials for educators, and examine recent factors affecting literacy development in Sierra Leone.

Personal Rationale

In the summer of 2010 I taught summer school at Children of the Nations (COTN) School in Sierra Leone, Africa for three weeks. Children of the Nations has a unique approach to the problems facing the population of Sierra Leone. It is a vision that acts now to affect the future.

“Children of the Nations recognize the future of any country is in the hands, minds, and souls of its children. Through Village Partnership Programs and Children’s Homes, Children of the Nations has established a daily presence in the communities, providing resources (including schools, medical clinics, feeding centers, health initiatives, etc.) that empower Sierra Leonean nationals to raise their own children. In partnership with the people of Sierra Leone, Children of the Nation’s vision is to develop a generation of future leaders and secure for Sierra Leone a future and a hope” (COTN.org).

I went with a teacher team comprised of ten primary school teachers and two college students and I taught a fourth grade class that varied from ten to forty village and orphan students. During this time, I was living in the orphanage that housed 98 children which, is where I first realized that they did not have the basic skills to read. As I read stories with the children I asked them to read parts of the story to me; however, when they read they tried sounding words out by saying the letters “c” “a” “t” and pronounce/read it “down.” Some of these students were as old as 12 years old and did not know how to read in either their native tongue or in English. They knew the letters, but did not know the sounds each letter made or how to blend sounds together to form words. Since the school does not have an effective way of assessing students at the end of each grade, students are passed onto further grades without learning how to read. Therefore, I realized there was a gap in literacy which I later learned was prevalent in many developing countries. These gaps allow most students to pass through many levels of education while still remaining functionally illiterate in the English language.

I co-taught summer school with a local teacher who had a longing to see her students receive a quality education. She came to every teacher in-service that the teacher team provided and asked questions about how to better educate her students. One day, as I observed her teaching letter sounds to her fourth grade class, it became obvious that she didn’t know all of the letter-sounds herself. Even though the teacher team was there to teach letter-sounds to students we became aware that the teachers needed training in basic teaching skills as well. I began to realize the poor quality of education these students were receiving. As a teacher team, we brought children’s books with us to share with students; who have no schema of western knowledge to the stories we provided. These events led me to brainstorm solutions/materials

needed for a more effective educational experience. As a Western educator myself, I wanted the opportunity of teaching English literacy using culturally-sensitive approaches. Students need literature that takes into account their social context so that, they are more equipped to learn.

Recent factors affecting literacy development

Literacy has different meanings to diverse cultures in varying contexts. Literacy was first introduced as having an impact on socio-economic development in the 1960s and 1970s. People and initiatives in the past, such as Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Paulo Freire, David Rumelhart, and *Sesame Street* have all recognized that literacy is about more than bringing print material to every culture. Around the 1960s literacy began being seen as a concept that incorporated the social context of culture. In 1963 Sylvia Ashton-Warner introduced her biography *Teacher* which portrayed her culturally relevant teaching style to the Maori children in New Zealand. Warner allowed her students to be a part of the learning and teaching process. For example, she would allow students to decide which vocabulary words they would learn. She argued that if they selected the word to learn, then those words would have meaning in their lives, and if it had meaning they would be more likely to learn and remember the words (Ashton-Warner, 1986). In the 1970s Paulo Freire was an educator who saw the need for having a culturally relevant curriculum. His (1970s) theory of conscientization saw education as “a part of the process of the revolutionary transformation of a society (Nyirenda).” Freire recognized the need to “Africanize” teaching English overseas and involve people in the process. In the 1980s David Rumelhart introduced the Schema Theory “mental connections that allow new experiences and information to be aligned with previous knowledge” in his book *Schemata: Building Blocks of Cognition* (1980). In the late 1980s *Sesame Street* was introduced during a time when “racial tensions in the

inner cities was high and many children were in poverty” says Gary Knell; the creator of *Sesame Street*. *Sesame Street* continues to have a whole child approach that focuses on the cognitive and health issues of every child (Knell, 2007). Currently, UNESCOs General Conference adopted a definition for literacy:

A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing, and calculation for his own and the community’s development (UNESCO, Understanding Literacy, 2006, p.154).

When children have culturally-sensitive material they are more equipped to learn. I returned to Sierra Leone in order to meet the needs of village and orphan students by, including them in a project to create relatable material.

How can educators impact culturally-sensitive material overseas?

As educators, we need to recognize that quality education is not reaching every child in the world moreover; countries are in need of people who will become involved in the mindset of learners in order to develop culturally-sensitive material for the students and teachers. More importantly, we need to be empowering the people already affecting education in these countries. Without proper materials such as; culturally relevant storybooks, educators in developing countries will continue to face challenges teaching English, or any other language, to children with printed material from the United States and Great Britain.

The following chapter will provide the historical background of Sub-Saharan Africa, while Chapter Three will discuss the cultural background of Sierra Leone, Chapter Four will provide the cultural context of my Sierra Leone experience, Chapter Five will explore the notion

of creating culturally-sensitive instructional materials for village and orphan students in Sierra Leone, and Chapter Six will have concluding remarks.

Chapter 2: Historical Background

This chapter will provide background information regarding education in Africa, and then more specifically education in Sierra Leone, as well as a history of Sierra Leone so that one may have a better understanding of the factors impacting the creation of culturally-sensitive instructional materials.

A brief history of education in Sub-Saharan Africa

"We cannot base the education of future citizens on the present inexcusable inequality of wealth nor on physical differences of race. We must seek not to make men carpenters but to make carpenters men." -Du Bois, 1920

Growing up in the United States and attending public schools, I imagined that the United States and Sub-Saharan Africa might have differences in education. I pictured children in Sub-Saharan Africa sitting under a tree with a chalkboard or in broken down buildings; certainly, as I researched this topic, I realized that the United States and Sub-Saharan Africa have multiple disparities in education. In 2006 the Center for Public Education reported that, 97% of children aged 5-14 attended school in the United States. Conversely, only 70% of school aged Sub-Saharan African children were enrolled in primary education, and one in three students did not complete primary school (UNESCO, Regional Overview, 2008, p.1). Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for about one-fifth of the world's 774 million illiterates in 1995-2004 (p.4). Sub-Saharan Africans have experienced challenges with regard to receiving quality education.

Sub-Saharan Africa faces many challenges in education, for example, in the United Nations Children's Fund article on Regional Overview: Sub-Saharan Africa, 2004 "41% of the

population in sub-Saharan Africa lived in extreme poverty as defined in developing countries , with less than \$1 per day.” Poverty decreases the chances of educational opportunities because of the opportunity cost: income lost from children helping to support the family, school fees, and school locations/structures in rural areas (UNESCO, Regional Overview, 2008, p.1).

“In Sub-Saharan Africa the primary net enrollment ratio (NER) increased from 57% to 70% between 1999 and 2005 but despite positive improvements the situation remains critical in Sub-Saharan Africa: more than 60% of the countries have primary NERs below 80% and more than one-third below 70%”(UNESCO, Regional Overview, 2008, p.1). Enrollment rates are not the only challenge; there is also the difficulty of keeping children in school to complete six years of primary education. According to the Education for All Global Report 2006 it takes “six to seven years of school to be functionally literate [in developing countries]”(p. 173). “The median survival rate to the last grade of primary education (63%) was lower in Sub-Saharan Africa than in other regions in 2004. According to the National Children’s Fund: school enrollments have increased exponentially in the last ten years because of the push for every child to receive an education. This push led to an increase of nearly half a million primary teachers from 1999-2005 which resulted in countries lowering standards for teachers to come into the teaching field (p.7).

Furthermore, there is a problem with the use of instructional time required of schools and teachers: “schools often start the school year a month late, end it a month early and have high student absenteeism, which results in as many as 200 to 300 fewer hours of instructional time than the official calendar requires. Significant loss of instructional time and inefficient use of classroom time are indicators of poor quality of education, which has detrimental effects on learning outcomes” (UNESCO, Regional Overview, 2008, p.7). A link is seen in the loss of

instructional time and the lack of accountability by administrators at government run schools where this is tolerated. Furthermore, school infrastructure is poor. Students are being taught in poor conditions for shorter than required periods of time. “In countries surveyed by SACMEQ, 47% of school buildings were reported to need major repairs or complete rebuilding; only 13% were listed as being in good condition” (p.7). These factors have a negative effect on the quality of education students are receiving

The government, Not for Profit Organizations (NGOs), and missionaries have all played a historical role in the education system in Sub-Saharan Africa. Sub-Saharan governments have located schools in urban areas, with less attention to sparsely inhabited rural areas. Many missionaries brought education into rural areas as a means to evangelize, and in some instances, to impact and westernize the culture (Mazonde, I.) Currently, steps are being taken that recognize the importance of quality education for all children around the world. UNICEF, Inter-Agency Standing Committee Cluster for Education in Emergencies, United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI), EFA (Education For All) Fast-Track Initiative, and the Education For All Global Action Plan are all organizations/programs that play a role in the advancement of education in Sub-Saharan Africa. These initiatives are striving to bring education to every child in the world by 2015.

Although one can generalize about education in Sub-Saharan Africa, each country has a unique history that has played a role in shaping its current education system. According to UNESCOs report *Understanding Literacy*: “In Sub-Saharan Africa literacy rates are extremely low in Chad, Mali, the Niger, Senegal, and Sierra Leone” (p.173). The emphasis of this paper is

on Sierra Leone and my experience in a rural school setting. The following section will provide information on this developing country.

Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is located on the west coast of Africa and its size and population is approximated to that of South Carolina. Currently 70% of the population lives below the poverty line, for developing countries, living on \$1.25 a day (CIA, 2012.) If you lived in Sierra Leone instead of the United States you would have a 13.1 times higher chance of dying in infancy, die 22.55 years earlier, use 99.98% less electricity, make 98.06% less money, and experience 39.78% greater of a class divide (Linter, 2011).

Sierra Leone has faced challenges marked by an elitist system of education where certain people are privileged over others. Formal education in Sierra Leone began during colonization when missionaries brought a formal, western style education into the country (Mazonde, Culture and Education in Developing Africa, p.6). At independence in 1961, Sierra Leone inherited the British-type education system designed for the urban middle class, “this system aimed at nurturing civil servants and government administrators and excluded the majority of the population” (World Bank, 2007, p.135). A social gap was seen in money that was funneled off to the elite 5% of the population who were wealthy, leaving the remaining 95% in poverty with a lack of education (Ministry of Education). The lower 95% of students without financial means were forced to abide with a vocational training model that mostly ignored academics and literacy. This is known by many Africans as the “good enough” model for education, where they are good enough to be working class but not good enough to hold significant power (Kranz, 2012). This system continued for several generations; well into the early 1900’s. In 1994 Sierra

Leone adopted the 6-3-3 education system which has been seen as a “bold attempt to move the country away from a predominantly grammar school type education, which takes neither varied talents of the pupils nor socioeconomic needs into account” (World Bank, 2007, p.34).

