

RESEARCH

Open Access

# Working with parents to promote children's literacy: a family literacy project in Uganda

Kate Parry<sup>1\*</sup>, Elizabeth Kirabo<sup>2</sup> and Gorreth Nakyato<sup>3</sup>

\* Correspondence:

kateparry@earthlink.net

<sup>1</sup>Hunter College, New York, NY, USA

Full list of author information is available at the end of the article

## Abstract

This article discusses the importance of family practices to children's acquisition of literacy and describes attempts to influence such practices through the institution of family literacy programmes. One of these is the Family Literacy Project in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, which both served as a model and provided material for a similar project at the Kitengesa Community Library in Uganda. The Kitengesa project is described in detail with particular emphasis on an exercise involving the translation of children's books into Luganda. The project as a whole and the translation exercise in particular elicited a warm response and seem to have been beneficial for both the adult participants and their children. The authors conclude that the project should be continued and extended but that more books are needed that are easy enough for such audiences and that reflect their African experiences.

## Introduction

In recent years, African governments have made strenuous efforts to make education available to more people and thus to expand the numbers of people able to read. Yet "the country lacks a reading culture" is a common lament; the expansion of education seems to have had little effect, so far, on reading habits.

The work reported here is based on the assumption that for a culture to develop in which reading plays an integral part, it is not enough to teach children how to read: adults need to read too, and children need to see them doing it. The promotion of adult literacy is, however, particularly difficult in the rural environments in which most Africans live. Apart from the fact that adults have other things to do besides attending literacy classes, an almost insuperable obstacle is that little written material is typically available in the languages that they speak. As for children, they may acquire initial literacy in their mother tongue, but to develop sophisticated reading skills they have to learn a foreign language—in Uganda, as in many African countries, English. Literacy as acquired through schooling tends thus to separate children from their parents and undermine cultural cohesion. The project described here aims to counteract that tendency by bringing parents and children together in a common literate activity, one in which bilingualism, for both generations, plays a pivotal role.

### **Literacy and families**

Since the late 1970s, numerous studies of literacy have appeared, many of the more recent inspired by the work of Brian Street (1984). His “ideological model” of literacy makes three basic assumptions:

- i. Literacy (that is, the use of written text) is inherently social, just as the oral use of language is.
- ii. As such, it requires not only knowledge of the writing system and of how it represents oral language, but also an understanding of the social conventions that govern when, where, and how it is appropriate to use writing.
- iii. These conventions, or literacy practices, vary greatly from one community to another and in different sorts of discourse in the same community—so that it might be more appropriate to think of plural literacies rather than a single monolithic construct.

The effect of this view of literacy has been to focus attention on the social contexts in which writing systems are used and learnt, and on the family as one of the most important of these contexts. Heath (1982), in particular, demonstrated the significance of family literacy practices for children’s later performance in school in the United States of America. The children of the “townspeople” she studied benefitted enormously from their parents’ habit of reading them stories at bedtime. Even though they might not learn how to read, these children learned what to expect from and how to respond to stories and were thus much better prepared for school work than were the children of the working class communities that Heath also studied (1982, 1983). Other, later researchers have supported the same contention (for reviews, see Carter et al. 2009; McCarthy 2000; Ntuli and Pretorius 2005).

A practical reaction to the emphasis on home literacy practices has been the development of family literacy programmes. In such programmes, children’s caregivers are brought together to work on their own literacy, sometimes separately from their children and sometimes together with them (Nutbrown et al. 2005; Timmons 2008). Whether the children are present or not during programme sessions, the emphasis is on equipping caregivers to prepare their children for school tasks; thus they participate more in their children’s education. There is some concern that such programmes may be imposing the practices of a hegemonic social group on those that are marginalized (Dudley-Marling 2009); but practitioners have found that provided they are sensitive to participant families’ practices and values, they can successfully bridge cultural and social barriers and the participants themselves recognize the benefits of the practices that the programmes advocate (DeBruin-Parecki 2009; Timmons 2008).

