



New Directions for Children's Libraries in Africa: Publishing for Early Readers

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Meeting: 85. Literacy and Reading in co-operation with the Public Libraries and Library Services to Multicultural Populations
Simultaneous Interpretation: Not available

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 74TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL

10-14 August 2008, Québec, Canada
<http://www.ifla.org/iv/ifla74/index.htm>

Abstract

Books are essential components in any library. However, children's libraries in Africa must usually rely on donated books from abroad to fill their shelves. In my presentation, I will show how our small Canada-based NGO, the Osu Children's Library Fund, has joined with local African publishers to publish and distribute books for early readers, books which feature African children and their environment.

Introduction

Books are essential components in any library but almost always, children's libraries in Africa must rely on donated books from abroad to fill their shelves. In my presentation, I would like to show how our small Canada-based NGO, the Osu Children's Library Fund, has joined with local African publishers to publish and distribute books for early readers, books which feature African children and reflect their environment.

Background

The Osu Children's Library Fund (OCLF), a registered charitable organization, was launched in 1991. Since then, it has been responsible for building five children's community libraries in Ghana's capital, Accra, and more than 170 smaller libraries throughout Ghana. Today, as I travel the

country and visit these facilities, I see over and over again how the presence of these libraries has transformed the lives of thousands of Ghanaian children. Youngsters who, just over a decade ago, had never seen a story book, now take great delight in visiting the library and seeing books as their friends and not simply as academic texts.

From the very start, it was our hope to instil in children the Joy of Reading, the motto of our organization. We wanted them to discover storybooks in order to enlarge their vision, to challenge their imagination. We feel we have succeeded.

Modest beginnings

The Osu Children's Library Fund started very much as a grassroots organization. In 1989, I travelled from my home in Canada to Ghana where my husband had accepted a job with a Canadian mining company. Knowing that children in our neighbourhood of Accra had no opportunities to read storybooks, I started a small library every Thursday afternoon in our garden. It began with only six children and a basket of books.

Very quickly, this reading circle expanded until I had 70 children in our garden. Clearly, there was a desire among these Ghanaian children for reading and books. To make space for more children, we turned our main floor guest room into a tiny library.

I trained my housekeeper, Joana Felih, to be our first librarian and we called the library, the Osu Community Library because we lived on Osu Avenue. We bought small tables and chairs, purchased more books and hired Harry Lartey, a University of Ghana student, to read to the children and listen as they read their books. Within three months, we had 75 library members who came every Monday and Thursday afternoon. The library was so popular, we started a waiting list.

Neither Joana nor I had any formal expertise in running a library, but we both learned on the job, making mistakes and adjustments along the way.

Our first permanent library

Two years later, when our family was due to leave Ghana and return to Canada, we decided to move the library into a larger, more permanent space. A friend of mine was a doctor for the Police Hospital and she assured me that her government compound was more than big enough for her home and a library. After securing permission from the Ghana Police Department, I purchased a 40 foot shipping container for US\$1200. With the help of many friends, we cut out windows and a door, attached a roof, installed blue tiled floors and ceiling fans and painted it bright blue. Inside, we added

colourful cushions and wall hangings and, of course, a large selection of books.

We wanted our library to be beautiful so we planted a garden with bright pink bougainvillea bushes outside the doors. After a sponsored walk to help raise funds, we opened the new library on November 13, 1992. Years later, the staff re-named it after me and it is now known as the Kathy Knowles Community Library.

Librarian training

Almost immediately, we had requests for help from community and school groups around the country who were anxious to follow our example. Joana and I then set up a free two-week training course for lay librarians. The course is still running and, since its inception, many young librarians have received the necessary practical skills to run a successful library.

The emphasis of the training is on the importance of story time, keeping a meaningful library collection, regardless of its size, and the steps required to keep books in good condition. The climate in Ghana, with its high temperatures, humidity and dust, is very hard on books. Part of the training includes covering the books with local plastic and mending them.

After completing the course, we give the lay librarian a box or two of children's books including as many as possible by African writers. We also give them a few wooden puzzles and educational games. They are then encouraged to return home to their village or school to set up their own library. If we receive regular progress reports that are positive, we donate additional books on an annual basis. Whenever possible, we try to visit these new libraries to offer encouragement and suggestions.

