
Experiments in the provision of rural community libraries in South Africa: the Family Literacy Project's initiatives

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Abstract

A short introduction to the provision of library services to rural areas in South Africa is followed by a description of the Sisonke District Municipality of southern KwaZulu-Natal and library provision there. The work and research of the Family Literacy Project in the area, culminating in the establishment of three community libraries is described. Aspects of the libraries such as their collections, management, and funding are examined in the light of the norms for community libraries as summarized by Mostert (1998) and an argument is made for a more flexible use of the term 'community library'.

Introduction

Between 2003 and 2006, three unique community libraries were opened in rural areas in southern KwaZulu-Natal, at Stepmore and Mpumlwane in 2003 and at Ndodeni in 2006. The libraries were established by the Family Literacy Project, a non-governmental organization (NGO) that was started in 2000 to develop school-readiness in rural pre-school children by encouraging their parents to read to them and engage in other early literacy practices. The project went on to develop programmes to improve the mother-tongue and English literacy skills of the women who joined its groups. The libraries were established to make reading materials available to project members and their children, as well as to other members of the communities in which they live.

Library provision in rural areas in South Africa

Public libraries of various sizes were set up to provide for the reading and information needs of the white population in rural areas both before and after the National Party came to power in 1948. By definition, this group generally had higher educational qualifications, better jobs, more money, more leisure time and easier access to the small towns where the libraries were built than did the black population. Those of the latter who lived in rural areas either worked for whites in the areas or further afield or lived in reserves and locations where a more traditional way of life was followed.

Public libraries

Although library services began earlier, ordinances were promulgated in the Cape, Natal and the Transvaal to set up provincial library services¹ after the National Party came to power (Musiker 1986:171-2). Until 2002, these services were jointly responsible, with municipalities or smaller local government structures, for providing a public library in those towns and villages where there was already a reading population. The municipality (or other structure) would provide the site and the staff to run the library², which would be affiliated to the provincial service that provided the books and other stock (Dominy 2003:40). White residents of the town or village and surrounding rural areas could join the libraries. Even those blacks who lived in towns and villages that had public libraries, lived in separate areas set apart from the white parts of the town and were required to use separate amenities (such as libraries) if these had been provided for their particular race group³. When South Africa became a democracy in 1994, in theory all public libraries were accessible to any South African regardless of colour or race although in practice there were as many obstacles in the way of poorer and less educated members of the population who wished to join a library as there had been earlier (Bekker and Lategan 1988:66).

Since 2002, the responsibility for the establishment of libraries in or for communities of towns and villages has become that of the ten provinces alone and the question of where the necessary funds would come from had still not been finalized in 2002 (Dominy 2003:40) or more recently when a report on funding and governance of public libraries was published (Centre for the Book 2004[?]).

Community libraries

Community libraries differ from public libraries in South Africa most obviously in that they are usually established in economically disadvantaged communities

and are more likely to provide information rather than recreational reading or viewing resources (Kalley 1995; Mostert 1998; Stilwell 1989, 1991a and b, 1997). Examining the earlier international and South African research, Mostert and Vermeulen (1998: 12-15) identified a set of norms that characterized community libraries. These include that they are established at the request of and with the full participation of a community and are managed and funded by community efforts. The nature of the community needs and the appropriate service to provide are arrived at by means of consultation and participative research with community representatives, taking into account and where necessary, supplementing existing local information networks. The aims of the libraries are to empower community members by proactively providing survival information and citizens' action information, often repackaged by the community librarians and if necessary, of a temporary nature such as displays and pamphlets, brochures, newspapers as well as oral information. Staff are drawn from and trusted by the community, highly motivated and good communicators who can provide referral services as well as information and can teach users to become self-reliant in their search for the information they need.

Most community libraries meeting the norms described above that have been set up in South Africa, have been in urban rather than rural areas. Several authors have researched and drawn attention to the need for the provision of relevant oral and printed information to fuel rural development, for example, Hendricks *et al.* (2005), Jiyane and Ocholla (2004), Leach (2001), Meyer (2003) and Snyman and Snyman (2003).