History of Education in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone had a “series of firsts in Western Style education in Sub-Saharan Africa” (World Bank, 2007, p.34). It had the first school for boys in Western Africa (Sierra Leone Grammar School) founded in 1845, the first school for girls in Sierra Leone (Annie Walsh Memorial School) founded in 1849. Sierra Leone also played an important role in training the first corps of administrations, doctors, and teachers in English-speaking West Africa in the first half of the 20th century through Fourah Bay College; the first higher education institution in West Africa for English-speaking Africans. It had a high level of education established yet a quarter of its population currently is not attending school, almost half of all teachers are unqualified to teach, and only 41% of its population is literate. In 2003 it had one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world (Diof, 2006). According to The Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook: Sierra Leone defines literacy as “anyone age 15 and over who can read and write English, Mende, Temne, or Arabic.” To discover why illiteracy is such a challenge we need to look at the history of Sierra Leone and its effect on education. Events that have played a role in determining literacy levels in Sierra Leone include: early educational practices in the villages, inheriting and British-type education system, a ten-year civil war that ended in 2002, and what has taken place post-civil war.

Early Education in Villages

Education throughout Sub-Saharan Africa did not start with public buildings, public school teachers, or resources from outside organizations. Rather, education had a more organic, familial and sometimes tribal and practical beginnings, with elders teaching younger children about life skills. Therefore, education (though not a necessarily formal education) has always been a part of the culture of Sierra Leone. Children went through (and many still go through) initiations where they were “taught” how to be a man or woman of a tribe. Also, children were taught oral language skills to communicate, how to memorize stories to share their history, how to cook, and how to hunt for the purpose of providing for themselves and others (Marriott, 1965, p. 21). Perhaps the key to the literacy issue in cultures like Sierra Leone are primarily auditory, not text-based, with learning through the direction of their elders, which explains why, they have a deep respect and fear for those who are older than themselves. Children use words such as “auntie, uncle, mama, and daddy” to address people who are older than themselves. When taking cultural factors into consideration the teacher-centered approach; where the teacher guides and directs the lesson including: demonstration, direct instruction, lecture and lecture-discussions to teaching, has been the most culturally appropriate and preferred approach to teaching and learning. These same organic practices continue to be a way of educating the youth of Sierra Leone today.

Colonialism as an Introduction to a More Formal Education

Sierra Leone was colonized by Britain in the 1700s which marked the beginning of the slave trade where men and women were taken from Sierra Leone to be slaves in Britain and North America. In 1787 freed slaves, who originated from different countries in Africa, were settled in one Portland area that came to be known as Freetown. This population came to be

known as Krios' who had a major impact in Sierra Leone. In 1896, Britain declared a protectorate over the entire country and Krios were elected into council. Krio (the language of this group) is now spoken by 95% of the country.

British-Type Education System

At independence in 1961, Sierra Leone inherited a British-type education system aimed at the urban middle class which, was in favor of families who could afford a better quality education. As a result, these two groups were (and still are) the only groups to move onto college and find formal employment in government. In 1961 less than 15% of children attended school and only 5 %were in secondary school (World Bank, 2007, p. 207). Attending school cost money, which forced those in poverty to work to pay fees before receiving their education. This was not the only corruption of power taking place. After independence Sierra Leone had a history of violent coups resulting in a 10-year civil war.

The Civil War of Sierra Leone 1991-2002

“Starting in 1967 the country suffered through 5 military coups, the last resulting in a 10 year civil war where 50,000 people were killed, 2 million displaced, 100,000 mutilated, [and] 250,000 women raped” (World Bank, 2007, p.16). Foday Sankoh was the leader of the RUF (Revolutionary United Front) that came in from Liberia with force and started destroying villages. Children and parents were separated. Many were forced to become child soldiers and even kill members of their own families. Other children watched as their mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters were murdered in front of their eyes. Because of this devastating war, many children were left orphaned. Tens of thousands of people were killed, and over two million people, which equates to one-third of the country, were displaced (Foday Sankoh).

The war halted education for many reasons including; resources being scattered, most of the social, economic, and physical infrastructure of Sierra Leone was destroyed, it disrupted school times, and traumatized students who no longer had a safe way to attend school. School was no longer viable; people were dispersed from their villages by different military groups, which led to the new goal of simply surviving. The civil war ended in 2002 with the disarmament of 45,000 soldiers (BBCNEWS, 2003).

Post-Civil War

Following the civil war the government made education one of its top priorities.

According to Education in Sierra Leone: Present challenges, Future Opportunities:

After the war Sierra Leone's economy collapsed after years of mismanagement, the quality of teaching and learning environments reached the lowest in the world, school infrastructure was devastated, severe shortage of teaching materials, there was overcrowding in schools in safer areas, and displacement of teachers (since most teachers moved to urban (safer) areas during the war. Students also faced disorientation and psychological trauma, poor learning outcomes, weakened institutional capacity to manage the system, and a lack of information and data to plan (p.15).

Primary enrollment was 442,915 in 2001 and 1,194,503 in 2011 (UNESCO, 2011). There was a “doubling of student enrollment from 2001/02 and 2004/05” because of the end of the war and the government's decision to offer free public primary education in 2001 (World Bank, 2007, p.35-38). Un-expected high enrollments led to large class sizes, and a need for more facilities, teachers, and resources.

Complementary Rapid Education for Primary Schools (CREPS) was enacted after the civil war for children ages 10 years to 16 years whose schooling was disrupted or who completely missed out on an education because of the war. CREPS was an accelerated program created for

children to complete a six-year primary education in three years and sit for the National Primary School Examination so that they could be enrolled in Junior Secondary School. In addition, this program incorporated psychosocial and health issues, including trauma healing, peace education, and human rights; however, most efforts were made to ensure students could pass the national examination (Baxter & Bethke, 2009).

Concluding Remarks

Chapter Two provided the background of historical events affecting Sierra Leone. Chapter Three provides cultural background information regarding education in Sierra Leone so that one may have a better understanding of the factors impacting the creation of culturally-sensitive instructional materials.

Chapter 3: Educational Background of Sierra Leone

This chapter will provide background information regarding education in Sierra Leone so that one may have a better understanding of the factors impacting the creation of culturally-sensitive instructional materials.

The Current Context of Education in Sierra Leone

Almost a decade after the civil war ended, Sierra Leone is still struggling to rebuild schools, train teachers, and reach children who have yet to see the inside of a classroom (Galanek, 2011).

Currently, education is structured by Sierra Leone's Ministries of Education and is aided by the help of outside providers such as NGO's (non-government organizations) and various missionary groups. Education has been seen as one of Sierra Leone's top priorities by the initiation of the Free Primary Education Policy in 2001; which cancelled primary school fees and doubled enrollment between 2001/02 and 2004/05, and the Education Act of 2004, which "requires all children to complete basic education: six years of primary school [and] three years of junior secondary school" (World Bank, 2007, p.135). Successful decentralization will also benefit the quality of education that each region in Sierra Leone will receive by bringing "more efficient and effective public spending, better service delivery, and improved school performance" (p.135) because more power will be given to individual chiefdoms (regions) in the northern, southern, and eastern regions of Sierra Leone.

The three types of schools established in Sierra Leone are government schools (25%), government assisted schools (70%), and private schools (5%). Students' progress through three

stages of schooling including; primary (ages 6-11), junior secondary (ages 12-14), and secondary school (ages 15-17). However, the age of students in the educational system can range from as young as four years to older than 25 years of age (World Bank, 2007, p.40-45).

The top three reasons children do not attend school in Sierra Leone are “economic difficulties, parents do not care about children’s education, and that the school is too far away” (World Bank, 2007, p.49). Although the government abolished school fees in 2001, many schools still impose charges on students to attend such as: uniforms and supplies, this is a barrier for children in Sierra Leone where poverty is widespread.

1.1.1 Urban Vs. Rural

Sierra Leone is made up of four districts in the north, south, east, and west. Each area can be characterized by being urban, urban slum, or rural. Each district has a more urbanized, area that relies less on agriculture. Freetown (the capital), is an urban area located on the west side of the country and has been widely characterized as an urban slum with a lack of basic services, inadequate building structures, overcrowding, unhealthy and hazardous living conditions, and irregular and informal settlements (UN-HBITAT, 2006, p. 35). The majority of the population lives in Freetown because most resources such as hospitals, schools, and food are located in urban areas of the country.

Children in Freetown have more access to education because more schools are available in urban areas opposed to rural areas. Students are also more likely to have trained and qualified teachers in Freetown since most teachers moved to Freetown during the war. Children in rural areas of the country are at a greater disadvantage to receiving quality education including: unqualified teachers, lack of resources, and insufficient facilities. As you move east (away from

Freetown), areas become more rural and poverty increases (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2007). “Educational attainment is low with an average of less than 4 years of education completed for males and less than two years for females... in urban areas men have three times as many years of education as do men in rural areas (World Bank, 2007, p.24).”

1.1.2 Infrastructure and Classrooms

Classes usually have an average of 40 to 50 students. Policies have been enacted to limit the class size to a maximum of 50 students per class; however, there is a realistic average of 66 pupils per teacher. Most classes are inside buildings; however, some classes may meet outside due to overcrowding. Building structures are inadequate since many schools had to rebuild after the civil war that targeted schools in its destruction. School materials such as textbooks are only provided in short supply. The official policy is to “provide without charge primary grade textbooks in the four core subjects and to reach a student textbook ratio of 2:1”because there are not enough textbooks to meet demands (World Bank, 2007, p.69).

1.1.3 Teachers

Teachers are faced with many challenges such as: underpayment of salaries, inadequate if not complete lack of in-service training, non-payment or late payment of salaries, and bias in the promotion process.

“But public education is broken in this recovering nation, where teachers are functionally the Cinderella; working a thankless job that nobody else wants. They are the poster child of disrespect and indignity, unable to compete with the rest of society for decent housing or an optimum lifestyle. This society gives them very little, yet expects the highest standard of integrity and professionalism from them” (Marke, 2009).