Rapid Expansion

With the success of our first library, others came to seek our support to build libraries for their communities. Luckily, we managed to raise enough funds in Canada to expand our programme. In 1998, we opened a library in Nima, an impoverished area of Ghana, which celebrated its 10th anniversary last June. This is a relatively small library bordering the Kanda Highway but, since its opening, more than 10,000 children have joined as members! If you walk into that library on any afternoon, you will find it packed with eager children, all of them reading or interacting in the puzzle room.

Since then, we have built two more libraries in impoverished parts of Accra and just last June, we celebrated the opening of a small library in a fishing village on the coast which will serve several neighbouring villages.

Our biggest project to date was the building of the Nima Maamobi Learning Centre. We had come to realize that many of the children who enjoyed our first libraries were now becoming teenagers and their needs were changing. At home, they live in crowded and noisy quarters. This centre, designed by a Ghanaian-Canadian architect, provides a large and quiet study space upstairs with an extensive collection of textbooks for in-library use. This gives the students who lack their own textbooks the opportunity to gain access to the required books on their school curriculum.

Downstairs, there is a performance space for our very keen theatre group and for other cultural activities. The drama troupe is flourishing, and gives several performances monthly to the citizens of their community.

Library Outreach

Our libraries not only provide reading opportunities for children but, in many cases, they have become community centres. One of our libraries in the capital has a scholarship fund which provides school fees and uniforms for deserving library members, a bathing program, and a food program where a hot meal is served to 30 children daily. They also have a popular woman's soccer team, a lively cultural dance group and a very active theatre club. Another library has introduced Scrabble and Boggle tournaments between library members and neighbourhood schools.

Literacy classes

Since 1994, we have offered free twice-weekly literacy classes for those who have never attended school. Our students range from teen-age girls who work as household help to grannies – some in their sixties - who have never learned to read and write. Our classes also appeal to recent immigrants to Ghana who do not speak English and need good language skills to find employment.

Our librarians teach the literacy classes. We also rely on local volunteers, usually untrained, from the expatriate community. One of our earlier volunteers devised a set of guidelines which suggests how to proceed at different learning levels. These easy-to-follow “Literacy Guidelines” have become a useful tool for literacy teachers and are available on our website.

Reading study

In 2001, I completed a 10-month reading study in partnership with the Ghana Education Service. This study evaluated the reading ability of 220 Grade III and IV students from inner-city government schools both before

and after intervention. The findings quantified what I was already aware of but did not have the statistics to verify.

To determine the baseline for the study, I had the students read from graded text passages and then asked questions to determine their comprehension of the text. Reading clinicians in Canada gave me guidelines that helped me write the passages and senior Ghanaian educators approved them. I was alarmed to discover that many at the Grade III level didn't even know the alphabet.

The study included the provision of a book cabinet with appropriate titles for each class. Each study group was given different parameters. The group with the highest degree of reading intervention included the following: 15 minutes a day for independent reading, having the teachers read aloud for 10 minutes each day and the chance for students to write weekly journal responses based on their reading.

The conclusion was loud and clear: the more exposure students had to books and reading, together with support from their teachers, the better the post-study assessments were. From my investigation, the students who had exceptionally high reading scores also had the advantage of either owning a storybook or attending a local library on a regular basis.

At the same time, we also assessed the books available to the students and compared this data to the reading ability of the students. Despite the fact that many classrooms had books, almost all of the books were beyond the reading ability of the students. This meant that money was being spent on books that held little value for the students.

Moving into Publishing

After completing the reading study, I contacted Akoss Ofori-Mensah, the Director of Sub-Saharan Publishers, and pointed out the tremendous need for books suited to early readers. She agreed and asked, "Do you have any ideas?" This invitation resulted in the submission of several stories based on the life of my Ghanaian daughter's childhood in Northern Ghana. To date, we have published three of them.