School libraries

In the same way that the provision of public libraries was divided under apartheid along racial lines, so was the provision of schools and school libraries. Before 1994, the education of the four race groups in what was called the Republic of South Africa, fell under four separate national departments. In addition, there was a Department of Education for each of the ten 'self-governing states' (Bondesio and Burkhout 1994: 5630). Until 1990, no school was allowed to cater for more than one of the four race groups (Bondesio and Burkhout 1994: 5630). The funding of schools was organized in such a way as to keep black schools under-resourced. In addition, schools in rural areas would be even more likely to be under-resourced than those in urban areas and many still are. Recent examples of this in KwaZulu-Natal alone are that in 2004 there were 1,490 mud schools in the province (Bot 2005: 9) and that in 2004/5, 1,375 toilets would be built in schools and 300 schools would get permanent potable water (Bot 2005: 9). As black parents were more likely to be poorer than parents of other race groups, they would not be able to afford extra fees for resources such as school libraries. In 2005 the Premier of the province stated that the

Provincial Education Directorate (PED) had set aside R 40,000,000 so that every school in the province could have a library (Bot 2005: 9).

School-community libraries

Combined school-community libraries were investigated by Dube (1998) as a possible model to overcome the shortage of libraries in black areas. Apart from eight school-community libraries reported in Free State province (Schimper 2004: 90), no other community-school libraries have been significantly described in the literature of South African librarianship.

The area in which the Family Literacy Project (FLP) works

The Drakensberg range of mountains in KwaZulu-Natal (or uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park) was declared a World Heritage Site in 2000 (Sycholt 2002: 9) and also forms part of the Drakensberg-Maloti Transfrontier Conservation Area that straddles South Africa and Lesotho. The range and its immediate foothills in KwaZulu-Natal are administered by the provincial conservation body, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (Sycholt 2002: 33) and are areas in which the only human activity is recreational with the aim of having as little impact on the environment as possible.

In the southern part of the province, the areas to the south east of the Park include large farms owned only by whites under apartheid and since 1994, still largely white-owned. In addition there are areas established under apartheid or before, that are administered by traditional authorities and to which many blacks were confined by apartheid legislation. Presently this largely rural area falls mainly into the Sisonke District Municipality. The five biggest towns are Creighton, Ixopo, Kokstad, Matatiele and Underberg.

The population of the municipality based on the 1996 census and projected to 2002 was estimated to be 256,695 with the majority of people living in rural households (South Africa. Municipal Demarcation Board 2003:2). Census information gathered in 1996 indicated that the majority of households (more than 25,000), earned less than R 18,000 per annum (South Africa. Municipal Demarcation Board 2003:1). It has been estimated that 30% of the people in the municipality are infected with HIV or are already suffering from AIDS (KwaZulu-Natal Municipal Portfolio 2005). The municipality has the responsibility of providing services that include certain amenities to its inhabitants. In its most recent Adjustment of Powers and Functions Report ...

(South Africa. Municipal Demarcation Board 2003), these amenities did not specifically mention libraries.

Public and school libraries in the area

There is a public library in each of the five biggest towns in the Sisonke District Municipality. Although some of the libraries began as private libraries, they are all now affiliated to the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Library and Information Services, Creighton since 1974, Kokstad since 1978, Underberg since 1975 (*Directory of Southern African libraries, 1989* 1990:32;80;148) with no dates given for Ixopo or Matatiele in the same publication.

The provision of libraries in schools in the area is the responsibility of the provincial education department, specifically its Education Library Information and Technology Services (ELITS). Schools in the area under discussion fall into the Umgungundlovu (or Pietermaritzburg) region. This region includes the Sisonke District Municipality but others too, not all of which are rural. The results of a 2004 school library audit were evaluated broadly in terms of the four provincial education regions only. Of the 1,145 schools from this region that completed the questionnaire 235 had a central school library, 352 had books in a store-room or cupboard, 335 had classroom or box libraries and 223 had no library at all (Education Library Information and Technology Services 2004[?]: 6).

The Family Literacy Project's interventions to promote reading

Family literacy in the United States of America (USA) and Europe has been well researched and documented, for example in the collection edited by Morrow (1995). While there are different approaches and models, all stress the vital role that parents play in the development of early literacy skills in their children. They do this in a number of ways including:

- providing a range of reading materials in the home, from product labels through newspapers and magazines to books
- reading to their children
- being readers themselves to provide good reading models for their children (adapted from Nickse, Speicher and Buchek (1988:636).

The FLP began its work in the Sisonke District Municipality and the neighbouring area of Lotheni in 2000 with a series of workshops for parents or carers of pre-school children. The aim of the workshops was to provide support for the adults to enable them to develop early literacy skills in the children.