In Sierra Leone “around 30% of teachers are satisfied with their job and 40% (8,000) of teachers are unqualified at the primary level” (World Bank, 2007, p.72-73) Unqualified teachers in Sierra Leone are defined as those teaching at a level higher than appropriate for their academic qualifications. Unqualified teachers have hindered the quality of education students receive in the classroom because they lack the training to teach students foundational skills such as reading and writing.

1.1.4 National Examinations

National examinations are taken at the end of Primary School, Junior Secondary School, and Senior Secondary School. Students are required to pass these exams to move onto the following grade. The WASSCE: West African Senior School Certificate Examination is taken at the end of primary school. Students wake up early (most without having had breakfast) and complete this eight-hour exam. When students pass WASSCE, they move on to Junior Secondary schools, or roughly the equivalent of junior high schools in the United States. When a child misses this day they must repeat sixth grade and take the exam the following year. The BECE: Basic Education Certificate Examination is taken after Junior Secondary schools in order to gain entrance to Senior Secondary schools, which differ from the United States’ high schools in that Senior Secondary schools, are only two years (Saunier, 2012) and has a passing rate of 40% (Education in Sierra Leone: Present Challenges, Future Opportunities). Many students must take an elongated route to completing secondary education causing the average age of graduation for those who make it through completion to be over 18 years. Previously, testing fees have hindered students from completing these exams. However, the abolishment of fees for examinations or fee waivers by the government at the end of primary school has tripled from

26,000 in 2001 to 78,000 in 2005 giving more students the opportunity to take and hopefully pass these exams.

Sierra Leone's Educational Perspective on Language

Students are taught English beginning in nursery school (Kindergarten). A student, who wants to go to University and/or achieve a better life for themselves and their family, recognizes the need to know English. Knowing English opens more doors to be a part of government employment or employment with non-profit organizations. English is seen as a valuable tool that many people; even older generations, are willing to learn.

Thirteen distinct languages are spoken throughout Sierra Leone (World Bank, 2007, p.16) with the two dominating tribal groups being the Temene in the North and the Mende in the South. Krios (former slaves) make up 2% of the population but Krio is spoken by 95% of the country (Bureau of African Affairs, 2012). In Sierra Leone, your social class is determined by the languages you speak. A person who knows Temene, Mende, or any other tribal language, is viewed as poor and uneducated. A person who knows Krio (they may know a tribal language as well) is seen as being more educated and better off. A person who knows English (most likely also knows a tribal language such as, Mende and/or Krio), is seen as well educated, wealthy, and successful. A person who knows English and Krio most likely comes from an Urban area and a person who only knows a tribal language comes from a rural area so, there is a disparity between education received in urban and rural areas (Ngoneh, 2011). The focus of this paper will now be on a rural part of South Sierra Leone where the majority of the population speaks Mende, the tribal language of the south. Children of the Nations is a school in a rural part of Sierra Leone that is facing many of these language challenges.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has provided some background information and my observations regarding the cultural context of Sierra Leone as well as the cultural lenses through which to see the native languages and English. Chapter Four will explain the rationale and the process of creating culturally-sensitive storybooks in English before getting to Sierra Leone, once in the country, and after leaving the country, it will also provide case studies of students I worked one-on-one with to show the reader why I chose to create storybooks for students so that, one may have a better understanding of the factors impacting the creation of culturally-sensitive instructional materials.

Chapter 4: The Cultural Context of my Sierra Leone Experience

This chapter describes the school, teachers, and students associated with this educational experience for beginning readers in English. Children of the Nations (COTN) is the organization that established this school. COTN's mission is to raise children to transform their nation with help; one may have a better understanding of the factors impacting the creation of culturally-sensitive instructional materials. Children of the Nations has a unique approach to the problems facing the population of Sierra Leone, which is a vision that acts now to affect the future.

The COTN School Setting in Ngolala

COTN is located in a rural southern region of Sierra Leone. COTN School, orphanage, and the office, are all within minutes walking distance of one another. The villages surrounding this compound range from about a ten-minute to about an hour walk.



To the left you see the building for JSS, to the right you see the building for Primary School, and in the middle is COTN's main office.

COTN's School, comprised of 98 children from COTN's orphanage and 1,488 children from the neighboring villages, is different from most schools in Sierra Leone because of the characteristic of students being both village and orphan children (Saunier, 2012). COTN's School is run by a Non-Profit Organization that chooses to base its teaching practices on the national standards for education set by Sierra Leone. Though a small fee is required for students to attend COTN's school (for uniforms, and supplies), it is sometimes more than a family can afford. In these cases COTN has a social worker who surveys families and provides scholarships to ensure that all children have the opportunity for an education despite their financial situation. The scholarship is made possible by a sponsorship program which helps offset the cost so children have access to education and health services. Sarah Saunier; the educational director of Sierra Leone, has seen that parents are more likely to have their children attend school if they have invested money in their education. Only desperate situations would cause the social worker to provide funding for children to attend school for example, a single mom who already has three children attending the school could not afford to send her fourth child to school.

The primary school building (1st-6th grade) consists of six classrooms. Each classroom is comprised of one grade where two classes of 40-50 students take place on opposite sides of the room at one time, leaving anywhere from 75-100 children in each standard American size classroom. Each classroom has heavy steal desks that children crowd into. The tops of these desks are bumpy and hard to write on so, students need something to "press" on, such as a journal, when they are writing.



Figure 1: Primary School Classroom. Two classes take place with the divider in the middle to separate them.

Across from the primary school building is a smaller building that holds junior secondary (7th-10th grade) students. There are two classrooms inside this building and one classroom outside on the patio, each holding over 50 students per class.



Figure 2: Junior Secondary School

This is a picture of the Junior Secondary School building. One class is held outside under the pavilion while two other classes take place inside of the building.

Finally, there is an even smaller building for senior secondary (11th-12th grade) students that consist of three classrooms. Each classroom is broken up by specification based upon the

career track of each student. Classes are smaller because of the high number of children who drop out or are unable to pass both exams before entering Senior Secondary School. Each classroom has anywhere from 10-20 students in each class.



Figure 3: This is inside the Senior Secondary School. There are three classrooms like this in the building.

COTN Teachers at Ngolala

COTN teaching is based on teacher-centered instruction where the teacher guides and directs the lesson and includes demonstration, direct instruction, lecture and lecture-discussions. Teacher-centered instruction can be beneficial as long as teachers are trained to do it affectively with the use of background knowledge, modeling, and assessment of students learning. Culturally, this is the most effective approach. Sadly, teachers face many challenges in and outside of the classroom.

Teachers at COTN cannot support themselves on a teacher's income alone. After a five-hour school day teachers return home to tend their farms. Preparing and planning outside the classroom is not encouraged, moreover, the director of COTN explained that she does not encourage teachers to plan anything outside of school time. She recognizes the responsibilities

and pressures teachers deal with outside of the classroom such as; taking care of a farm, family, and household chores. Another challenge for these teachers is due to the fact that these teachers work for an NGO (non-profit organization) and as a result, are seen as rich and, faced with pressure to provide for their extended family as well as their immediate family. Most of the teachers have limited training in teaching basic skills such as reading, writing, and basic math skills but are knowledgeable in more complex skills such as algebra. They can complete math problems and are literate in English but have a difficult time teaching the basics of each concept to the students. In addition, the only resources teachers are given include chalk, chalkboard, and a limited number of pencils and paper. Teachers have chalkboards in front of every class, however, in most cases; teachers can only use half of the chalkboard because the other half is broken or can't be written on.

Some negative examples teachers have portrayed have effected students. Most of the teachers' go to Freetown to visit family over school breaks and sometimes don't arrive back to school until a week after school has re-opened. A major problem has been the lack of consequences teachers receive for not coming to teach, coming to school late, and lack of teaching during the school day. For example, the first and last weeks of school and before or after break students decide not to attend school because most teachers do not attend, which is a problem that has lessened since the feeding program moved to the middle of the day instead of right before school (in which students would come, eat, and go back to their village). Through experience, COTN continues to improve their methods of providing quality education in this rural setting.

There are emerging professional development opportunities. Teacher teams come annually to give workshops to teachers and allow teachers to observe and learn from one another during summer school. As a result, teachers have been able to learn new strategies and see them implemented in the classroom.

Students attending COTN School

Location geographically in Sierra Leone has a lot to do with the level of (or lack of) education you receive. In Freetown (the city) on the west side of Sierra Leone there are numerous government and mission run schools for students to attend. The more urban districts such as Bo (south), Koidu (east), and Makeni (north) also have a higher number of schools. Once you go out into the more rural areas in the north, south, and east part of Sierra Leone the number of people living in poverty increases and the number of schools and child enrollment rates decrease. The COTN School is placed in a rural area in the south of Sierra Leone. There are two distinct groups of students that attend COTN School, which include students from the villages and students from the orphanage. These two groups share similarities and differences in academics, home life, mentors, and dreams of achievement.

Students from the Orphanage

COTN created an orphanage during the civil war because of the rising number of orphans and a school was built in an effort to provide these children a quality education. COTN expanded when land was donated in a rural part of South Sierra Leone, and the orphanage moved to Ngolala. The orphanage is made up of nine homes with around ten children and one caretaker, per home. Most of the children come from Freetown, the capital; however, others have come from various villages throughout Sierra Leone. Therefore, children speak a mixture of native

languages including the national language; Krio, and the tribal languages; Temane or Mende . Since most of the staff members speak Krio, this is the language commonly spoken by children around the orphanage. Children have also become fluent in the English language because of missionaries who come and live in the orphanage throughout the year. This means that some of these children know three languages and the rest of the children know at least two: Emmanuel, a boy from the orphanage is an example of this. He arrived at COTN's malnutrition clinic in 2008 in a dreadfully swollen, listless and blistered condition of protein deficiency. After two weeks of care and a high protein diet, little Emmanuel started to come back to life. He spoke Mende (one of the tribal languages). Within a year of being at COTN he was able to speak fluently in English.

Many of these children have faced malnutrition, posttraumatic stress disorder, abandonment, and rejection. One would assume these children would be performing at a lower level than their village schoolmates at COTN's school; however, these children tend to perform better than those living in the village because of the educational advantages COTN provides. Missionaries haven't only given them contact with the English language but have also come as tutors who work one-on-one with children who are failing in school. Children have less difficulty learning how to speak a language but greater difficulty learning how to read and write because their culture is more auditory. Emmanuel spoke many "big" words in Mende, which showed the high level of proficiency he had in his language. But, when it came to reading and writing English words and/or letters it was difficult for him to do so. Since class sizes are so big teachers can't give one-on-one attention, therefore tutoring is essential for many students to become literate and COTN provides tutors for children who are struggling. The orphanage also has a

generator that runs for three hours every night that gives children a light to do their homework and read at night. Children in the villages lack these advantages. When COTN created the school in the rural part of Sierra Leone they recognized the need for children in the neighboring villages to receive an education as well therefore; they made the school open for village children.

