

	<p style="text-align: right;">Date : 01/10/2007</p> <p><b>“It Is Our Help” – A Community Library In Rural Kwazulu Natal</b></p> <p>Snoeks Desmond</p> <p>And</p> <p>Zimbili Dlamini  <a href="mailto:Snoeks@global.co.za">Snoeks@global.co.za</a>  <a href="http://www.familyliteracyproject.co.za">www.familyliteracyproject.co.za</a>  031-2076503  3 Achadhu, 337 Montpelier Road,  Durban, 4001, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa</p>
<b>Meeting:</b>	<b>155 Division of Regional Activities with IFLA/ALP</b>
<b>Simultaneous Interpretation:</b>	No
<p><b>WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 73RD IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL</b>  19-23 August 2007, Durban, South Africa  <a href="http://www.ifla.org/iv/ifla73/index.htm">http://www.ifla.org/iv/ifla73/index.htm</a></p>	

## **ABSTRACT**

### **“IT IS OUR HELP” – A COMMUNITY LIBRARY IN RURAL KWAZULU NATAL**

*The hand written sign outside a community library reads “Strengthen the community of Ndodeni by joining the Community Library. It is our help.” The library is the only brick building in this remote KwaZulu Natal village and is run by local women who are members of the non government organization The Family Literacy Project. This paper will tell the story of the library and how it has become part of the lives of many of the local families.*

*1 million children in South Africa live in homes where there are no literate adults and this poses a problem for their future because without the support of adults who believe in the importance of education these children and their families will find it difficult to make full use of any available learning and development opportunities. The approach of the Family Literacy Project with its three community libraries and eight library boxes is one way of supporting early and adult literacy development which in turn contributes to the overall development of under-resourced areas. This paper will trace the growth of the FLP and focus on how the provision of a box of books began an interest in reading for both*

*pleasure and knowledge in homes where previously there were very few, if any, books.*

*The library in Ndodeni is the venue for community activities, for adult and early literacy development groups and for teenage discussions. The displays in the library draw attention to issues of local importance such as health (in particular HIV/Aids) and early childhood development. An income generation project meets in the library and young children come to play with the puzzles as there is no crèche or primary school in the village. A roundabout provides a place for children to play and is also a source of water.*

*Information has been collected over a number of years through interviews with neighbours by newly literate FLP members to gauge their interest in the provision of a library; explanatory stories of photographs taken by FLP facilitators to track changes in reading habits within the community; and the results of focus groups held with library users as well as those who have not yet joined with the aim of discovering the perceived benefits of the library and the role it can play in the development of the village.*

*In this case study of the growth of a community library, the importance of literacy development and how necessary libraries are in extending the knowledge of families living in isolated and under developed areas will be highlighted. The difficulties and successes will be considered in order to provide ideas for those in similar situations who want to support grassroots development. The power point presentation will include photographs of the area and community members, and a project booklet on how to run a community library will be on display.*

*Presenters:*

*Snoeks Desmond is the founder-director of the Family Literacy Project. Her background is in early childhood development and her qualifications include a M.Ed. in Adult Education.*

*Zimbili Dlamini is a Family Literacy Project facilitator and is a member of the local community. Her qualifications include the Higher Diploma in Adult Basic Education and Training.*

*Contact details:*

*[Snoeks@global.co.za](mailto:Snoeks@global.co.za)*

*[www.familyliteracyproject.co.za](http://www.familyliteracyproject.co.za)*

*031-2076503*

*3 Achadhu, 337 Montpelier Road,  
Durban, 4001, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa*

## **PAPER**

### **“IT IS OUR HELP” – A COMMUNITY LIBRARY IN RURAL KWAZULU NATAL**

#### **Introduction**

The hand written sign outside a community library reads “Strengthen the community of Ndodeni by joining the Community Library. It is our help.” The library is the only brick building in this remote KwaZulu Natal village and is run by local women who are members of the Family Literacy Project a small non government organization. This paper will tell the story of the library and how it has become part of the lives of many local families.