Workshop activities were easy to replicate in homes with limited resources. Parents made simple books for their children, and also practised reading these and other books aloud (Desmond 2000). The emphasis was on reading as an activity to be enjoyed with one's children and "as a way of relaxing with one another rather than as a time for testing progress in reading skills" (Desmond 2005a: par.2).

An important principle underlying the workshops was that parents are the first and most important educators of their children. Much of this education takes place naturally as part of daily life and parents may support their children's development without always knowing that they are doing so. For example, when a child is engaged in a household task such as sweeping, she is strengthening her eye-hand co-ordination, important when writing or turning the pages of a book. If a mother talks to her child about their trip to the river to fetch water, she will be building vocabulary, recall, repetition and sequencing, all of which are important early literacy skills. When parents at early FLP meetings were asked if a person who could not read, or who could not read well, could help their child their answer was that this was not possible. It was only when they looked more closely at the different skills involved in reading and writing that they began to see how supportive they were already. Realizing the importance of their support appeared to give them confidence to go on to do other activities with their children. To date, all the members of the groups have been women with low levels of education and literacy. Because of their economic disadvantages, they do not have many books in their homes (Kvalsvig 2006:13) and any newspapers, magazines or other printed paper that found their way into their homes would be more useful as fuel, wallpaper or for other purposes. Activities were designed to take this lack of materials into account.

The parents attending the workshops in 2000 soon asked for help with their own literacy development and the FLP trained local women selected by their communities as literacy facilitators. Facilitators were required to have completed all 12 years of formal schooling and able to communicate in English as well as their mother-tongue (usually Zulu). Their training included adult literacy, early literacy and the participatory Reflect approach and this combination led to the development of an approach to family literacy that takes into account what people know already before introducing new information (Desmond 2003:12). Since 2001, seven family literacy groups using this approach have been meeting twice a week in five sites in the area, Mpumlwane, Ndodeni, Stepmore (two groups), Lotheni (two groups) and Reichenau Mission. The session held cover a wide range of topics including material on how parents and children can "make literacy a shared pleasure and a valuable skill" (Desmond 2003:12). From the start of the project the groups were each provided with a box containing children's books and easy readers for new literates. Group members were

encouraged to borrow both types of books with the result that seven informal book clubs were born at which the women discussed what they had read (Desmond 2003: 12; 2005b: 26).

The Family Literacy Project's community libraries

After three years, the women in the groups had improved their skills in reading and writing Zulu so sessions began to include practice in English as a second language. The confidence of the women as readers themselves, as readers to their children and as proactive members of their community organizations (Desmond 2005b: 46) had grown and they were asked if they would like to share the books with their wider communities.

A booklet in Zulu and English called "Setting up a Community Library" (Family Literacy Project 2003) was adapted, with permission, from a manual entitled "Our Reading Home: Library Guidelines" published by the Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA)/Nepal in 2000⁴. This booklet was used by the facilitators of groups "to focus discussion and build an understanding of community libraries" (Desmond 2005a: par.6).

One of the exercises in this booklet, encouraged group members to conduct a survey in their community to see how many people would like access to books and why they would use a library. In Stepmore, 114 completed forms were returned by FLP members who had interviewed people between the ages of 10 and 72 years with an average schooling level of Grade 6. In spite of the lack of infrastructure in the area (for example, piped water and electricity), 74% of respondents read a newspaper that they named. Most people interviewed (93%) said they did want a library and amongst other reasons given, 58% stated that they would "gain knowledge" (Desmond 2005a: par.9-11). Results from the 74 questionnaires completed by respondents at Mpumlwane gave similar replies (Desmond 2005a: par.12).

The way to the establishment of the FLP community libraries was opened in 2003 when a 40ft container was donated for use as a community library. It was decided that it would be situated at Stepmore where one of the FLP groups met. This donation was from Biblionef, an NGO established to bring "books to the bookless". Biblionef donated many books to the Stepmore library and to the Mpumlwane library that was established in the same year when the FLP received a Guinness/UDV award. This was a monetary prize for achievements in the field of adult literacy and was used to build the one-roomed community library next to a church and crèche at Mpumlwane.

In 2005 the Exclusive Books Trust built a two-roomed library at Ndodeni, another FLP site. This community library was officially opened in March 2006 and has been stocked with 2,500 books in Zulu and English by the Trust. In addition, the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Library and Information Services has given books and furniture as well as support and advice to the FLP community libraries. It is important to note that each library was established as a result of the combined efforts of FLP and its members, donor agencies and funders and the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Library and Information Services. The two FLP sites that have not yet got community libraries are Lotheni, where two groups meet but where no suitable site is available, and Reichenau Mission.