### **Family literacy in Africa**

In Africa, little work has been done on home literacy practices, though there are a few exceptions in Southern African countries (Dlamini 2009; Onyewadume 2009). Yet even without detailed ethnographic research, it seems safe to assert, as Ntuli and Pretorius (2005) do, that the establishment of fruitful relationships between home and school literacies is particularly challenging in African contexts. Most of Africa’s population is

rural, and in rural African environments there is often little support for literacy: no television, few books or magazines in the homes, and although written signs may be ubiquitous in the trading centres, there is hardly any extended text to be found. In some areas many parents are non-literate, and those who have learned to read have little opportunity to maintain the habit. Studies in Uganda have shown that they use their literacy to read and write occasional letters, to read newspapers when available, to understand publicly posted notices, and, in some cases, to read the Bible or other religious material (Carr-Hill, *et al.* 2001; Openjuru 2009). Pawlitzky (2009) reports a similar range of interests among mother-tongue and bilingual readers in Kenya. Such uses are limited in comparison to what Heath describes in her “townspeople”, or even in the other two, less privileged, communities that she considers. Thus three of the basic factors that Baker (1999) identifies as facilitating the acquisition of literacy—having materials available, observing adults reading, and being read to regularly—can hardly be realized, nor can children see that adults value reading if there is no material to be read.

There is, in addition, a marked divide between home and school that is encoded in and maintained by language (Parry 2009a). Even in countries like Uganda, where it is official policy to teach initial literacy in the mother tongue (Uganda Government 1992), children are obliged after only four years to switch to English as the language of instruction. Once they do so, it is extremely difficult for parents who do not speak English to support their children’s learning; and typically such parents consider that they have neither the right nor the responsibility to do so—literacy is in the teacher’s sphere and not the parent’s.

In such circumstances, the benefits of family literacy programmes are likely to be particularly great. Desmond and Elfert (2008) have collected accounts of projects in Mali, Namibia, Senegal, South Africa, Kenya, and Uganda which try to address these problems by helping parents to support their children’s learning. But the real centre for African Family Literacy projects is South Africa, perhaps because the literacy practices of Heath’s “townspeople” are already well established in some communities there but are notably absent in most others—those others being the ones that were, under apartheid, systematically denied full access to education. There is thus, in the post-apartheid regime, a particularly strong incentive to try to bridge the gaps between the literacy practices of home and school, since this will help address the inequitable inheritance of the past.

Examples of such work include the Families Learning Together Programme in Soweto (Mashishi 2009) and the Family Literacy Project of the Children’s Literature Research Unit (CLRU) at the University of Southern Africa (Machet and Wessels 2006). These are both township projects. However, the Family Literacy Project in KwaZulu-Natal is rural and as such is of greater interest to researchers in Uganda. This project began in 2000 by working in crèches and preschools, but it later developed adult literacy classes and set up libraries to serve them. The project’s founder reports that “many of the facilitators say that the provision of books has been one of the most exciting developments in their communities” (Desmond 2008, p. 38) and she quotes remarks from participants, emphasizing the importance of the libraries to the project as a whole. Here, for example, is what one participant said:

It has helped me a lot that we learn as a family, I no longer have low confidence around people and I can help my children with their school work and read books

that I borrow from the library to them. These books are very helpful because the children often have homework and they allow me to be able to help them easily because I have read the library books and because I can teach my children to write English. (Desmond 2008, p. 34)

It was as a result of learning about this project and visiting a couple of the libraries in question that the first author of this article decided to initiate a similar project in Uganda, where she has been managing a community library project for over ten years and where there is now a national community libraries movement (Parry 2009a,b). The project, it was hoped, would help develop new ways of bridging the home-school gap in Uganda and of helping parents understand the importance of developing children's proficiency in their mother tongue.

## **Methods**

The subsections that follow outline the context and the methods adopted in carrying out and evaluating the project.

### **The context**

The project was carried out in the Kitengesa Community Library, located in Lwannunda Parish near the trading centre of Kitengesa in Masaka District of the Central Region of Uganda. Kitengesa is only a few kilometers away from the District headquarters, but the road is bad and Lwannunda feels quite remote from the town. In many respects, it is a typical rural area. The people live mostly by farming, growing matoke, or plantains, to eat, and coffee to sell for cash. Most are not destitute, but many are poor and find it difficult to raise the cash needed to send children to school. Nonetheless, enthusiasm for education is great, and there are significant numbers in the community who can read. When the library entered its first phase of expansion in 2002, a house-to-house survey found that there were at least 2000 people in the parishes of Lwannunda and Kitengesa who might be interested in using it.