To link this story to the theme of “Libraries at the Forefront of Grassroots Development”, the paper will begin with a brief discussion of community development, and then describe the point of entry of the Family Literacy Project into the community of Ndodeni and the many programmes that resulted including the establishment of a library. The impact of the library on the families in Ndodeni will be discussed.

#### **Community Development**

This is not the place for a long discussion on community development but it is important that we recognize how much has had to change in South Africa since the democratic elections in 1994. Pre-1994 apartheid style development can be summed up in the phrase “separate development” that was used by the Nationalist Government. It is well documented that the development of black

people and that of white people was very different in terms of resources and approach. The legacy of separate development is that there are vast areas of the country that have little or no infrastructure, and the impact on the self image of people is hard to describe. Post 1994 development attempts to be more holistic and the desire of people in the communities is taken into account although there are still serious problems in delivery.

Ndodeni, the sprawling rural village, lies in a beautiful part of southern KwaZulu Natal close to the World Heritage Site of the towering Drakensberg range. Ndodeni lies within Ward 2 of the Ingwe Local Municipality. 99% of the population in the Ingwe Local Municipality is black and therefore considered to be previously disadvantaged and given the rate of development in the area could be considered to be currently disadvantaged. (Integrated Development Plan of Ingwe Municipality 2006/2007:12 – 15)

### **Family Literacy**

In 2000 a final report on research conducted by the national Department of Education over a three year period (1997 – 2000) showed that overall literacy scores of pre-school children did not improve even when pre-school teachers received training in early childhood development (Khulisa Management Services 2000). The Family Literacy Project was established in March 2000 to find a different way to improve literacy development of young children – by working with parents. For the first year workshops were held with parents of pre-school

children where the crucial role of parents as first educators of their children was explored through discussion and activities designed to support early literacy development.

The term “family literacy” was first used in the United States of America and most research into family literacy has been conducted in the United States of America and England. There are different models of family literacy but in all of these, adult literacy and early literacy are addressed together in some way and parental involvement is stressed.

Different models of family literacy which informed the establishment of the Family Literacy Project are described as follows:

- “Parents in schools: Problems that children experience in school are identified. Interventions are designed that target parents so that they can help their children overcome these problems. Those parents, who take part in classroom activities such as reading, helping in libraries and producing newsletters and notices, are given appropriate guidance (Auerbach 1995; Paratore 1995).
- Children and parents in groups: Parents and children are shown ways to play, talk, or read together. This can be in structured activity sessions outside the home. In some programmes parents and children are asked to engage in activities such as storybook reading, using the library, and writing up literacy and other activities. These are then discussed during group sessions and guidance provided. If parents and children read at home they are monitored

and receive advice on different techniques (Baker et al 1995; Harrison 1995; Neuman 1995).

- Children and parents at home: Materials and activities in the home are the resources parents and children are encouraged to use to develop literacy skills. Programmes provide strategies for helping parents to help their children enjoy reading and other literacy related activities (Graves 1995; Harrison 1995; McKee 1995).” Desmond (2004:349)

It was this last model of children and parents at home that had most influence on the Family Literacy Project programme in its first year. From the second year of the project when the parents asked for help with their own literacy it was another approach from the United Kingdom that proved helpful as these foreign programmes were adapted to the South African situation. This approach was where “an adult literacy programme for parents (that) made use of their desire to help their children learn to write and which created shared writing activities to enable both parent and child to learn together” (Hannon 2003:100)

The approach adapted and developed by the Family Literacy Project creates a systematic and clear link between early literacy and adult literacy through the use of the participatory and action based methods of REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques). The combination of these aspects results in what the project calls a unit. Each unit consists of six or seven sessions. An issue relevant to the group is chosen and a REFLECT tool (activity) is used to find out what the group already knows about the issue and what they want to know more about. Literacy activities are built

into the sessions. One session in each unit focuses on early literacy by providing guidance on ways that adults can work with children and giving ideas for activities, books or games that highlight the issue under discussion.

