

# first words in print



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**M**artin Luther King's famous words from the American Civil Rights' Movement, 'I have a dream', echoed by Nelson Mandela at his presidential inauguration when, in 1994, South Africa became a true democracy; the hackneyed advertising slogan used at Christmas, 'the gift of giving'; and, one of my favourite quotes that I keep on my office notice board, 'not reading to a child before she can read is akin to not speaking to a child before she can speak' all come to mind as I begin this article about one of the most innovative and exciting projects I have been involved with in my career as a librarian, primarily concerned with the book needs of children.

First Words in Print (FWIP) is an ambitious project of the Centre for the Book in Cape Town which seeks to distribute picture books, free of charge, to South African children under the age of six in their mother tongue.

This article will attempt to provide an overview of the first phase of the pilot project and more specifically the experience in Ottery, one of the pilot distribution areas.

## Aims

Research has shown that children who have access to books and who are read to on a regular basis, before they enter school, have a distinct advantage over those who do not. The challenge of giving all our children this advantage is compounded in a country that is beset with problems of illiteracy, lack of libraries, access to books and dearth of suitable books in a child's mother tongue, a critical component for developing early literacy. This was highlighted at a meeting held at the Centre for the Book in July 2000 at which Elisabeth Anderson, the head of the Centre, and Carole Bloch of the University of Cape Town's Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) first proposed a plan to address this situation. From that meeting, plans were formulated, funds raised and mechanisms put in place to make their dream, shared by those present, a reality - starting with providing thousands of pre-school children with a set of books in their own language and educating their parents, pre-school teachers and caregivers in the importance of and techniques of sharing books with young children. And so FWIP was born with the aim to:

- 'encourage South African writers, illustrators and publishers to produce appropriate literature for children aged 0-6 years

- distribute sets of picture and story books in all South African official languages to targeted children

• facilitate and encourage a culture of reading within communities where the project is implemented

- contribute towards early literacy development of very young children
- help build a common culture of literature for future generations and, thereby, contribute towards nation building.' (3, p.4)

## Distribution areas

In the first phase of the project which was run as a pilot, 40 000 children in four demarcated areas in a number of provinces would be targeted. Through lack of funds this figure was subsequently reduced to 10 000 - 2 500 pre-schoolers in each area. The aim was to give free books to all the children in this age group in the targeted area - an ambitious objective if ever there was one! The areas selected differ in terms of degree of urbanisation, languages spoken, level of employment and literacy and community resources, yet common to all was that the young children who live there are severely disadvantaged in terms of access to books and a culture that supports and promotes reading.

The distribution areas were Mapotla in Mpumalanga, Mount Ayliffe in the Eastern Cape and Rammulotsi in the Free State. The fourth targeted area is the most urbanised and residential area of the four. Ottery forms part of the greater Grassy Park area in the southern suburbs of Cape Town. The targeted area covered approximately two and a half square kilometres and is characterised by mixed living standards, although working class households predominate. There are several large, high density blocks of council flats in the area with unemployment, harsh living conditions, lack of recreational facilities, gangsterism and substance abuse a fact of life.

The names used for the Ottery area need some explanation for at different times during the project the names Grassy Park and Montagu's Gift were used. In the planning stages of the project, when 40 000 children were to be targeted, Grassy Park was selected as the urban distribution area for the Western Cape. When the project was scaled down, it was decided to target the most deprived area within the greater Grassy Park area. That area is referred to as Montagu's Gift on the street map of Cape Town (street names were used to define the boundaries). But Montagu's Gift is a name not used by those who live in the area who call it Ottery. Ottery, as defined in the street map, is a far greater area than the area targeted in this project. For the purposes of this article the name Ottery will be used.

'...not reading to a child before she can read is akin to not speaking to a child before she can speak...'



◁ The launch of FWIP in the Ottery Community Centre

▽ Young readers with the FWIP books in the home languages of the targeted area

## Management and area teams

The Centre for the Book established a management team to manage the first phase of the pilot project. The task they had to oversee was enormous - to raise funds, bring stakeholders and role players on board, publicise and promote the project, work with publishers, printers, authors, illustrators, language specialists, early childhood development (ECD) specialists and researchers, et cetera to see the project through all the stages from planning to implementation and evaluation. Ronnie Simons was appointed as the FWIP manager.

Once the project was initiated in an area, a lengthy planning process began. In conjunction with role players in the community, research was conducted to establish the boundaries of the designated area, statistics collected on the number of children under the age of seven who were to be reached, and their home languages. This information was vital as the aim of the project was to saturate the designated area and reach every pre-school child.

In each designated distribution area a team was established with role players and stakeholders in the community to oversee the management of the project in the area. The composition and modus operandi of each area team differed according to local circumstances, but common to all were the following tasks - publicising the project and informing the community, working in conjunction with libraries, crèches, pre-schools, clinics and community organisations to distribute the books, training the caregivers in the use of the books, assisting the researchers and launching the project in the area. Much time was spent in the planning phase on gathering data and bringing role players on board.

