

IFLA/ALP Reading Promotion Workshop seeking mechanisms towards reading skills enhancement among young children in Sub-Saharan Africa

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ENCOURAGING YOUNG CHILDREN TO USE OUR LIBRARIES

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Introduction

Since 2000 the Family Literacy Project (FLP) has worked in five communities in rural KwaZulu Natal. These villages are in the foothills of a World Heritage Site – the Drakensberg. The area is very beautiful but many of the 300,000 people who live here do not have running water or electricity in their homes. The unemployment rate is 41% and it is estimated that 30% of the adult population is HIV positive. (KwaZulu-Natal Municipal Portfolio. 2005) Despite these difficulties, the members of the Family Literacy Project are strong women who are proving to be role models in their families by learning to read and write and to spread the message that books are a source of fun and information.

When the FLP first began working in the area it was in response to a problem that emerged from a national research project that revealed that despite three years of support for pre-schools, the literacy scores of young children did not improve. (Khulisa Management Services. 2000) The FLP decided it was worth investigating an approach that involved parents as the first educators of their children. This approach has led to the acceptance of the principle that young children need the support of their parents, or those who take on the role of parents, in order to become competent and enthusiastic readers. The Family Literacy Project believes that it is not enough to target children and that if the whole family becomes involved in reading and writing, the benefits will be greater. Young children benefit when a parent models a willingness to improve her own level of literacy. It helps young children to see parents who enjoy reading books and who share this enjoyment with the whole family.

Early in 2000 it became apparent that there were two issues that needed to be tackled before adults became confident enough to believe that they really could support early literacy development in their children. The first issue was that they believed that because of their own low levels of literacy, they had no role to play in fostering a love of reading and books in their children. The second issue was that most homes did not have many books apart from school text books and

perhaps a Bible. This raised the question of how children could grow to love books if there were no books in their homes. The nearest libraries were in the villages of Creighton and Underberg - a taxi ride away and generally people going for the weekly or monthly shopping could not also carry books home with them.

The first issue that the FLP addressed was the adult's lack of self confidence. In the first round of workshops, parents said that because they could not read and write well that they certainly could not prepare their children to read and write. When we discussed how much they as parents did already they began to see that everyday life presents opportunities for building vocabulary, sequencing, recall and a host of other early literacy skills. For example, when a woman goes to fetch water from the river and her child goes along too there are opportunities for planning (where are we going? What do we need to take with us?), listening, extending vocabulary, sequencing (what did we do first? And then?), and recall (Do you remember what happened last time we went to fetch water?). When children sweep, as they do, they are developing good eye-hand co-ordination. Children who herd cattle name them and find ways to make sure they are all back home. In the workshops we also made books and collages and did other activities using simple materials that were easy to obtain.

Once parents began to see the importance of their role in early literacy development, they were happy to borrow children's books from the book boxes supplied to each group. In the groups the women practiced looking at books with children, discussing the illustrations and finding ways to extend conversations about the stories.

These same adults then asked the FLP for help with their own literacy development. Each group chose a woman from their community who had successfully completed school and who was not employed. The FLP trained these women in adult literacy, early literacy and the REFLECT approach to working with groups. These facilitators took on the responsibility of the book boxes, cataloguing and recording the borrowing and returning of books. The group members continued to borrow books for children, reading these themselves as well as reading them to their children. In many sites children would come with their parents to choose books.

The FLP members reported that as they walked along the road, local children called out to them to come and read to them. Or, a neighbour's children visited when they knew the FLP member was reading to her own children. This led to a home visiting programme that started in 2003 and is still running. FLP members visit neighbours who have young children. They share information on early childhood development and health issues. They also carry books with them to read to the children.

The FLP was given a book on setting up a community library. This was from Nepal and the FLP reworked it, translated it into Zulu and commissioned new illustrations. (Family Literacy Project 2003) This was presented to the group members in the hope that they would be encouraged to share their new-found access to and growing love of books with others. They were enthusiastic and before long FLP had three community libraries up and running. These were a result of donations from organizations such as Exclusive Books Trust, Biblionef and the provincial Department of Library Services.

Once these three communities had libraries, it was important to open the doors to all the children in the area. The FLP runs children's groups in the primary schools and these weekly groups follow a theme-based programme with discussion, opportunities to read and write, and storytelling by the facilitator. In addition, the children borrow books and when they return them they are encouraged to share the stories with the rest of the group resulting in lively book club sessions.

In these weekly sessions, the children discuss a topic, draw, write, listen to stories and borrow books. The following week they talk about the book they borrowed. In a piece of research conducted by the FLP, teachers at the local primary schools reported improved concentration and interest in books in their classes. The members of these children's groups form the core of library users but those children who cannot be accommodated in the children's groups now also have somewhere to go to choose books for themselves.

The very important lessons that the FLP has learnt over the years are the following:

- Offer parents a way to become familiar with books. This can be through discussion groups or family (adult) literacy groups. In all our groups there is a constant stress on the important role the adult plays in the early literacy development of their children. This can be through letting the child see the adult enjoying a book, reading to the child, listening to children read and talking and discussing everyday events with them.
- Presenting children and adults with books that are in their home language. The children's books in particular should be colourful with engaging illustrations.
- Making children welcome in the library by providing child size tables and chairs, puzzles and games as well as books.
- Providing sessions in the primary school or in the library where children know they can come to hear stories, talk about the issues raised in the stories, draw, write and also borrow books to take home.

The FLP community libraries are staffed by local women who themselves are learning to enjoy books and reading and who are committed to ensuring that young children have more opportunities than they themselves had.

I will now hand over to my colleague Zimbili Dlamini to describe some of the experiences she has had in her work as a facilitator in the FLP.

I will share two stories from my experience as a facilitator about how children in our project enjoy reading and are reading more. As my colleague mentioned, there are different activities that we do with the children and also that we have community libraries and have a home visiting programme.

I work in the two-roomed block building in the FLP Community Library in the remote village of Ndodeni. This is the only block building in the community. One room is the library and we use the second room for our family literacy group.

There is a four year old child who lives near the library. She is visited regularly by one of the family literacy group members who reads to her. When the family literacy group meets, this little girl comes running to “her visitor” and asks her to go into the library to choose the book they will read together during the home visit. To me that shows that this child really enjoys reading and that the more she is exposed to books the more she grows to love it.

The second story is about our children’s group. We meet on two days each week in the library to follow a theme based programme and read together. One group meets on one day, and the other on the second day. However what happens is that all the children want to come on both days! When we ask the one group to leave and come back the following day they refuse. We close the doors but they stand outside the windows and listen to the stories. They beg us to accommodate them all but the library is not big enough for forty children at one time. We think that we are trying very hard to reach all the children in the community to promote this culture and love of reading.

References

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