The library is, indeed, one of the most remarkable institutions of the area. It was established in close collaboration with Kitengesa Comprehensive Secondary School, which provided the land for putting up the initial library building and whose students and staff comprise the bulk of the library's members. The library also supports and is supported by the school through the institution of Library Scholars. At any one time seven of the school students help run the library in return for having their school fees paid. But closely associated as it is with the school, it is not just a school library; it systematically reaches out to the community beyond the school by providing classes for adults, inviting children of primary school age to come for special reading sessions, and serving as a focus and meeting place for various groups interested in community development. It has also extended hospitality to researchers and volunteers whose work has introduced new ideas and skills to the village and who have been instrumental in raising funds for the library and for other village projects (for a full account, see Parry 2009b)

### **Participants**

One consequence of the synergy between the library, foreign visitors, and the village community was the formation in 2007 of the Lwannunda Women's Group. This group, originally comprised of nine women, began meeting in the library in 2005 for an adult

literacy class in which they were taught by a visiting researcher, assisted by the librarian. The group began by studying basic literacy—the letters of the alphabet and so on—but soon the women became more interested in talking about the practical difficulties of their lives and considering how they could alleviate them. When the researcher left, she promised to raise funds for the group, and in the meanwhile, the women continued to meet while the librarian arranged talks for them by rural extension workers and other specialists. When the promised funds arrived, the women constituted themselves formally as a community-based organization and used the funds to finance a small project for each of them—a cow for one, a pig for another, and so on. They continued to meet for study, too, and so the group became increasingly cohesive.

This group became the basis for the Kitengesha Community Library Family Literacy Project. In 2008 Kate Parry asked the women if they would be interested in meeting every week for workshops on how to help their children in school. She proposed that Gorreth Nakyato should be the facilitator since Nakyato had already worked for the library as a Library Scholar and in 2008 was training as a primary school teacher. The library was supporting her in her studies on the understanding that she would return to work as a library assistant when she finished in 2009. The women were eager to participate, so Parry made the arrangements with Nakyato and set about securing the necessary materials. She also recruited Elizabeth Kirabo, who was then studying for a Master's degree in Education at Makerere University, to assist in evaluating the project. Kirabo agreed to observe the sessions and to visit the women in their homes when the project was over.

The project began formally in May 2009. In the first session seven women signed up, to be joined a week later by two more—as well as by one man, a brother of one of the women, who said he was eager to learn, whatever the subject, and who, indeed, proved an enthusiastic participant until he went off to seek work in Kampala. The women varied in age from the mid twenties to the mid forties, and each of them had from two to six children in her home (not necessarily her own children, because a number of these women are caring for AIDS orphans). The oldest of the children was fourteen at the time, the youngest was ten months, and the average age was nearly eight. The older children were all in primary school but none of those who were under six was in pre-school. As for the women themselves, they all had minimal literacy, but at least one had had no schooling and had learned to read in the library. They all also had a little English, but only a couple of them could maintain a conversation in it, and the language of discussion in the workshops was always Luganda.

### **Materials**

The Family Literacy Project in KwaZulu-Natal generously provided the project with course materials, specifically a twelve-week unit developed originally for a series of workshops held with women at Nieu Bethesda in South Africa in 2006. The tone of the series is set by the notes to the facilitator at the beginning:

- i. Do not worry if you do not finish a workshop in the time given. Don't rush through the activities; rather carry on in the next workshop. If these workshops take more than 12 sessions, that is not a problem.

- ii. If you think that the group members are not enjoying the workshops, stop and spend time finding out what the problem is.
- iii. Arrive on time for the workshops.
- iv. Be prepared for each workshop.
- v. Enjoy yourself!

(Family Literacy at Bethesda Arts Centre 2006)

The series includes a variety of practical activities—drawing a map of the locality, looking at pictures, making patterns with small bits of paper, drawing pictures and arranging them, telling and reading stories, making books. These activities are interspersed with discussions of what children learn from such activities and how adults can help them engage in, and enjoy, them. Various techniques are used for organizing the group in the activities and discussions: sometimes the whole group talks together, with the facilitator keeping notes on a flip-chart; sometimes the participants work together in small groups; sometimes they work in pairs with one in each pair pretending to be a child; on one occasion participants are invited to bring one of their own children to the workshop so the adults are working with real children. After almost every session the participants are asked to do something with their children at home that is related to what they have been talking about.

Parry and Nakyato worked together to adapt this series to the Kitengesa women's needs. Generally the adaptations consisted of removing references to things, like television, that members of the group rarely got to see. Occasionally, too, substitutions were made of materials that were more easily obtainable in Kitengesa than were those recommended for the Nieu Bethesda women: the Nieu Bethesda course, for example, calls for magazine pictures, but since there are few magazines in Kitengesa (the library has none), the group used newspaper pictures instead. In addition, the course was adapted to the local linguistic situation by including explicit reference to the bilingual literacy that the library tries to foster. For example, where the Nieu Bethesda course calls for a discussion of reading aloud to children, the Kitengesa version adds a discussion of the differences between reading to a child in Luganda and reading in English.