Community library management and organization

The book produced by the FLP and based on the CEDPA/Nepal book, provided the necessary information on appropriate training for those selected to run the community libraries. The book covers membership, management and library regulations and how to go about establishing and sustaining a library. The book is interactive in that readers are asked questions and expected to discuss issues with the group intending to set up a library.

Each library is run by the local FLP facilitator and one of the group members, the latter, women who a few years ago had few literacy skills and certainly no experience of a library. Even today, most of the women have never visited a public library but all enjoy using their community libraries.

Books in the libraries are arranged in four categories: adult stories, children's stories, adult factual and children's factual books. There are also reference books that are clearly marked for use in the library only. All the libraries have requested dictionaries and secondary school text books but it was decided not to supply the latter as this is the responsibility of the provincial Department of Education. Correct library stationery is used and many hours of working in the library by day and by candlelight at night were needed to complete the organization of the library stock in time for the respective opening ceremonies.

The library at Stepmore has benefited from a monthly visit from a qualified librarian who works with the community librarian to ensure that displays are relevant and up-to-date and that books are correctly shelved. This transfer of skills is taking place in a friendly, non-formal way and the community librarian appears to be benefiting from the interaction.

The costs related to the upkeep of the library such as maintenance, cleaning, stationery and an honorarium for the community librarian are being raised by the

FLP. Books and shelving that have not been donated, have been paid for from financial donations to the FLP. This places pressure on the FLP as an NGO with no guaranteed long-term source of income apart from funding donors who may or may not continue to support the project.

User communities

The FLP community libraries are open to anyone living near them and are well used by adults and primary school children. The primary school children in particular are very at ease in the libraries, running in to change their books and then reading them on the way to their homes. This year each library has started mounting displays to show members what books are available on particular topics. Adults say they enjoy books that tell them about their own history and books written in Zulu are very popular. Teachers from the local schools are encouraged to use the libraries to prepare their lessons.

Despite much effort, secondary school children have been difficult to draw into the libraries. In a workshop run at a local secondary school by the FLP to encourage learners into the library, questions were asked by the youth which showed that they know very little about how libraries function or their potential benefit to them as students. They were appalled that they couldn't eat in the library; they wanted to know what would happen if there wasn't even one book that they liked; and they complained that the borrowing time of two weeks was too short.

In a further attempt to draw teenagers into the libraries, the FLP facilitators started sessions at weekends at which teenagers come either to discuss issues around sexuality (boys and girls in separate groups) or to improve their English. Recently, two Peace Corps volunteers from the USA have moved into the area to work with the FLP and they will also try to change this reluctance by running more discussion groups for teenagers in the libraries. The aim is to get teenagers into the library and then talk about the books around them in the hope that they will be interested enough to begin borrowing and reading. Given that this initiative is in its early stages, it is too early to report on progress made.

FLP community libraries' school and holiday programmes

Several programmes are run by the FLP to promote reading amongst different age groups. All the Project's facilitators run weekly child-to-child sessions in the local primary schools⁵ and in the case of Mpumlwane, in the FLP community library. Each session follows a theme and includes a time to read or be read to

and a time to draw and write. The sessions are well attended at all the schools in which they are held. Each group is made up of children from four different grades and the older children are encouraged to help younger children read, draw and write. Every child is expected to borrow a book each week and they are asked to read it to one other person in their family. Even the Grade R and Grade 1 children are encouraged to at least look at a book with another person and tell a story from the illustrations.

In addition to these groups, a holiday programme for children was run in December 2005 by the Peace Corps volunteers in the Stepmore and Mpumlwane libraries. Many local children attended the sessions in which they made Christmas cards, used balloons to make paper mache puppets and also made books about themselves and their families. Towards the end of the holidays the children were taken on an outing to a local centre where they played games, told stories and learnt about the environment. For many children this was their first outing of this kind and excitement ran high on the day and according to the adults involved, for many days afterwards.

One of the most popular series of workshops for children and repeated with the adults in the FLP groups, centred on building resilience in those who face daily hardships, including the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This is based on the Hero Book project in which participants worked on discovering their own fears and the strategies they use to deal with them, and identified those within their families and communities who should be their real role models. As this project, the 10 Million Memory Project (10MMP) is part of an Africa-wide initiative, it provided an opportunity for the adults and children to begin to think of their place in the continent. The 10MMP aims to reach at least 10 million children in Africa by 2010 (10 Million Memory Project. N.d.).