Students from the Village

Father Abraham and Uncle Ben (father and uncle are used to show respect to elders in Sierra Leone) are leaders in their village and teachers at COTN School, they started academically educating children from the villages before COTN School was established. Father Abraham explained, “If I didn’t start educating children they would not receive an education” since the government had not established a school in the region of the country. Providing a quality academic education was not could not be attained without a building, teachers, supplies, or training to be effective.

Students from villages face different struggles than the children in the orphanage leading to the three main reasons (that differ from the three national reasons) students miss and/or don’t attend COTN’s school: they work on the farm to help sustain their family, the school is miles away (some students have to walk as far as an hour to get to school), or there isn’t enough room at the school. Students also miss school certain parts of the year because of the cultural necessities. For example, when the second term opens in January secret societies take place. Secret societies are when groups of boys are taken by the men in the tribe and groups of girls are taken by women in the tribe to initiate them into manhood and womanhood. Villages also lack electricity so students are unable complete schoolwork at night meaning the only time these students study is during the day while attending school. Village students who do succeed usually

have a staff member who has invested in them or, who are naturally more intelligent than other students. Although COTN School wishes to provide an education to every child in the area they recognize they can't give a quality education to large quantities of students and so, they must turn some children away from attending school (Saunier, 2012).

Concluding Remarks

This chapter provided an overview of the conditions of the school and population of the students. It also highlighted my experiences while teaching in Sierra Leone. Through these experiences I realized that many students were not literate, could not do simple math problems, and could not reason for themselves. Chapter Five provides insight into the need for creating cultural relevant material and provides the finished product.

Chapter 5: The Creative Project

This chapter will explain the process of creating the *What's Up* and *ABC's of Sierra Leone* storybooks before getting to Sierra Leone, once in the country, and after leaving the country. It will provide case studies of classes I taught and students I worked one-on-one with. These experiences will give a better understanding of the factors impacting the creation of culturally-sensitive instructional materials.

Case Studies

I made observations on a whole group and individual basis in 2010 and 2011 through teaching in the classroom, listening to children read, reading to children, and tutoring children one-on-one. In the summer of 2010, I taught a 4th grade summer school class that focused on phonics and phonemic awareness for three weeks. I was also a part of presenting workshops to the teachers of COTN's School. In 2011, I taught a spring break math class, Junior Secondary School writing, and tutored three students. My observations while teaching and tutoring revealed to me the need for students to have culturally-sensitive materials.

2011 Summer School

Summer school took place Monday-Friday from 9:30am-12:30pm for three weeks. I had a fourth grade class that varied from 10-30 children from the orphanage and the village. Each day we worked on a journal prompt, introduced a different letter, a letter sound, word families, and introduced the strategy of segmenting and blending sounds to create words. I had students use the letter sounds I introduced to spell and sound out words as a class. I would hand out different letters to students then, call certain letters such as "c" "a" and "n" up to the front, once

the students with the correct letters were up front I had them say each sound, finally I had them blend the sounds together to form a word. Most of the students were able to recognize the name of each letter but could not recognize the letter sound or blend sounds together to form words.

Junior Secondary School: Writing

I instructed fifteen Junior Secondary School students ages 12- 17 years old on writing expository stories. These students started their stories like fairy tales: once upon a time, a long time ago in a land, and end their stories with: the end or, this is the end of my story. They did not understand when, where, or how to use punctuation marks and were confused about when to use a capital and lowercase letters. Thinking of an authentic story to write about were problematic for these children, even though they possess many life experiences, most students write about stories that have been passed down orally and are commonly talked about among their friends. These students may change the names or setting, but the storyline is always the same such as; a girl getting pregnant or a boy stealing an item. Once we recognized this, our team of teachers tried banning certain storylines so that the students could discover new narratives.

2012 One-on-one Tutoring

I tutored four students: Fatima, Fatmata, and Ester, and observed the progress of another, student who was being tutored. These are the observations from those experiences:

Fatima

Fatima is 14 years old and attends Junior Secondary School. She had a difficult time thinking and discovering things for herself. She has a fear of being criticized for being wrong. She needs a lot of “wait time” to answer questions whether they are easy or difficult for example, when I ask her what the title of the story was it would took her at least a minute to answer. She usually had the right answer but needed wait time to process the question. The problem is that in

Junior Secondary School (where she attends) she is in a fast paced lecture class of 50 students. As a result, she doesn't get the wait time she needs to process what she is learning. She also has a difficult time summarizing, instead she tells me word for word what is on a page. At 14 years old, I was reading storybooks with her such as *Wangari's Trees of Peace*, which is a fifth grade readability level book. While reviewing her writing I noticed that she doesn't know the difference between capital and lower case letters, doesn't understand when and where to use punctuation marks, and has a hard time thinking of an authentic story to write about.

Fatmata

Fatmata is 10 years old and attends primary school. I had Fatmata in my summer school class in 2010 and, I had the opportunity to tutor her one-on-one on my second trip in 2011. When I started working with her she didn't know the name of certain letters or the sounds they made. As a result, she also couldn't read a book to me, no matter the level. I reviewed high frequency words with her, which she started to memorize, however, she was still unable to sound out words. She sounded out words by saying their letter name instead of their letter sound (like many of the other children).

Example: I could go over three different letter sounds with her like /c/ /a/ /t/ and she can say it separate but when I put them together to have her try and say the word "cat" she cannot say the word cat. She will say letter sounds that are not a part of the word like saying "color" or "fit."

Fatmata had the heart to learn. She wants to be a teacher when she grows up, but lacks the skills that will help her live out her dream. Fatmata also has an older sister who is 16 years old who had recently been taken out of school to work in the trade school since she was unable

to retain what she was learning in school. She couldn't read high frequency words or use basic reading skills to figure them out. Fatmata and her sister seem to have the same difficulties in the reading process.

Esther

Esther is 10 years old and attends class six of primary school. She was the most advanced of the students I tutored. She caught onto things quickly, was able to sound out new words (if she was fully confident, she would get almost every word she sounded out correct), and she was a student who needed one-on-one attention. It would be difficult for her to learn in a class of 40-60 students, yet the typical daily class has 50 students.

Emmanuel

Emmanuel has been in the orphanage for about two years. He came in severely malnourished. He has the body of a six-year-old, but dental records conclude that he is actually ten years of age; however, because of the effects of malnutrition and a lack of education, he has been in nursery (preschool) for the past two years. He has difficulty writing and recognizing letters by name and sound but has finally reached the point where he can spell his name.

Process of Creating Culturally-sensitive Material

My team packed school supplies: lined paper, blank paper, pencils, pens, and a lot of crayons, before leaving for Sierra Leone, to assist us in creating storybooks with the children. The only storyline idea we had was for an alphabet book that would be beneficial for children to associate words with pictures. Upon arriving, we continued building relationships with the children and learned more about the culture. We cooked meals, played games, read stories, and

sat and talked with the people from all walks of life. We experienced and lived life daily with them.

The teacher team lived with 98 children at the orphanage. The orphanage is made up of ten houses: nine houses for the children and one house for volunteers to stay in. To create culturally-sensitive materials we recognized the importance of getting to know the culture and the way of life to create a more authentic piece of literature. After spending a couple of weeks in the culture we started to pick up on common objects relevant to their lives, and common phrases or conversations that came up.

Once I was ready to create the books, I walked around the orphanage and told the children that I had crayons and paper at House Ten and I needed their help drawing some pictures, in a couple minutes ten children were already on the back porch.



Figure 4: This is a picture of the children drawing the pictures for the storybooks.

Storybooks

I created two storybooks with the children of Sierra Leone in mind. One has a storyline that relates to the children in the orphanage: *What's Up* whereas the other is more basic: the ABC's of Sierra Leone.

Book one: *What's Up?*

The official language in Sierra Leone is English, however, this is a second language to most people who know it. The children in the orphanage have been able to recognize and make fun of the slang people from the United States use when they come over. One of these phrases is "What's up?" Whenever we asked the children "what's up" they would always respond with something quirky. When we were thinking about story ideas, we thought of this one common interaction we had with the children. So, we worked on the *What's Up?* book. We went through the list and asked children to draw pictures of the objects we suggested then, we told them to draw pictures of animals that were familiar to them such as an elephant, monkey, and giraffe. Next, we had them draw pictures of objects that were above us, such as a tree and the sky. By this time, we had about 35 children helping on the back porch, the front porch, and all over the floor of our house. When they brought us a piece of paper, we gave them another piece and asked them to draw something new. Lastly, we went through the pictures and sorted out the ones we could use for the storybooks on the basis of: 1) can you tell what the picture is; 2) is it big enough to use; and 3) have we already used one of these children's pictures? We wanted to be sure to include as many children's pictures as possible.

The idea of the book was very appropriate because it included the prior knowledge of the students so as to engage them in the story. The book was also appropriate for emergent readers and used predictable language so as to help the students.