Unlike the other three distribution areas, Ottery is located close to the Centre of the Book which meant that Ronnie Simons, the FWIP manager, took a keen interest in the management of the project in the area and was a permanent active member of our area team. As a result FWIP management gained first-hand experience of and an insight into the ways in which an area team operated.

In Ottery we spent much time discussing methods of distribution - how does one reach all pre-school children in an area and their parents and caregivers and ensure that there is no duplication? Working through pre-schools and crèches reaches some of the children, as does working



through clinics, but what about those children who are not under institutional care? Getting volunteers to distribute books and information door to door was another method discussed. An integral part of the book distribution process was recording the names and contactable addresses of the children for the purposes of research.

A subject that caused much heated debate and healthy discussion within our area team meetings was the language issue. According to the most recent census statistics we had access to, the majority of the children in the area had Afrikaans as their home language. Those working and living in Ottery suspected that there might be some resistance to the Afrikaans books, for although some people may speak Afrikaans at home, there is a trend for parents to send their children to English schools and to want them to learn English for it is perceived as the language of upward mobility and accompanying social and economic advancement.

## Books

A competition was held through publishing houses and authors and illustrators were invited to submit manuscripts for four books that would be translated into the home languages of the children in the targeted areas. Specifications were drawn up for the four books to be illustrated in full colour and with a uniquely South African flavour. Those that were finally published were:

**Horns only**, written by Fathima Dada, Leoni Hofmeyer and Gcina Mhlophe and illustrated by Heather Moore and Jiggs Snaddon-Wood (a picture book telling a story)





**Thandeka's gift**, written by Fathima Dada, Leoni Hofmeyer and Gcina Mhlophe, and illustrated by Pandora Alberts (a picture-word book focussing on the daily life experiences of young children)

**Abongi's journey**, conceptualised by Kerry Saadien-Raad and illustrated by Tasia Rosser (a wordless picture book)

**Khushu khushu**, illustrated by Jean Fullalove (a multi-lingual collection of rhymes).

The care and thought that has gone into the writing and illustrating of these four books is very evident, with each reflecting a uniquely South African perspective and experience, be it in the landscape, the characters or the experiences described. While the books were printed and distributed free of charge to the children targeted in this project, they have also been published for sale to the general public and have been purchased by the Library Service in English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa editions. A very positive outcome of this project, one of whose aims was to stimulate the production of uniquely South African picture books for pre-schoolers, is that a number of titles that did not win FWIPs literary competition, have subsequently been published and bought for the Library Service.

### Education and training

An integral part of the project was the education and training of parents, pre-school teachers and caregivers in the importance of reading books to pre-school children, and in particular sharing and using the titles published by the project. A simply written illustrated pamphlet was produced for this purpose for distribution to caregivers in their mother tongue. A video, also available in a number of languages, was produced and the intention was that this should be shown as widely as possible to the potential audience of caregivers. The English version, **Beginning with books**, has been bought for the Library Service.

### Research and evaluation

Research and evaluation featured strongly in the first phase of this pilot project. Independent researchers, Kathy Watters and Angela Schaffer, were contacted to produce two reports. The first was a baseline study, carried out in the four targeted areas before books were distributed, to gather data and establish yardsticks against which to monitor and measure the progress and future impact of the project. Three types of research were conducted in each area:

- a comprehensive socio-economic area profile, with special emphasis on the factors affecting young children, was developed;
- reading behaviour data was collected by means of a survey and in-depth interviews with caregivers; and
- site visits were undertaken to relevant public facilities in order to develop an understanding of the availability of printed material and the routine activities taking place at these facilities (1, p.4).

The clear and succinct reports contain a wealth of information and insights - essential reading for anyone who is interested in books and children in this country. Any

librarian reading them will see the huge amount of work that needs to be done to even begin to meet our children's need for access to books.

After a three-day visit to the Ottery area in June 2002 for the baseline study, the researchers concluded that 'The fact that less than half of the residents in our research sample had reading books for adults in their homes and that only 55% had children's story books suggests that there is no domestic culture of reading. This finding was supported by our interviews in caregivers' homes. With one notable exception, we saw very few books at all and the majority of the interviewees said that they did not like to read books' (2, pp.23-24).

In May 2003 the researchers presented their second report, a formative evaluation of the delivery of the books to the four targeted areas. Their research focused on:

- the effectiveness of the delivery model and strategy
- the extent to which the books reached the target recipients and were used by them
- the extent to which the video and pamphlet were used to orientate and encourage caregivers to share books with young children (3, pp.4-5).

These research reports are available from the Centre for the Book.

### The Ottery experience

The FWIP experience in Ottery could fill a whole book, so for the purposes of this article, the role of the library within the project and community during 2001-2003 will be outlined. Some aspects of the work of the area team were discussed above under *Management and area teams*. The role of some area team members and the impact of the project on them will be covered as well.