The greatest change made to the Nieu Bethesda course was the addition of three sessions devoted to the translation of children's books from English into Luganda. This component was made possible by the Osu Children's Library Fund, a Canadian NGO that establishes and maintains children's libraries in Ghana. Shortly before we began thinking about our Family Literacy Project, Kathy Knowles, the director of the Fund, published a set of books based on colours: *My Red Book*, *My Yellow Book*, *My Green Book*, and *My Blue Book*. The text of the books is extremely simple: each begins with the sentence, "I like \_\_\_\_", and in the blank is inserted the name of the colour featured in the book. The subsequent sentences describe items as being of that colour; the first few sentences of *My Red Book*, for example, are:

The lorry is red.

The school bag is red.

The uniform is red and white.

The bird is red. (Knowles 2007)



Finally, each book ends with, “Bye-bye \_\_\_\_\_”, and the appropriate colour name. Each sentence is written at the bottom of a page, and most of the rest of the page is taken up by a beautiful photograph (taken by Knowles, who is a highly skilled photographer) of the item described. All the photographs were taken in Africa, and many of them feature Ghanaian children. For example, the sentence about the school bag is accompanied by a picture of a child with the bag on her back; she is walking away from the camera but is looking over her shoulder at the photographer and has a warm smile on her face. These pictures are ideal for stimulating discussion with young children; and the fact that the children and scenes depicted are all African made the books particularly appropriate for the Kitengesa project. The Osu Children’s Library Fund generously donated twelve copies of each book (and some of their other publications as well, but they were not used for this project), and My Yellow Book and My Blue Book were used for the translation activity described below. Each participant received a complete set of books, including the two that the group had not actually translated.

Finally, the group received basic tools for practising literacy: flip charts, manilla paper, pens, scissors, and glue, and Nakyato was given a hard-backed notebook in which to keep a record of the activities.

### **Implementation**

Nakyato began the programme early in May, making notes each week of what had been done. While the notes do not reflect the full richness of the activities, they do show that the workshops proceeded pretty well according to plan. The group moved from talking about families and literacy in the first session to drawing maps of the community in the second and discussing where writing was used—one of these maps was subsequently displayed in the library and was much admired. They also talked about pictures that had been taken by Parry for the purpose and then selected and cut out pictures from the library’s old newspapers to take home and talk about with their children. In the third session the participants reported on this experience, which led to a more general discussion in the fourth session of what had helped and what had hindered them in learning to read—and what this suggested about how they could help their children. The next session focused on telling and retelling stories, which the participants did with one another in pairs: one told a story in the first person, while the other retold it in the third person to the rest of the group. In the sixth session the participants brought their children, as requested, and worked with them on talking about and drawing pictures of daily activities. The pictures represented a sequence, and when they were done, the adults mixed them up and asked the children to put them back in order; the point of the exercise was to give the adults practice in guiding and encouraging their children in an activity. The next three sessions were devoted to translating the books and are described in more detail below. From there the participants moved on, in Session 10, to discussing environmental print as it existed in the village and in their own homes, and how they could use it to encourage their children’s reading. Then the participants made their own books, using pictures that they had cut out from newspapers and text that Nakyato had typed for them on slips of paper. These books were taken home, read with children, and reported on. In the twelfth session, they wrote plays and made puppets to act them. The activity in the following session was constructing time-lines of the participants’ own lives and making more books from that

material; the children came to that session to make books of their lives as well. Finally the group wound up with a discussion of how the participants could help their children and what they had learnt.

The focus of this article is on how this project fostered multilingual literacy, so particular attention will be paid to the translation exercise with the “colour” books. This exercise went rather more quickly than expected. Three weeks were spent on it, as intended, but the group translated two books (the yellow and the blue one) instead of only one. The participants did not choose to translate the other two books, but they took all the books home, and from their reports to the group it is evident that they read with their children the ones they had not translated as well as the ones they had.

In the facilitator’s guide, the instructions for the first of the three sessions begin as follows:

Show the group one complete set of the “colour” books by Kathy Knowles. Ask the group to choose one of them.

Hand out one copy to each person of the book that they have chosen. Give them time to read or look at it.

Ask them what they like about the book. Do they think a young child will like the book? Ask them to give a reason for their answer.

Hand out an exercise book to each person. On the first page of the exercise book ask them to copy out the title of the book you have chosen. Meanwhile, write the title yourself on a piece of newsprint that you have put up on a cupboard door where they can see it.

Ask the group how they might express the title in Luganda. If there is more than one suggestion, discuss the question until you reach an agreement.

Write the Luganda title beneath the English one on your newsprint. Ask everyone to copy it under the title they have written in their exercise books.