Follow-up research and evaluation

After the community library at Stepmore had been open for six months, the facilitator there surveyed a number of members to ask how they enjoyed using the library (Shezi 2004). The primary school children said they liked reading and they valued the opportunity to take books home with them, something they had not previously been able to do as the local school has no library. The primary school teachers said they enjoyed reading the reference books and presumably this helped them with their lesson plans. Adults said they were gaining knowledge, in particular about their history and how others live in different parts of the world.

From these remarks and others made in conversations with school children, they seem to be enjoying reading the books and do not focus only on the more serious references to “knowledge” made by adults. There are many novels for adults to read, in English and Zulu and these are not too daunting for people not used to reading. But the emphasis by adults on knowledge from books and its importance for education is evident from the following quotation by Dumile Kunene who wrote about her family during the 2005 evaluation of the FLP:

“We study through family literacy and we can borrow books that have a lot of knowledge from the library, and I use those books to impart those lessons to my family. When I read English books I also read to them so that they may know English, and I ask them if they learn English well in school.... Our children are also free and they borrow books from the library to read because they have seen that education is important” (Frow 2005: 20).

Can the FLP libraries be called community libraries?

In examining the three FLP community libraries established to date in the light of the set of norms for community libraries identified by Mostert and Vermeulen (1998:12-15), more differences than similarities are apparent:

- the libraries were established on the initiative of the FLP and its members, in consultation with the community but not necessarily with the latter’s full participation
- they are managed not by the community, but by the FLP and its members and
- they are funded by donations to the FLP and by the fund-raising activities of the director
- the aim of the libraries is to foster an interest in reading amongst community members of all ages and the largely print collections of the libraries are selected or donated accordingly; survival information and citizens’ action information are not the main components of the collections although they may be represented
- displays are organized to draw attention to books in the collection, not necessarily to provide alternative forms of information
- staff members are trusted by the community, are highly motivated and good communicators but are not necessarily able to provide referral services or to train users to become self-reliant information seekers.

As Stilwell (1997:28) has argued, calling a library a community library does not necessarily mean that it meets the norms that characterize such a library. But are there ways in which, after their establishment, the FLP community libraries should transform themselves to meet the norms outlined above?

The first problem would be in identifying 'the' community whose needs to identify, with whom to consult and do 'participative research' and whose 'full participation' to seek in designing an appropriate service. The FLP's lack of success in attracting youth into the community libraries is an illustration of the existence of a community within a community. Secondly, if one community was identified, would its members be so convinced of their need for survival information and citizens' action information that they would be prepared to contribute to the management and also to the funding of the community library along similar lines to the 'sustaining schemes' set up in Nepal by an international NGO called Rural Education and Development (READ) (Williams 2000: 77). Thirdly, FLP community librarians would need training in how to find and display relevant information from sources other than books, to provide a referral service and to teach library users to become independent searchers.

Perhaps the question that should be asked instead is whether any of this is necessary. An important success of the Stepmore community library, as identified by Shezi (2004) in the follow-up research she did six months after the library had opened, was the emphasis given to the pleasure derived from reading by children and adults including teachers. On 3 February 2006, a notice of the establishment of a Ministerial Committee to investigate and report on the feasibility of a mass literacy campaign for South Africa was gazetted (Department of Education 2006: 8-9). It is common cause that newly literate people must practise reading and making sense of texts because these skills will deteriorate if there are no books or other materials to read. If a literacy campaign is implemented, community libraries such as those set up by NGOs like the FLP, in rural areas far from the public libraries of large and small towns, could make a contribution as they work towards their aim of promoting reading amongst new literates, other adults, young people and children.

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Endnotes

¹ The provincial library service in the fourth province, the Orange Free State, originally fell under an ordinance that covered other services (Musiker 1986:172).

² Dominy refers to 'community libraries', does not define the term but refers to libraries previously called 'public', 'provincial' or 'community' libraries.

³ The four race groups eventually catered for under apartheid were black (African), white (of European descent), Indian (of Indian descent) and Coloured (mixed race).

⁴ CEDPA is an international non-profit organization and its mission in Nepal is to help rural women and girls meet their educational, social and reproductive health needs.

⁵ Nomagaga Primary School, Mpumlwane; Stepmore Primary School and Somangwe Primary School, Stepmore; Malunga Primary School, Lotheni; Reichenau Primary School, Reichenau.