### Ottery Library

In each distribution area there was a central agency that took charge of the project and book distribution. In some regions it was ECD organisations and in Ottery it was the library. The library remained the focal point for the project despite its fluctuating fortunes in the past few years. In 2001, when the project began, Ottery did not have a fully-fledged library that could provide all the services needed by the community. There was the Ottery Reference Library, a non-circulating satellite of Grassy Park Public Library that was open for a few hours several times a week. While it did house children's books, the stock consisted mainly of non-fiction and reference works that were available for use in the library by learners and students in the area.

The library is housed in a large bright room at the Ottery Community Centre, a multi-purpose facility with offices, meeting rooms, a hall and fields that is managed by the Sports and Recreation Department of the local authority. This facility is located opposite an open field between council flats and at one time also housed the local clinic that was forced to close when repeated outbreaks of gang warfare posed too great a threat to staff and patients.

The library was run by Themba Mobo, a staff member of Grassy Park Library who worked there in the afternoons. It was Themba and Anita Shaw, the librarian-in-charge of Grassy Park Library who were the initial members of the

Otterly area team and their commitment was crucial in the establishment of the project in the area - spreading information about the project, gathering statistical information and bringing role players in the area into the process. When staff shortages at Grassy Park Library forced the temporary closure of Otterly Library, FWIP area team meetings continued to be held there and librarians remained on board.

Fadeela Davids is librarian-in-charge at Hangberg in Hout Bay. In her capacity as the co-ordinator of extension libraries for the South Peninsula, she joined the Otterly FWIP area team as the Otterly Library now fell within her area of responsibility. She embraced the FWIP project right from the start for she is passionate about books, reading and community upliftment. Reopening the library, reorientating the stock to reflect the reading needs of the community and its children and converting it into a circulating library was a priority for her. As she says, she fought against the idea of the library being a reference library for 'How can you stimulate and encourage reading without people having access to reading books for lending?' The library was formally reopened as a circulating library in May 2003 with Karen van der Heyden appointed to staff the library on contract. By October last year the library had 863 registered members (194 adults, 669 children) and a circulation of 3 309, of which 2 335 were children's books. When asked about the role that FWIP played in getting the library reopened, Fadeela answered that the project strengthened the case for reopening as well as motivating library staff. The FWIP experience also accelerated and enhanced the training of Karen when she became a library staff member.

### Otterly FWIP team

The planning process in Otterly was a lengthy one, with community members and leaders as well as professionals working in the area who were concerned with children (for example, social workers and clinic sisters) all part of the process at some stage or another. While not all of them were directly involved in the eventual distribution of the books, they were all part of the process of spreading the word about the importance of reading to children and FWIP.

Some months before the launch of the project in Otterly, in August 2002, we ended up with our core team, the people who were ultimately responsible for the practical implementation of the project. In an effort to record the experience of FWIP in Otterly, last December I interviewed several women who were the project in the area during 2002 and 2003.

- Fadeela Davids's role in getting the Otterly Library reopened was referred to above. She headed up the book distribution and related caregiver training process in the area.
- Karen van der Heyden joined the area team in her capacity as a volunteer at the Otterly Community Centre. She was central to bringing volunteers on board for the distribution process. She now staffs the Otterly Library.
- Faranaaz Daniels, a teacher at Rooikappie Crèche, located within the grounds of the community centre, played an important role in liaising and working with crèches and pre-schools.
- Cynthia January volunteers at the community centre and the library. As the grandmother of children who were

FWIP book recipients she was personally able to see the benefits of the project within her own family.

It is all but impossible to convey the mood and sentiments expressed at that joyous get-together where we chatted about the highs and lows, the frustrations and hard work, and above all the unflagging faith and belief in the project that made it all so worthwhile for all involved. Words fail me for I am unable to express my deep respect and admiration for the dedication and hard work of these women to the project and to the upliftment of their community - truly awe-inspiring and humbling. 'I like to give' were words used by them all as they reminisced about the project. Giving books to children that were theirs to keep, giving the gift of reading. Not one of them mentioned their greatest gift that I would like to single out - they gave of themselves.

And the 'cherry on the top', or is that 'cherries'? FWIP has entered its second phase, with plans for more books for more children and it was recently announced that First Words in Print has been awarded the prestigious international IBBY-Asahi Award for Reading Promotion which will be presented at the 29th annual congress of IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) in Cape Town in September 2004.

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*Johanna de Beer was involved in establishing the FWIP project in Otterly. For a more detailed, less personal description of the project, readers are urged to visit the web site of the Centre for the Book at [centreforthebook.org.za](http://centreforthebook.org.za).*

### References

1. Schaffer, Angela and Watters, Kathy. **First Words in Print baseline study: summary report.** September 2002.
2. Schaffer, Angela. **First Words in Print baseline study: the Montagu's Gift area of Grassy Park.** August 2002.
3. Schaffer, Angela and Watters, Kathy. **Formative evaluation of the first phase of First Words in Print: summary report.** May 2003.



◁ Thembela Mobo who was involved in the early days of the project



◁ Fadeela Davids, the major core team member, was responsible for book distribution and related caregiver training processes