(Family Literacy at Kitengesa Community Library 2009)

The subsequent instructions are similarly detailed, leading the group through a regular sequence of discussing pictures, translating the accompanying sentences, and writing them down. After each session, Nakyato was to type the Luganda sentences out and make copies for all the participants, who would then cut them up so that each sentence was on a strip of paper that they could paste on the appropriate page in their own copies of the book. Thus by the third session, each participant would have at least one bilingual book, and the session was devoted to practising reading the book aloud, both in Luganda and in English, the latter being for older children who were already in school. The final activity for that session was a discussion of the differences between reading in the two languages, while part of the next session was given to discussion of the experience of reading the books at home.

Nakyato’s notes of the first session in the sequence read as follows (the notes have been edited for spelling and punctuation):

- i. We translated the books as directed by the workshop.
- ii. They were 2 books, i.e. yellow and blue.



- iii. People copied the English and the Luganda sentences in their exercise books.
- iv. The Luganda translations were written beneath the English sentences.
- v. We were translating while talking about the picture as the workshop states it.
- vi. Luganda titles were typed and all the sentences in Luganda and enough copies were typed (Nakyato, Notes, Unit 1, Session 7).

She kept similar notes of the subsequent sessions. Here is her record of the discussion of the differences between reading in Luganda and in English:

... We came up with the following views:

- Reading in English may [be] difficult because some words may not be easy to be understood while in Luganda there are few words which a reader may fail to understand.
- In English you learn new vocabularies rather than in Luganda.
- In English we also learn how to pronounce words rather than in Luganda.

When the translations were complete, the participants took the books, which were now theirs, home to read with their children. The feedback in the next session, according to Nakyato's notes, was as follows:

- i. Books were read by the adults to their children.
- ii. The experience was successfully described by the adults.
- iii. Children were interested about the colour of the books.
- iv. They were also interested about the pictures in the book.
- v. They were interested because they saw them reading the books to them.
- vi. They asked whether their parents also use pencils when they come for the workshops according to the level of the books they took home to read for them.
- vii. Some children got involved hence learning how to read to the others.
- viii. Some of the children were requesting for the books to take to school because they are good so that they read them to others.
- ix. One of the children wanted also to make a catapult which is in the red book. (Nakyato, Notes, Unit 1, Session 10).

The group then moved on, as directed, to the discussion of environmental print.

## **Discussion**

In describing the KwaZulu-Natal Family Literacy Project, Desmond (2004) emphasizes the importance of the sessions being enjoyable. The Kitengesa project certainly seems to have been a success in that regard. The participants came regularly to the sessions, and as they talked about what they were doing with their friends and neighbours, more and more people wanted to join. When the first unit was completed there was no question but that the participants wanted to continue with the second, thus committing themselves to another three months of work. There was a pause at the end of the second unit because no more material was immediately available and Nakyato had to take time off for personal reasons, but at a meeting with Parry in January 2010, the core

members of the group said they wished to resume the project and asked her to get more material from South Africa. Such commitment is striking given that these people are extremely busy: all the women have several children to look after as well as their crops and animal husbandry projects, and the little time they have left is taken up mostly with church and community functions.

Nakyato's notes also suggest that the participants had learnt a good deal in the process. At the beginning of the second unit, they reviewed what they had done in the first and made the following points:

- i. They learnt that coming to the library with their children was very important hence reading to them was also very useful.
- ii. Reading aloud to children is very important.
- iii. They thanked each and everybody who participated in the workshops with professor [Parry] who gave them the "colour" books which helped them very much with reading.
- iv. Drawing a community map was very essential.
- v. They also learnt to read the sign posts on the road and to know their importances.
- vi. Being confident when they are talking with their group mates. (Nakyato, Notes, Unit 2, Session 1)

There are a number of interesting points about this list. First, the mention of the library may be significant. The sessions were always held in the library or in a classroom nearby, and the project was clearly associated with it in an organizational sense, yet there is no explicit mention of the library in the course materials; it would seem that the inference about its importance was the participants' own. It is also interesting that the community map evidently made such an impact, as did the discussions of environmental print. Still more interesting is the remark about confidence, and it will be noticed how similar it is to the quotation, above, from Sibongile Dlamini of the South African Family Literacy Project.