### **Family literacy and community development**

According to Statistics South Africa 2005, one million children in South Africa live in homes where there are no literate adults. This poses a problem for their future because without the support of adults who believe in the importance of education these children and their families will find it difficult to make full use of any available learning and development opportunities. The approach of the Family Literacy Project with its three community libraries and eight library boxes is one way of supporting early and adult literacy development which in turn contributes to the overall development of under-resourced areas.

Communities are made up of families and by supporting families the project supports community development. So although the Family Literacy Project is not a community development project, the activities contribute to the development of the community as a whole.

### **The beginning of the community library**

The family literacy group in Ndodeni first met in a church building that was small and built of mud. There were no chairs or tables and the women used to bring

grass mats and arrange themselves around the room so that they could lean against the walls during the group sessions.

The group then cleaned and painted a two-roomed mud dwelling that had been abandoned by a local family. The project provided a table and chairs and a cupboard for the books that had been kept in the box-library.

When a staff member of a large South African book store chain heard about the project she asked if there was any way in which their social responsibility programme could help. The proposal put to Exclusive Books Trust was successful and the building of a two roomed brick library began. The women from the project were involved in finding accommodation for the builder and helped him throughout especially when it came to bringing water from the river to use when the concrete floor was thrown.

The opening of the library was a huge event in the community with great excitement at the procession of 4 wheeled drive vehicles bringing visitors from all over South Africa. The women and children danced and sang and the celebrations went on long after the visitors had left.

### **The community library and community development**

Before the community library was built at Ndodeni, the family literacy project group members borrowed books from the book box supplied by the project.

Researchers in the area had found that very few homes had books. (Kvalsvig 2006:6) The book boxes were well used by adults and children, with children often reminding their mothers to exchange books.

To develop the idea of offering the books from the book box to the wider community, the Family Literacy Project adapted a Nepalese booklet entitled “Our Reading Home: Library Guidelines” published by CEDPA/Nepal in 2000. The Family Literacy Project booklet, “Setting up a Community Library” is in Zulu and English. In this booklet it was suggested that group members conduct a survey to find out how relevant a library would be to the community.

Ndodeni group members visited thirty three of their neighbours aged between 10 and 45. Thirty of those interviewed said that they regularly read newspapers and magazines, each naming one including the project monthly newsletter. The reasons given for wanting a library ranged from gaining knowledge, and improving the area to helping family members. “It will help me a lot to get books that I’ll obtain knowledge from” and “It is a good thing to have a library because we will be able to educate our families” and “The whole community will benefit”.

There is no school at Ndodeni and the nearest library is in the small village of Creighton, a taxi ride away, so it is no surprise that since the opening of the community library at Ndodeni it has been used by adults, teenagers and children in the area.

## Adults

Adults attend the family literacy group sessions that are held twice a week during the school terms. Adults who are part of an income generating project meet in the building. The home visiting scheme run by the Family Literacy Project uses the books and puzzles from the library.

## Teenagers

Initially it was not easy to attract teenagers into the library. They now come to attend English lessons and discussions on health and other issues of interest to them.

## Children

The children come to the weekly sessions that are held to encourage reading, drawing and story telling. The children all borrow books and take them home to read to younger siblings and others in the family.

## General resources

Apart from the books and puzzles in the library, there is a display that is linked to the topic under discussion in the family literacy group. This is a way of sharing information with those library users who do not attend family literacy sessions.

The project produces a monthly newsletter and this is available at the library.