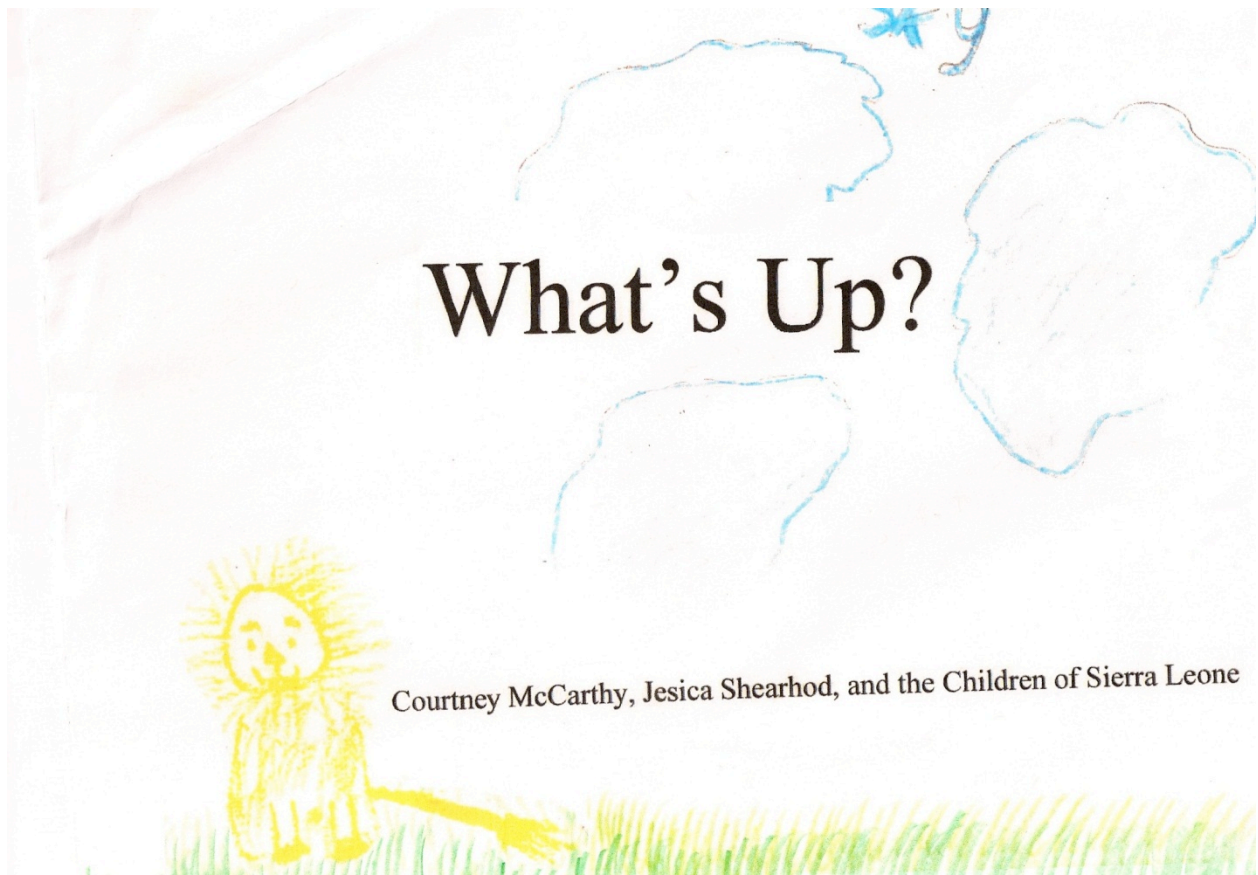


Figure 5: *What's Up* title page



Figure 6: What's Up storybook, page 1



Figure 7: What's Up storybook, page 2

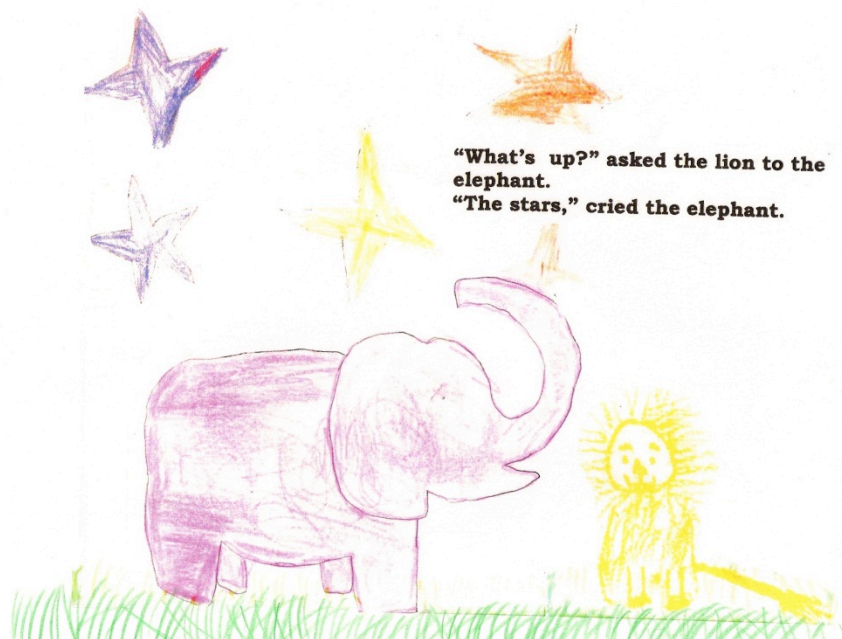


Figure 8: What's up storybook, page 3

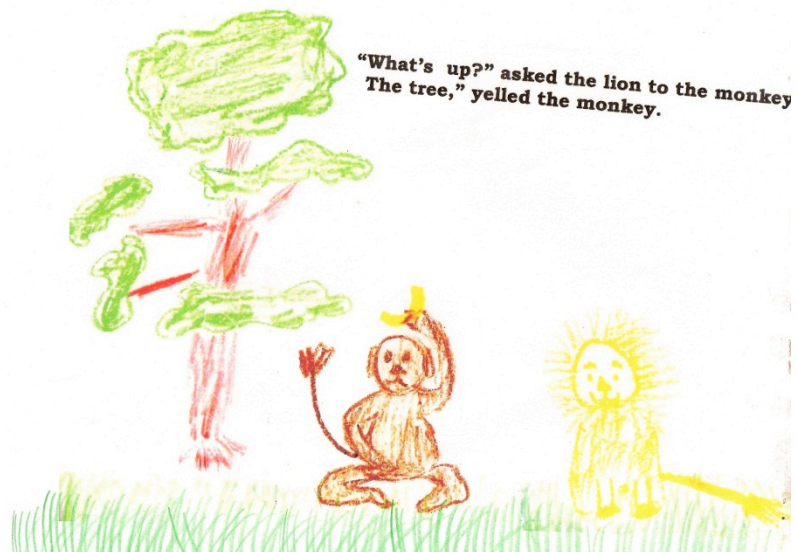


Figure 9: What's up storybook, page 4



Figure 10: What's up storybook, page 5

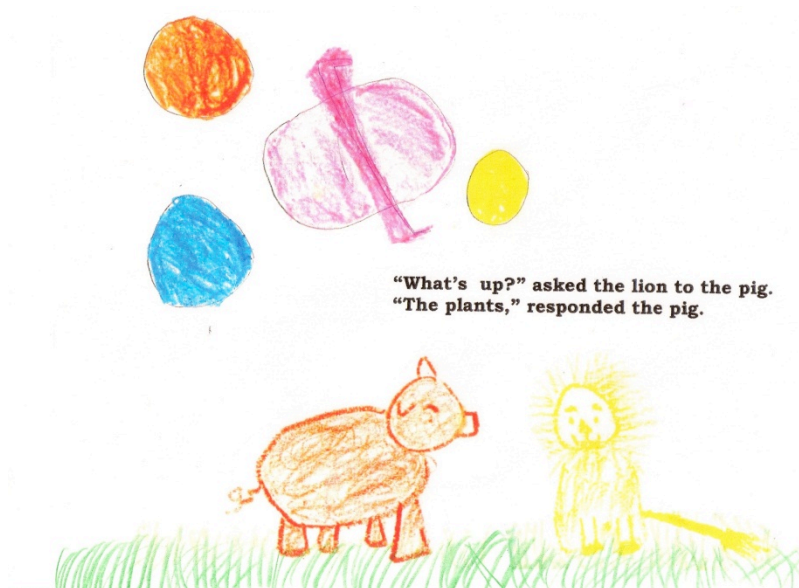


Figure 11: What's up storybook, page 6

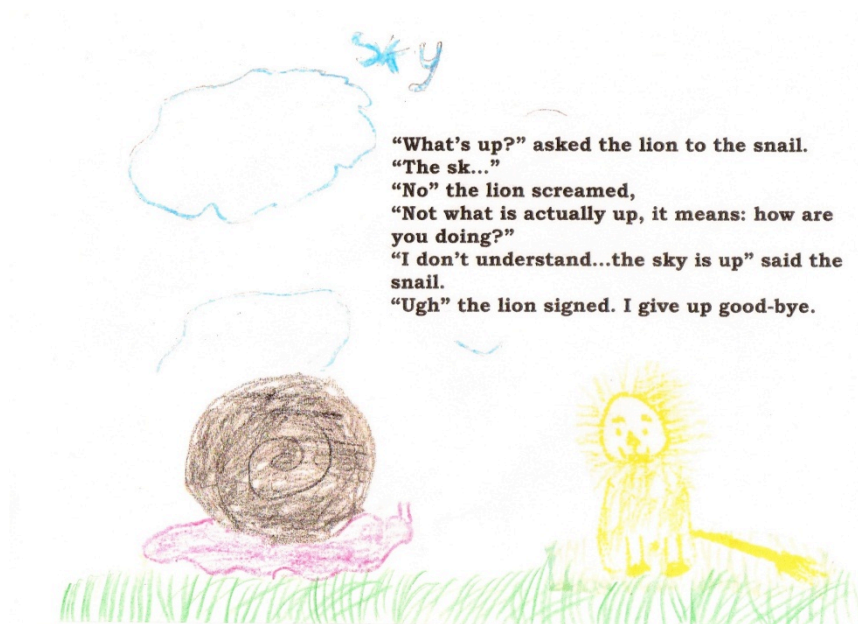


Figure 12: What's up storybook, page 7

Book two: ABC's of Sierra Leone

The point of this book was a simple ABC's concept book that could be used to help beginning readers see pictures and read words of their everyday life. We gathered the children from the orphanage and asked them for words that begin with each letter of the alphabet. I wrote down all of the words and we picked out the most appropriate words to have them draw pictures of. Then, we asked the children to draw pictures of each word. We went through the list and removed some of the items the children only knew because of the exposure with people from the United States such as computer and racecar.

The idea of this book was meant to be straightforward; however, I wish I could have included more than one picture per page to increase the amount of picture word correspondence the children could recognize. Below is the finished product of this storybook.