Kirabo's observations confirm the impression that the participants were becoming more confident. At the beginning she noted that they were rather quiet and reluctant to ask questions. In Session 2, for example, when Nakyato asked them to work in pairs and discuss when their family members read or wrote together, the participants did not know what to do and simply sat in silence. In Session 7, by contrast, when Nakyato first presented the colour books, the group was full of questions: How were they going to handle them? Should they take them home? Were they going to go through them with their children? At the same time, the participants became far readier to answer Nakyato's questions. At first the answers usually came from only two people, but later Kirabo noticed that the hands were "shooting up". Towards the end of the first series, the group was entirely relaxed, as Parry noticed when she attended Session 11 and recorded what she saw in her journal:

The work for that day [29 July] was making books. The women had identified pictures that they wanted to use, all related to a particular topic, and [Nakyato] had typed up text for them based on the previous week's discussion. Topics included Wild Animals ..., Houses ..., Domestic Animals ..., Birds ..., and Number Rhymes.... A lot of the texts were songs and rhymes, which [one of them] sang as she worked.

The task was to stick pictures and texts together into books (one for each participant), for which [Nakyato] had provided covers comprised of manilla paper encased in a plastic document protector .... So everyone sat around with scissors and glue, chatting, singing, all busy and in great good humour (29 July, 2009).

Another significant observation of Kirabo's was that the participants were beginning to read more. The first ones to arrive for a session generally sat in the library to wait for the others. At the beginning of the programme, they did not do anything while waiting, but by the end they regularly picked up a newspaper (particularly the Luganda newspaper, *Bukedde*) to read, or else they looked at the books that were out on the tables—though it has to be said that they did not go to the shelves to pick out books.

It is impossible to say to what extent the work with the colour books was responsible for these beneficent effects, but there is no doubt that it was a powerful addition to the programme. The books were noted particularly when the participants reviewed their work at the beginning of the second series (see Nakyato's notes cited above), and it is probably significant that much later in the second series, a discussion of what helped learning and what made it difficult produced reference to translation and the lack of it as important factors (Nakyato, Notes, Unit 2, Session 10).

As to the sessions in which the participants did the translation, they seem to have been particularly lively. After looking at all the books, the group decided to focus on My Blue Book and My Yellow Book. They translated both titles first and then worked through the yellow book, the title of which they rendered as *Akatabo kange akakyenvu*, using the diminutive form, *akatabo*, of the word for book. There was little discussion of which words to use—the translations were apparently fairly obvious—except when the group was uncertain as to what was shown in the photograph. For example, one of the sentences in the book is "The corn is yellow," and the photograph shows an open hand holding some partially crushed grains, with more grains in what must be a mortar beneath. The participants could not decide whether to describe the "corn" as "maize" or "pop-corn", because they said that the grain in the hand looked like the first, but the grain in the mortar like the second. In the end they chose the word for "pop-corn", *emberenge*. "The fast food stand is yellow" also presented a problem, because the building shown looked like a shop, but the signs painted on the front suggested that it was a hotel. In the end they translated "the fast food stand" as *omudaala gw'emmere*, meaning literally "food stall".

Often, Kirabo noted, the participants expressed their own reactions to the pictures: they liked the pig shown standing by a yellow bowl because it looked so healthy; a little girl holding yellow flowers was remarked on because she seemed to be happy. The picture that inspired most comment was one of a van, described in the text by the Ghanaian word *trotro*, "The *trotro* is yellow". A woman is shown walking in front of the vehicle, wheeling a bicycle and carrying a bowl of loaves on her head. The word *trotro* caused some difficulty since no one knew it, but they decided the van must be a taxi (taxis in Uganda are that shape, although they are not usually yellow) because of its shape and the roof rack on top. But the woman was interesting too: she was carrying nice bread, they said, and was probably taking it to the market; and the bicycle suggested that women there work hard, since women rarely ride bicycles in Uganda except in the north where they are known to be hard workers.

The responses to My Blue Book were similar. There was only one real difficulty in translation, that being of the sentence “The provision store is blue”. The participants could see that the establishment depicted was what they would call a *duka* (shop, but always a small one, not a supermarket). However, they did not know what to do with the word provision. In the end, they opted to use *duka* alone. There were some difficulties in understanding the pictures, especially one of blue fishing nets with breaking waves behind them. In landlocked Uganda, none of the participants had seen such waves, and fishing nets in Uganda are always brown. Most of the comments arose, though, out of the participants’ relating the pictures to their own experience: the little girl in the “I like blue” page looked like the daughter of someone they knew; the uniforms shown in “The uniforms are blue and white” looked like the uniforms of a neighbouring school—but how did you keep the white clean? In short, the exercise did not give rise to debate about linguistic issues, but it did stimulate imaginative responses and encouraged the participants to see themselves and their own lives in the books.

Finally, how did the project affect the children? The children were not present at most of the sessions, but when they did come to Session 6, they were deeply involved in the activity. Parry wrote an account of the session in her journal:

Everyone [settled] in four groups, each comprising two or three adults and between four and eight children. [Nakyato] went round asking each child what she or he was going to do, the assignment being to identify all the activities involved in some familiar routine, like getting up in the morning or going shopping, and then to draw pictures of each. The children drew while the adults encouraged them and wrote labels on the pictures – except for [one] who most of the time was breastfeeding her baby.