## **Running the library**

Early in the life of the project a local woman was chosen by the community to be the family literacy facilitator. Zimbili Dlamini lives in the neighbouring area and walks for an hour to reach Ndodeni as there is little transport between her home at Mpumlwane and Ndodeni. Zimbili Dlamini runs the library with the help of some of the family literacy group members. These are women who have never used another library and have had to learn how to catalogue books as well as issue them and keep track of returns. The project has produced a second booklet relating to libraries. This booklet “How to run a Community Library” helps those who run the Ndodeni library and the other libraries run by the project.

## **Evaluation**

Each year the Family Literacy Project has engaged an external evaluator to work with the groups to provide information on the programme and recommendations for the year ahead. In 2004, before the building of the community library at Ndodeni, the group in Stepmore already had a community library. The comments in the evaluation report from the Stepmore group were that

- “We have learned how to visit a library and borrow books”
- “The community is now enjoying reading books”
- “We teach people how to use a library “
- We interact a lot with the community through the library.” (Frow 2004:15)

These findings from a different area (Stepmore) in 2004 were reiterated in the evaluation conducted in Ndodeni in 2006. The 2006 evaluation used an adaptation of Photo Voice where Family Literacy facilitators used cameras to record changes in reading patterns in their members, families and the wider community. Once the photographs were developed, the facilitators wrote a sentence or two to explain why they had taken each photograph. The photographs were then displayed in the groups so that group members could comment as well. The following are some comments linked to photographs taken at Ndodeni:

Photograph	Explanatory sentence
An adult reading a book in the library	The learner is taking books in the library while she is waiting for others to come. The learners use waiting time to read now.
An adult signing a form outside the library	A learner signing for First Words in Print. The learners were very glad to get new books. They were using the same books for a long time. They were allowed to keep these and take them home.
A child visiting the facilitator and looking at a magazine	This is Sisiza, a neighbours child – also part of the Child to Child programme. She came into my house, saw a magazine and naturally sat down to read it. She loves my puzzles too.
An adult crouching down amongst a group of young children. All looking at a book.	These are some of the children visited by our learners in the Home Visiting programme. They live next door to the library. They always come and ask for something to play with. They come and call the learner every day.... Asking for her to read to them. They are like my friends too. They call me “Missy Missy” if they meet me.

Two adults and a child looking at a book	She always comes with her grandchild to school. The child asked her and she is reading her a book. It shows what she is used to doing at home.
Facilitator's son reading a book at home	This is my child doing his homework. He can speak English. I wish you could hear him. He does not have to be told to do his homework. When he heard I was going away, he said "I will do my homework but who will sign?"
A toddler holding a book	My brothers child always asks for a book if he sees someone else reading. "Give me mine."
Older child choosing a book in the library	"Library Time". One of the children is choosing a book. If for some reason they are not attending school they do not even wait for Library Time, they come and ask to use the library. I do not mind if it is just one or two. The other children may, for example, have gone to play sport. The library has given the children something else to do.

Despite these positive findings in the 2006 evaluation, the facilitator was concerned that not enough community members were using the library, nor were there many teenagers except for those who attend the weekly group sessions. She continues to look for ways to encourage people who were not readers to become interested in books and reading.

However, overall the evaluation was very positive with the concluding remarks were that people are beginning to read and to enjoy it and that "reading patterns are certainly changing and there is a sense of momentum in the change as small

people who love books become big people who love books and big people who love books become parents who love books .....” (Frow 2006:47)

## **Conclusion**

The library in Ndodeni has become a focal point for many in the community. For example there is a follow up to one of the photographs in the evaluation that describes how children follow the FLP group member to the library. This particular group member has, since the evaluation, been widowed. According to traditional practice in the area she may not leave her home for a year so will not be able to attend group sessions or visit the children to read to them. However the pattern has been set and the children now come to the library on their own to look at books and play with the puzzles.

Teenagers have discovered that the reference books in the library and now ask the facilitator to help them with their homework assignments.

The adults use it for family literacy group sessions as well as community meetings. The library at Ndodeni has become “our help”, it is part of community life and enriches the lives of those who previously had no access to books and reading.

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