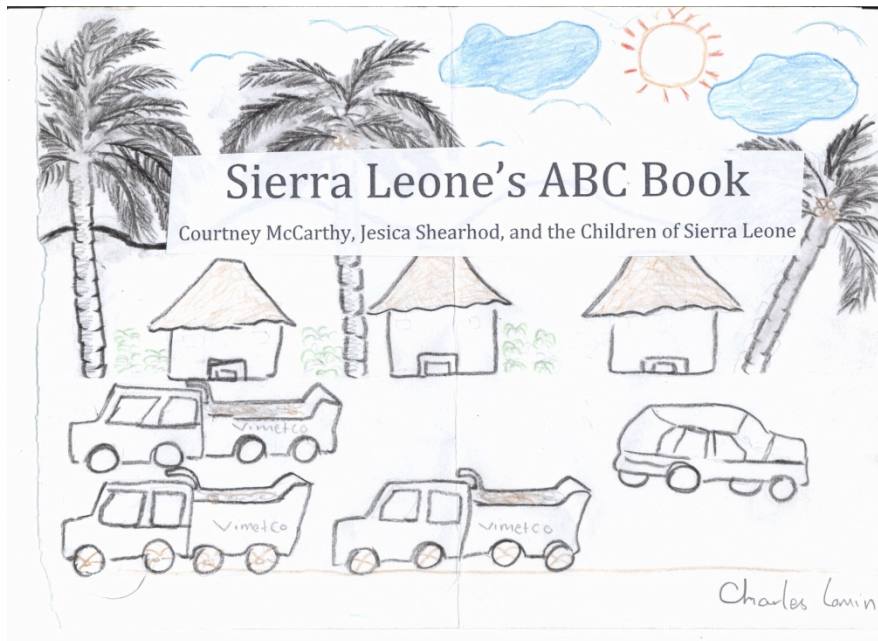


Figure 13: ABC's title page

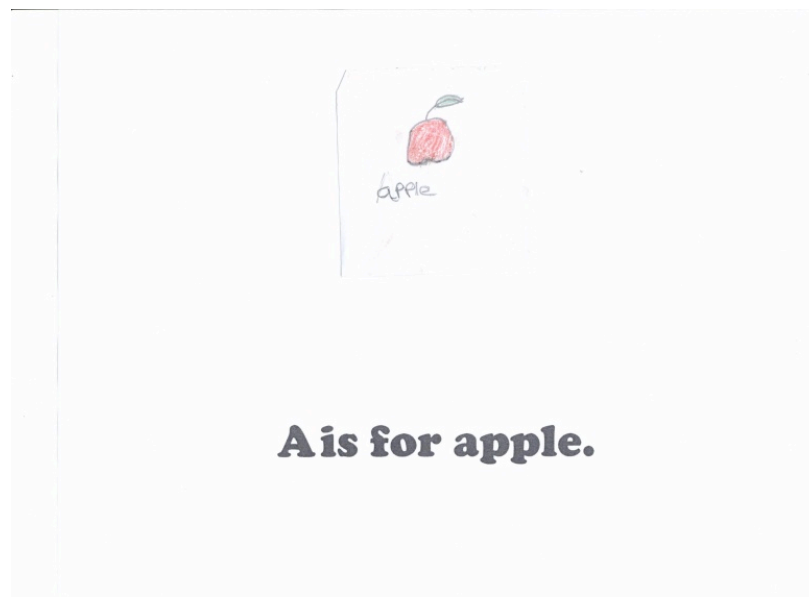


Figure 14: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 1

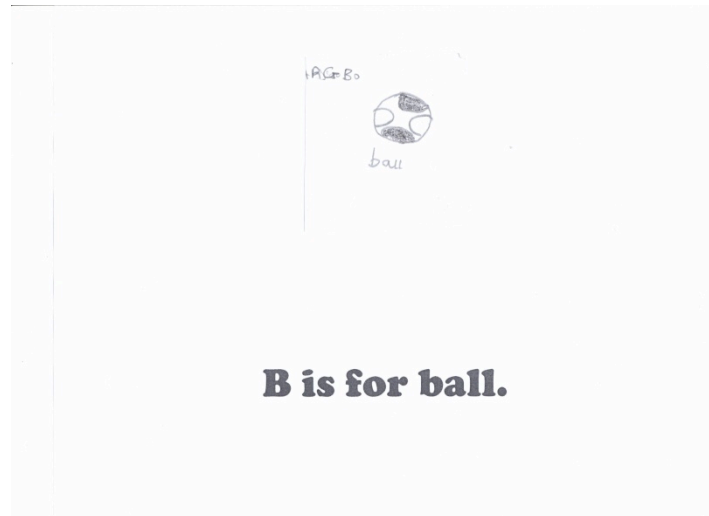


Figure 15: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 2

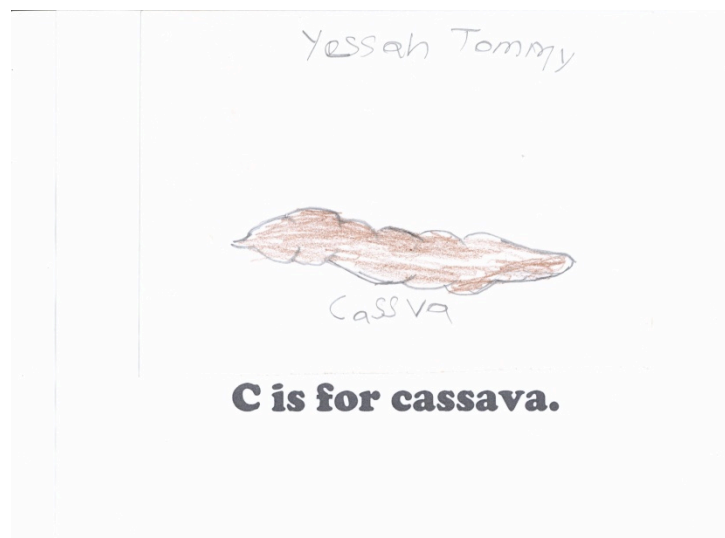


Figure 16: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 3



Figure 17: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 4

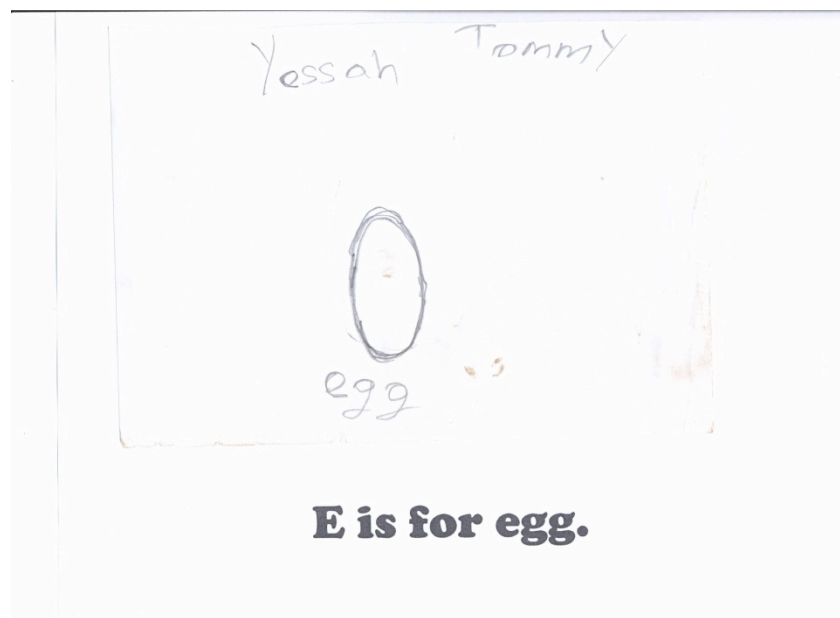
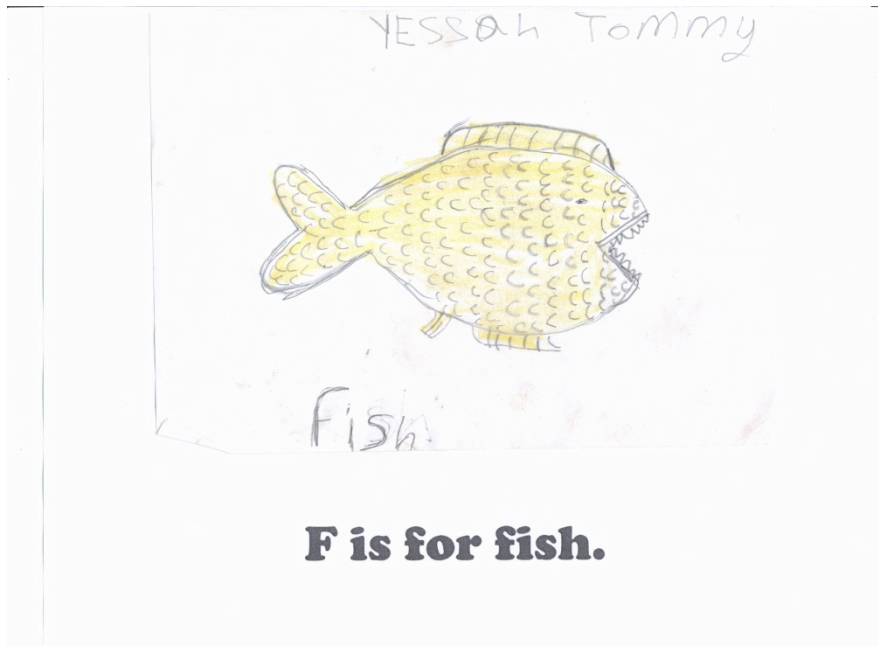


Figure 18: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 5



F is for fish.