... [Nakyato] went round all the time, putting her hand on a child’s head or round his chin and making encouraging noises. At one point she showed me a child’s drawing of incomprehensible circles and said, laughing: “Early in the morning he greets his grandmother – eh, this workshop!” Other pictures included picking up grass and taking the goat out. ... The children also were looking at the pictures, very engaged (17 June 2009).

It seems clear that the children were enjoying both the activities and the adult attention that they were receiving.

When the adult participants had finished pasting the translated sentences into the blue and yellow colour books, they took the whole set home to read with their children and reported back at the next session. The children were apparently entranced by the glossy paper and bright colours of the books. They also responded warmly to the pictures. The question about whether the parents use pencils at the workshop, recorded above, was almost certainly stimulated by the picture illustrating “The pencil is yellow”; and the desire of one child to make a catapult was inspired by a picture in the red book—showing that this book, though not translated, had also been looked at by parent and child, and the picture of a catapult had made an impression. Some children, presumably the older ones, read the books to other members of the family, while some “were requesting for the books to take them to school because they are good so that they read them to others” (Nakyato’s notes do not record whether the parents allowed this). The participants themselves were

clear that the main attraction of the books was the fact that they, and the children, could identify with them. Kirabo recorded one woman as saying, "*Ebifananyi ebifanana nga bino ebyawano byebalaba bulijo*"—"The pictures look like things here that they [the children] see everyday"—to which another responded warmly, "*Munange, era ebifananyi obiraba n'obitegera bulungi*"—"My friend, you see these pictures and understand them well".

Perhaps even more significant, though, is the report that "[the children] were interested because they saw [the parents] reading the books to them" (Nakyato, Notes, Unit 1, Session 10). Kirabo recorded further that the participants said this was a new experience for both parties; hitherto, the only materials that they had read together were the children's school reports. It seems then that there is a direct link between the work with the colour books and the participants' comment at the beginning of the next workshop series that they had learned that reading aloud to their children was important. This supposition is reinforced by the fact that in a much later discussion, they listed as ways of helping their children in school, "Being a role model of borrowing the books and reading with them," and "translating if possible, it might be of both sides either children or parents" (Nakyato Notes, Unit 2, Session 14). The fact that they said this does not, of course, mean that the "bedtime story" literacy practice is fully established among them, but it does suggest that the idea is there to be built on in future workshops.

## Conclusions

When the KwaZulu-Natal Family Literacy Project was evaluated in 2001 and 2002, it was noted:

... that excitement was obvious when group members were asked to talk about themselves and their young children. The evaluator wrote that "the link with early literacy seems to be a success formula for literacy classes. Not only have the women carried out various activities with their children, but also their own literacy skills and use for the skill have been stimulated through the activities they have done with their children". (Desmond 2004, p. 358)

The experience of the Kitengesa project endorses this view. The focus on their children seems to have engaged and maintained the participants' interest, while giving them occasion to practise easy reading and writing tasks without feeling that they were beneath their dignity as adults. It has also brought home to them the value of the library and encouraged them to read more themselves, though it would be too much to claim that it has turned them into avid readers.

It seems equally clear that such a project is beneficial to the participants' children. The Kitengesa project has not gone on for long enough for the effects to show up in the children's school performance, but the evidence so far is that the children enjoy participating in literacy events with the adults who take care of them and that those who are old enough want to share the experience, especially of the books, with their siblings and school mates. By itself this does not make a reading culture, but it would certainly seem to be a step towards it.

The one significant departure of the Kitengesa project from its South African model seems also to have been beneficial. The activity of translating Kathy Knowles' colour books was evidently interesting in itself and led to productive interactions between

parents and children. The only problem here is that it depends on appropriate books being available and a recent shopping expedition for children's books in Kampala (for the Uganda Community Libraries Association Workshop in January 2010) demonstrated that picture books of this quality are hard to come by.

One recommendation based on this project, then, is that organizations interested in promoting literacy in Africa should encourage the production of such books, with colourful pictures that relate to African experience. The books would be particularly valuable if published in local languages, but, as the Kitengesa Women's Group found, they do not have to be. Provided they have good pictures and are in simple English, and provided that they are presented in a forum such as a Family Literacy Project with a competent facilitator, they can be translated and so made useful to local children and their parents.

