

QualiFLY meeting, Hamburg, Germany

A report on the Family Literacy Project
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The following figures show the extent of some of the problems in South Africa:

Of the 28.9 million adults in South Africa, almost 20 % did not complete more than 5 years of school with half that number never attending school at all.

Of the 18 million children in South Africa, 1 million live in a home with adults who are not functionally literate.

In 1999 a report on a 3-year research project showed that despite resources and training in community pre-schools, the literacy scores of the children did not improve.

The project I am going to describe is a small non government organization, the Family Literacy Project that is run in eleven sites in rural KwaZulu Natal, in the foothills of the southern Drakensberg – in a world heritage site, very beautiful but where many of the 300,000 people in the area still rely on rivers for their drinking water and have no electricity. The unemployment rate is 41% and 66% of the households live on less than R800 (EU 100) a month. It is estimated that 30% of the population is HIV positive. This sounds very gloomy but once you meet the women in our project you cannot help but be inspired by their strength and quiet determination to make their children's lives better.

The Family Literacy Project cannot reach very many people but what we can do and have done since 2000 is to help some people change their lives and the lives of their children. We have developed an approach that others can look at, use as it is, or use parts of it or adapt it to suit their own situation.

Let's look at where the project is now, in 2007:

- Eleven local women are employed as facilitators
- 150 adults are members of FLP
- 220 teenagers attend regular workshops
- 480 primary school children are members of the child to child groups

In addition 94 adult FLP members visit their neighbours to talk about and model good ECD and health practices.

520 adults and children borrow books from our 3 community libraries and 8 library boxes.

We have also trained family literacy facilitators in four areas in South Africa, and in Namibia.

How did we get here? It has been an interesting journey and one we have taken by having an initial goal – to support the early literacy development of young children by working with their families. The project has grown

organically as we respond where we can to what people want. We try to listen and we respect what people know already but I believe that if people have never tasted chocolate how will they know they like it so we always bring in new information and sometimes even challenge existing traditional practices. The journey has not always been smooth and we have tried different things that have not worked well and which we have abandoned.

To go back to the beginning:

I ran monthly workshops for parents of preschool children in 5 remote sites. In these workshops we discussed what parents do and can learn to do to help their young children be prepared for learning to read and write. We never try to teach parents how to teach children to read and write. We talk about preparation and about support for literacy development. Many of the women believed that as they could not read or write that they could not help their children. By looking at their own daily activities in a different way, the women realized they were or could be helping their children.

For example, when a woman goes to fetch water from the river and her child goes along too there are opportunities for talking listening, extending vocabulary, sequencing and recall. 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.

By the end of that first year when we conducted a PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) the women said they wanted help to learn to read and write well. Why did they want to read and write? The reasons given were that they wanted to be able to fill in forms (top of the list), sign forms, read the Bible, and not be cheated in shops and find their way around the clinic and hospital. No-one mentioned fun or relaxation and I saw that as an additional challenge.

Five local women were chosen by the groups I had been working with. They were women who were unemployed, had completed school and who could speak English as well as Zulu. They were trained to become adult literacy facilitators, learnt about early literacy development and also the REFLECT approach. We wrote the lesson plans and they started working. These women have been the strength of our project and the groups they run are still attracting members seven years on. Some women who joined in 2000 are still members, possible because as well as learning to read and write in Zulu, many are learning English and in addition have covered a range of topics of interest to them e.g. child protection, budgets, women's health, environmental health, sanitation, confidence building and committee skills.

Each group was given a box of books and the women, once shown how to look at a book with children, began to borrow these. If we had asked them to read children's books themselves they may have been insulted even though these were all they could read. But asking them to read to their children increased the impact – they became comfortable holding the books, their children benefited from being read to and the mothers became role models in their own families:

"I was happy to hear my mother saying she is receiving her education through the Family Literacy Project so that she would be able to help me with my schoolwork. I wish I would also do likewise to make her happy when I have achieved my goal." (Mirriam Zwane's child)

Our facilitators run weekly sessions for primary school children. These follow a theme and allow time for drawing, writing, reading and listening to stories.

Teenagers were reluctant to come into the libraries and so we began discussion groups on sexuality and Aids and they came for those. Now they borrow or at least look at the books in the libraries.

The home visiting programme requires adult members of FLP to attend the weekly sessions regularly, to have attended both those sessions focusing on ECD and on health messages. They visit a neighbouring family to talk about activities for young children and to pass on health messages. They receive a food voucher for every visit made and get writing practice as they have to write up their visits.

"Use it or lose it" – we organize other activities to help group members with their reading and writing. They exchange pen friend letters with members in other FLP groups, the project newsletter prints letters to the editor, and they keep journals with their children.

Some of the lessons we like to share with others are:

- Respond to parent's desire to help their children
- Discuss interesting issues
- Provide a range of opportunities for reading and writing
- Work with different members of a family – adults, teens and children
- Provide books for adults and children

We respect the people we work with and we hope they enjoy being members of the Family Literacy Project and learn that books can be fun.

"I use the ways of reading to them, the ways that I learn in family literacy and it works because my children are happy about reading." Cresentia Zuma