Figure 19: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 6



Figure 20: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 7



Figure 21: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 8

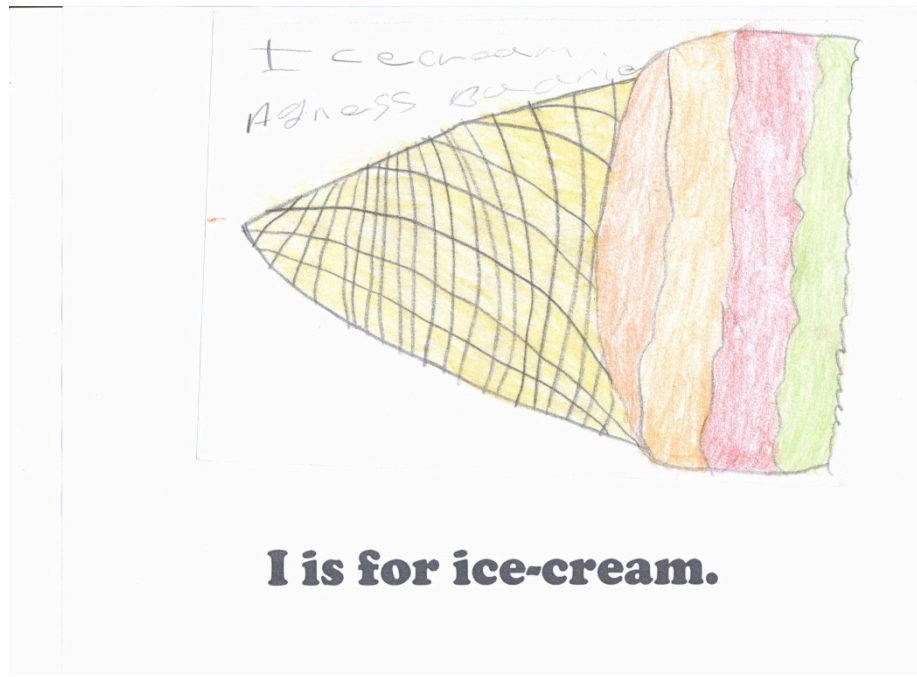


Figure 22: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 9

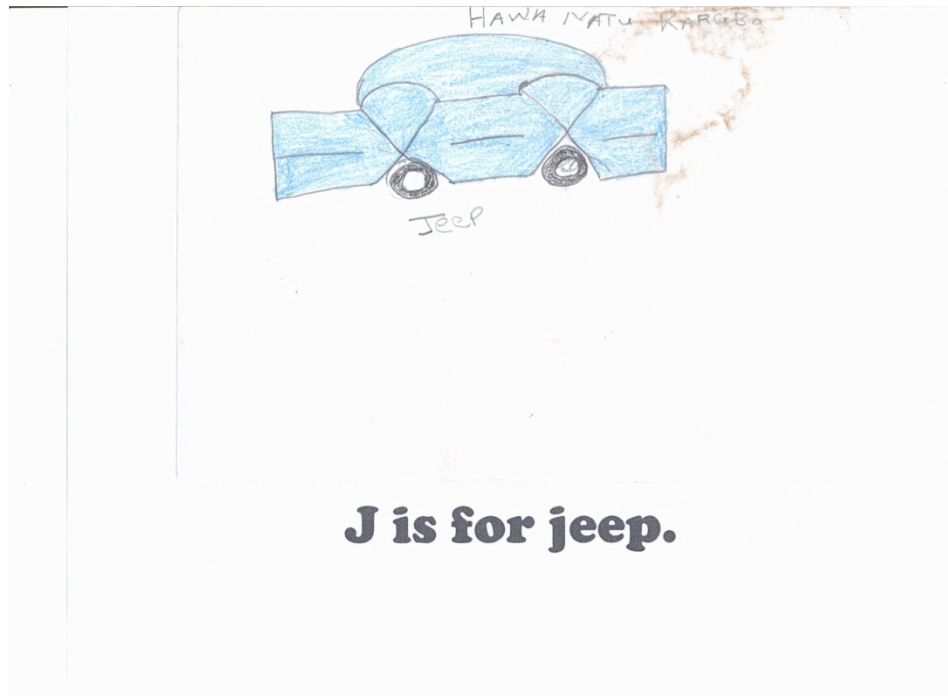


Figure 23: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 10

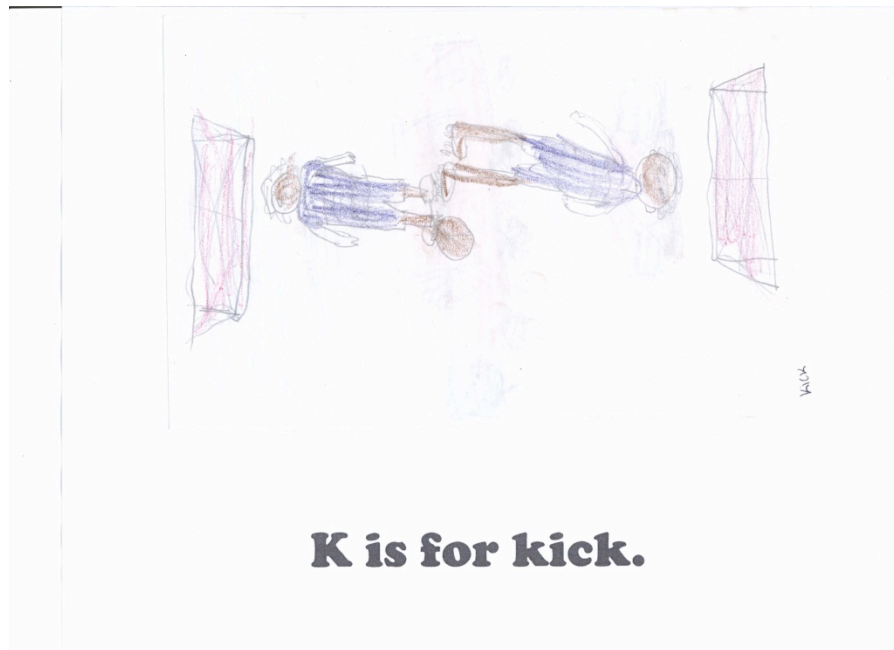
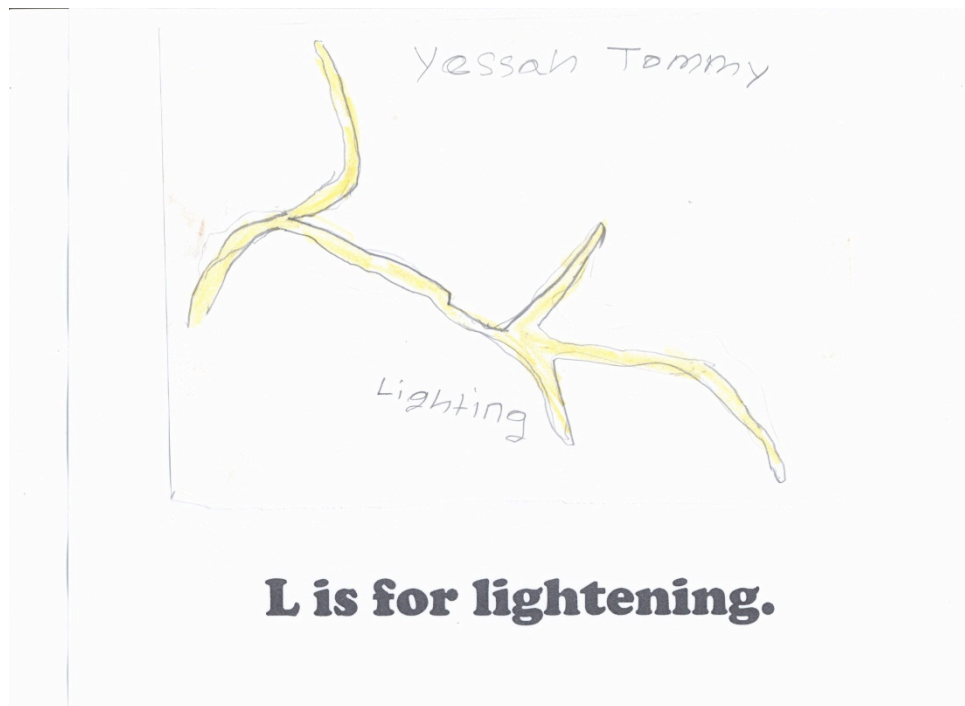


Figure 24: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 11



L is for lightening.