These stories have quickly become favourites among children in Ghana. The central figure is Fati, a five-year-old girl who loves to laugh, can run like the wind and who always tries hard to do as she is told. We put a lot of effort into creating these books with a storyline that children can relate to, an easy-to-read text and good illustrations. Soon after it was published, *Fati and the Honey Tree* received the Toyota Children's Book Award for the best illustrated book published that year. It has since been translated into French and six Ghanaian languages.

These *Fati* stories brought us into the exciting world of publishing. We entered it with the full knowledge that it is a risky business and takes a huge amount of effort to break even financially. Unfortunately, there is very little discretionary income for Ghanaians to purchase storybooks. They are seen as frivolous when compared to their children's required academic textbooks. However, our sales in Canada have helped to offset the publishing costs.

More titles

Beyond our partnership with Sub-Saharan Publishers, we have moved on to produce another 18 book titles, plus seven titles in African languages. Many of these publications were made possible by grants from various organizations.

All our books are photo-illustrated and are geared towards early readers or newly literate adults. The characters in the books are usually library members and, since I enjoy photography, I have taken most of the photos. I did the layout of the books in my home in Winnipeg with the help of a graphic designer and they have so far all been printed at Friesens, a printing company located in Manitoba.

The books include the following subjects: the alphabet, counting, shapes, opposites, four colours, naming body parts and Ghana's natural resources.

Literacy books

We have also written a five-part series called *Literacy Changed My Life* featuring literacy students from our libraries. These books contain a detailed glossary of many of the terms related to the subject together with photographs of each item. Two of the books also include Teaching Guidelines to assist literacy trainers. These books have proven to be excellent tools for teaching adult literacy classes. Canadian ESL teachers have also found them to be useful teaching aids.

Publishing quality books for Ghanaian children with themes and images that they can easily relate to fits nicely with our mandate of promoting the joy of reading. Children are far more excited to read books if the characters and images relate to their own environment and culture.

New development

Recently, a Ghanaian publisher asked us for royalty rights to print and distribute our books in West Africa. This is a HUGE step for our

organization and will remove the logistics of shipping our books to Ghana which is always challenging and costly.

However, despite our efforts and those of Ghanaian publishers to write for young readers, we are still dependent on stocking our libraries with books from abroad. There are simply not enough local books to meet the demand.

The Osu Children's Library Fund is very, very careful when we send books to Ghana. A team of volunteers in Canada carefully sorts through every single donated book and chooses only those that are culturally appropriate and in excellent condition. Sadly, I have often seen bookshelves in Ghana lined with inappropriate books donated by well-meaning organizations. Unfortunately, these books sit idle, taking up space and collecting dust.

Tanzanian venture

A year ago, I received funding to visit northern Tanzania in order to initiate seven rural school libraries. I took along my head librarian, Joana Felih, and together, we organized a three-day workshop which included a teacher and two students from each of the seven schools. Following the workshop, we donated 100 books and several educational games to each school and we then visited each of the communities. This was a major challenge since most of the schools were located in the hinterlands. It is too early to tell whether this intervention will make a lasting difference but I am hopeful. The development officer in that area is keeping us informed, though communication is difficult.

While I was in Tanzania, I took photographs and gathered material for two books. One is about deforestation and the importance of trees and the other is about anti-poaching. We have printed these books in English and Swahili and sent copies to northern Tanzania for distribution in their libraries and schools.

Book distribution

We learned very quickly that the distribution of books is no easy matter. Our major Canadian network of distribution is through a Winnipeg-based independent bookstore chain. We have also sold copies to public libraries and book distributors. We have listed all our books on our website (www.osuchildrenslibraryfund.ca) so we also receive orders on line.

In Ghana, three stores stock our books. Recently, more and more people make inquiries online and purchase them directly from our stockpile in Accra. Proceeds from book sales in Ghana are deposited into a special

bank account which, in turn, pays for health insurance premiums and annual benefits for our deserving librarians.

Our publishing venture has given us enormous satisfaction and the feedback both in Canada and in Ghana has been very encouraging. To watch the reaction of the children when they open our books and see themselves, or their friends, their food, their animals in the pages is more than enough reward. It is difficult to know what our next title will be but I am confident there will be many more!