Figure 25: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 12

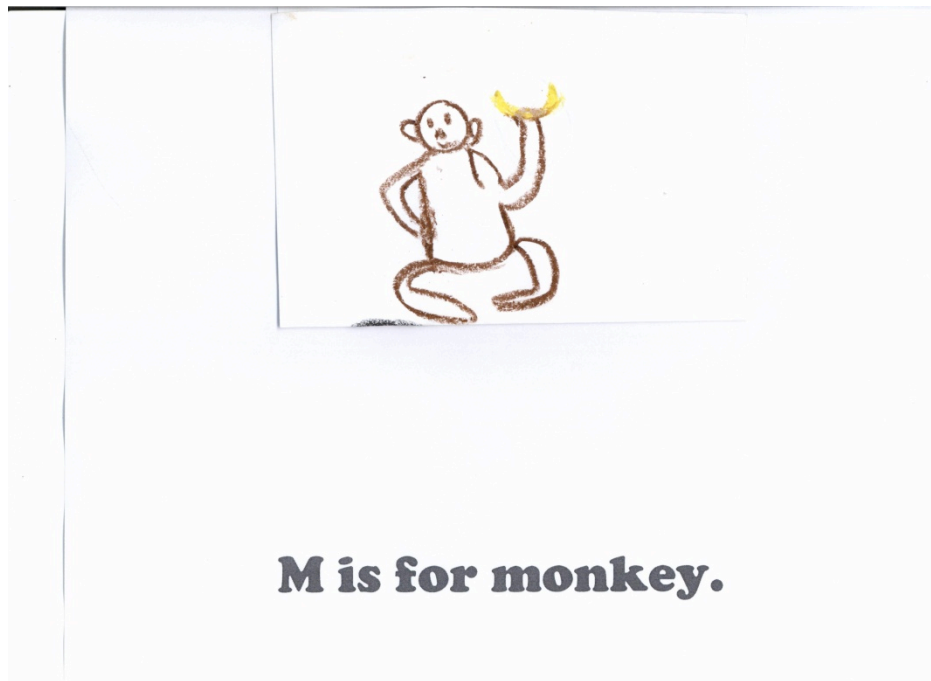


Figure 26: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 13

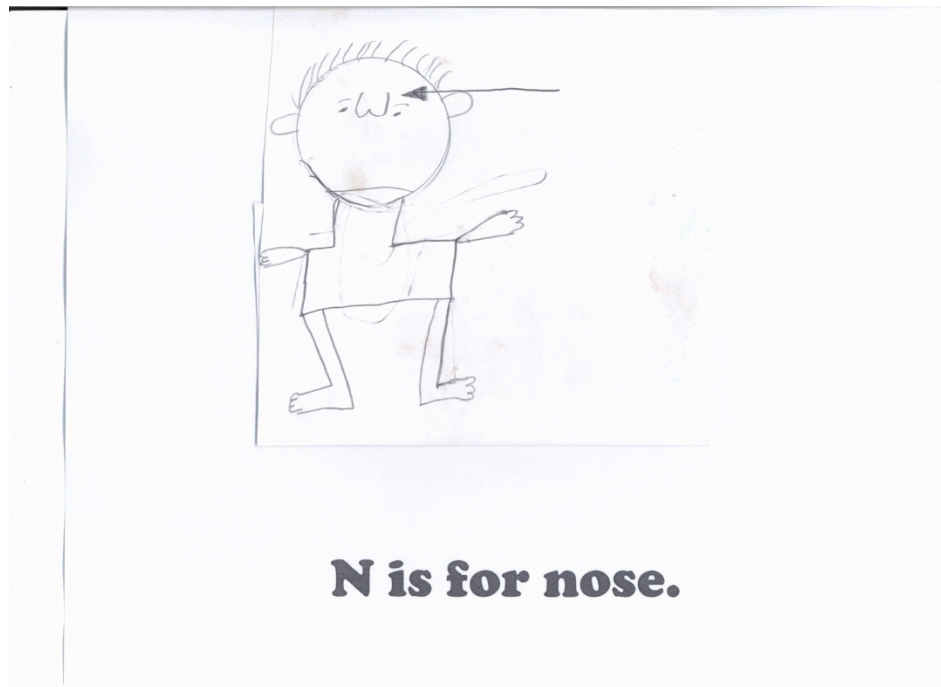


Figure 27: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 14

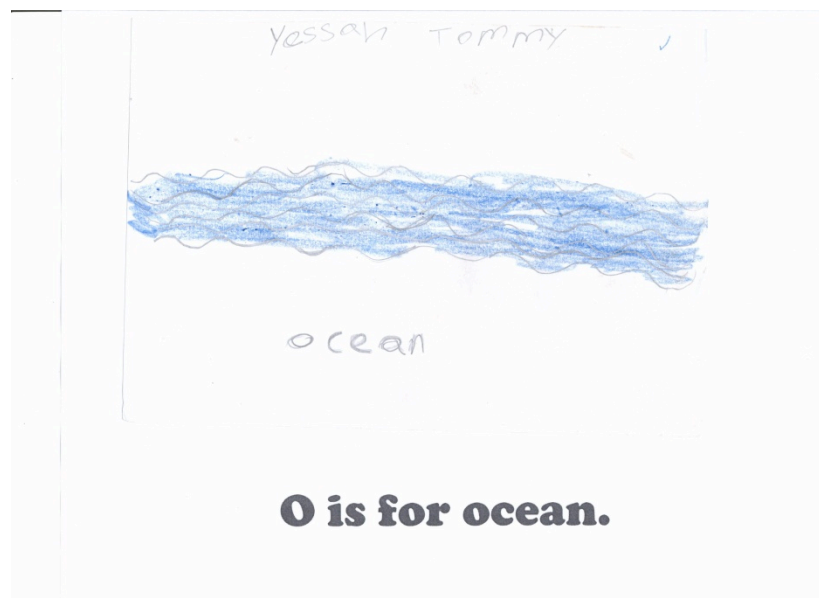


Figure 28: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 15

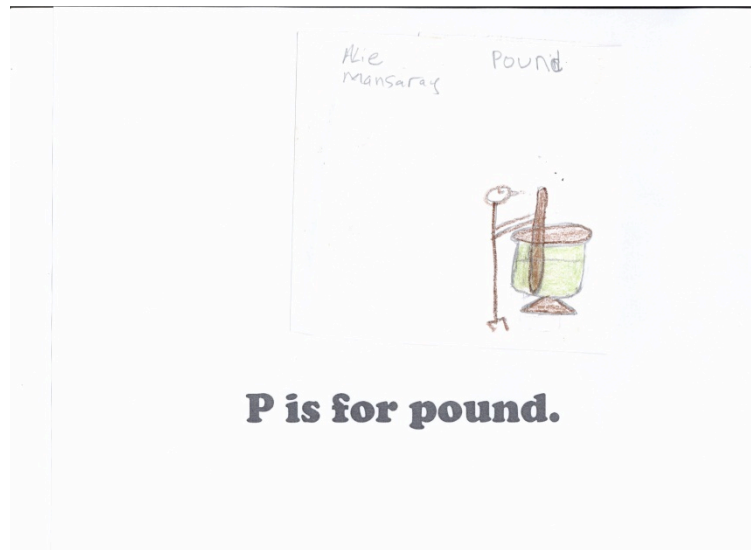


Figure 29: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 16



Figure 30: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 17



Figure 31: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 18

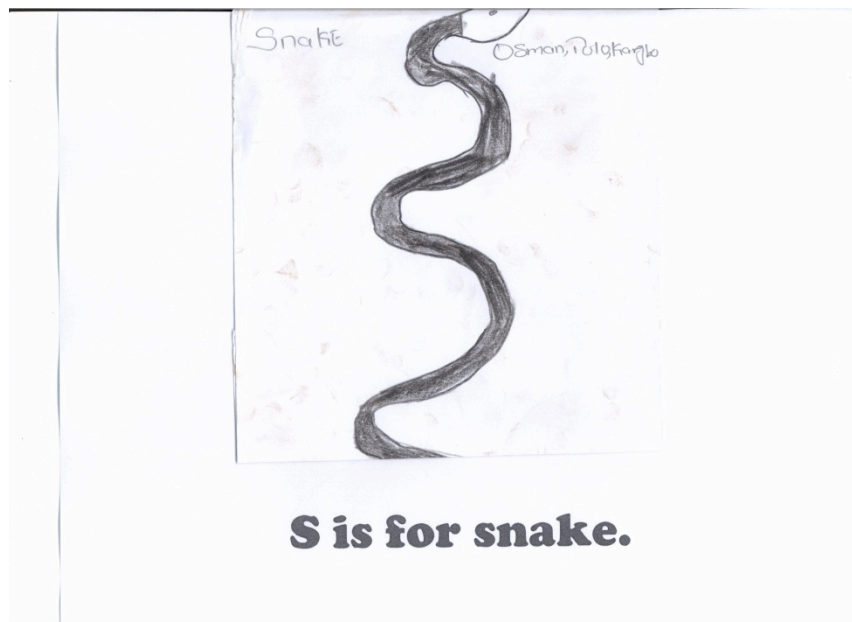


Figure 32: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 19



Figure 33: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 20

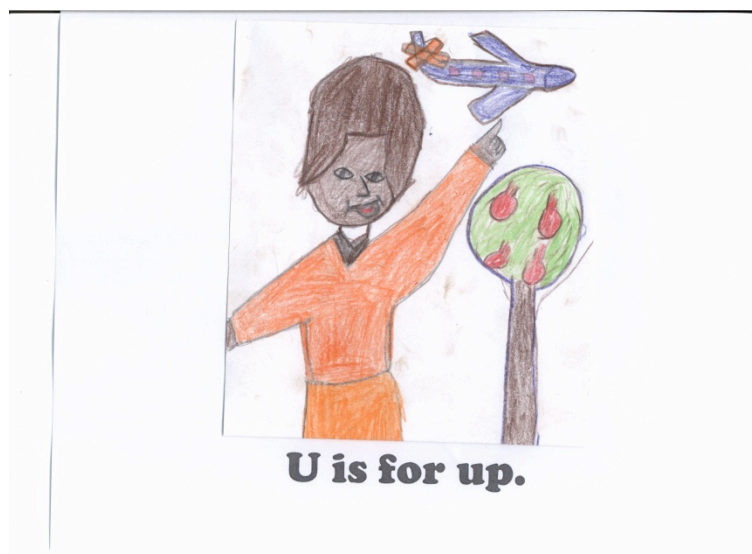


Figure 34: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 21



Figure 35: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 22



Figure 36: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 23



Figure 37: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 24

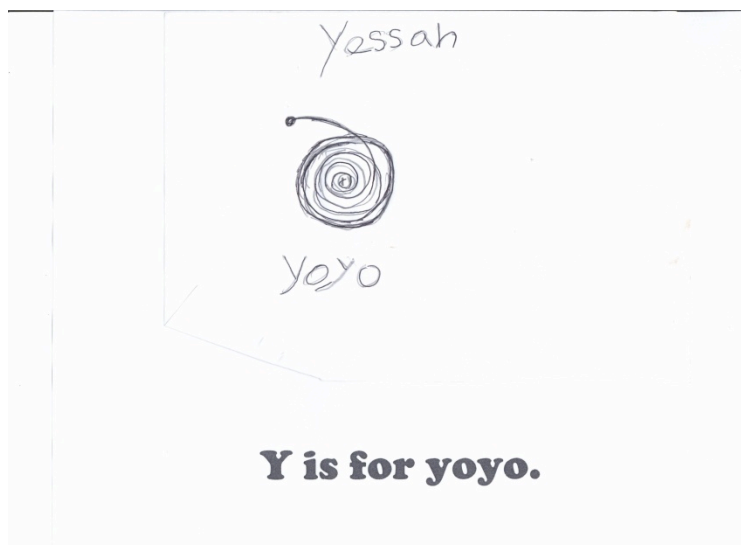


Figure 38: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 25



Figure 39: ABC's of Sierra Leone storybook, page 26

Chapter 6: Concluding Reflections

Chapter Six will state observations and reactions during the creation of the materials and will state research I will continue to do with the issue of creating culturally-sensitive material in the future. The focus of this study 1) examined recent factors affecting literacy development; 2) provided insights into history and literacy development issues of Sierra Leone from the perspective of a Western educator; 3) described my teaching experience in Sierra Leone with multiage children learning English; and 4) explored the notion of creating culturally-sensitive instructional materials for village and orphan students in Sierra Leone.

Observations and Reactions

The children wanted to be a part of the process and they were able to use their creativity to help create a book that all of them could use their prior knowledge to relate to. As soon as I started passing out crayons and paper, children flocked to the “volunteer house”. Rarely do these

children get paper and crayons to draw with so this was a special treat. More importantly is the fact that these children rarely get a sense of ownership in something “educational” that they have been a part of. In teaching students to read they need to be given the opportunity to have culturally-sensitive material that is coupled with quality instruction by teachers in the classroom. Students are the same everywhere and need the same quality education that enables them to become literate. To do this students are in need of qualified teachers who know how to effectively teach West African children and develop effective instructional materials for teachers to use.

Future Research

I plan on doing future research in the area of creating culturally-sensitive material and assessing its effectiveness in teaching reading. On returning to Sierra Leone I will assess the difference in teaching children’s reading ability using culturally-sensitive material compared to books created for children in the United States that is often given to them. During my time in Sierra Leone I was able to sit with five of the older children from the orphanage and hear Sierra Leone folktales that most children in Sierra Leone grow up hearing. The teacher teams recorded their stories and have hope of getting these stories put into a storybook as well.

Furthermore, I plan on going to Nepal; which is another developing country where a lack of quality education also exists. Living among the people and the culture may also allow us to create culturally-sensitive material for Nepalese children in different areas of Nepal. I am going to use the research I gain from both Sierra Leone and Nepal to compare and contrast similarities and differences between the effectiveness of creating culturally-sensitive material between the two cultures.

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