As for the Kitengesa project, the library will certainly continue to support it as long as the participants are interested and Nakyato is available to facilitate it. Other members of the Uganda Community Libraries Association are also taking an interest, so we hope that Uganda more broadly, through its libraries, will follow in the footsteps of South Africa in the successful promotion of family literacy.

#### **Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

#### **About the authors**

**Kate Parry** teaches Linguistics at Hunter College of the City University of New York and is an Executive Director of Friends of African Village Libraries. She does her research in Uganda, where she is the Director of the Kitengesa Community Library. **Elizabeth Kirabo** is a teacher by profession. She works with the Rwanda Education Board and acted as the evaluator of the Kitengesa Community Library Literacy Project. **Gorreth Nakyato** was, at the time of writing, facilitator of the Family Literacy Project, at the Kitengesa Community Library, Masaka, Uganda. Now she teaches at Lwaggulwe Mixed Primary School in Kalisizo.

#### **Authors' contributions**

All three authors worked together to develop the conference presentation on which this article is based. GN worked with KP to adapt the South African course material for use in Kitengesa. She administered the programme and kept notes of every session, providing much of the primary data for this article. EK attended most of the programme sessions as an observer. Her notes likewise constitute much of the primary data reported here. KP procured the initial programme material and worked with GN to adapt it. She attended a couple of workshop sessions, contributing primary data through her journal accounts. She collated the data, performed the literature review, and produced the finished text. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

#### **Acknowledgements**

This article was first developed as a paper for presentation at a conference on "Multilingualism and education: Global practices, challenges, and the way forward", which was hosted by Kenyatta University and the University of Pennsylvania at Kenyatta University in Nairobi in July 2010. The authors are grateful for the opportunity to present at this conference and appreciate particularly the role of Martin Njoroge in organizing it.

The authors acknowledge with gratitude the contribution of curricular materials for the project by Snoeks Desmond and Lynn Stefano of the Family Literacy Project in South Africa. They also acknowledge the contribution of Kathy Knowles and the Osu Children's Library Project in producing the colour books, donating copies, and allowing their use for the presentation and this article.

#### **Author details**

<sup>1</sup>Hunter College, New York, NY, USA. <sup>2</sup>Rwanda Education Board, Kigali, Rwanda. <sup>3</sup>Lwaggulwe Mixed Primary School, Kalisizo, Uganda.

Received: 16 May 2014 Accepted: 9 July 2014

Published: 19 July 2014

#### **References**

- Baker, L. 1999. Opportunities at home and in the community that foster reading engagement. In *Engaged Reading: Processes, Practices, and Policy Implications*, ed. J Guthrie and D Alvermann, 105–133. New York: Teachers College.
- Carr-Hill, RA, A Okech, AR Katahoire, T Kakooza, AN Ndidde, and J Oxenham. 2001. *Adult Literacy Programmes in Uganda*. Washington D.C.: World Bank.
- Carter, DR, DJ Chard, and JL Pool. 2009. A family strengths approach to early language and literacy development. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 36: 519–526.



- DeBruin-Parecki, A. 2009. Establishing a family literacy program with a focus on interactive reading: the role of research and accountability. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 36(5): 385–392.
- Desmond, S. 2004. Literacy for now and for the future: working with parents and children. *Language Matters* 35(2): 348–362.
- Desmond, S. 2008. Family Literacy in a Rural Setting: The Story of the Family Literacy Project. In *Family Literacy: Experiences from Africa and Around the World*, ed. S Desmond and M Elfert, 33–40. Cape Town and Hamburg: DDV international and UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.
- Desmond, S, and M Elfert (eds.). 2008. *Family Literacy: Experiences from Africa and Around the World*. Cape Town and Hamburg: DDV International and UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.
- Dlamini, SM. 2009. *Early Language and Literacy Learning in a Peripheral African Setting: A Study of Children's Participation in Home and School Communicative and Literacy Practices in and Around Manzini, Swaziland*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.
- Dudley-Marling, C. 2009. Home-school literacy connections: the perceptions of African American and immigrant ESL parents in two urban communities. *Teachers College Record* 111(7): 1713–1752.
- Family Literacy at Bethesda Arts Centre. 2006. Unpublished facilitator's guide. Family Literacy Project.
- Family Literacy at Kitengesa Community Library. 2009. Unpublished facilitator's guide. Kitengesa Community Library.
- Heath, SB. 1982. What no bedtime story means: narrative skills at home and school. *Language in Society* 11(2): 49–76.
- Heath, SB. 1983. *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Knowles, K. 2007. My Red book. Winnipeg: Osu Children's Library Fund.
- Machet, M, and N Wessels. 2006. Family literacy projects and the public library. *Innovation* 32: 55–73.
- Mashishi, L. 2009. The Families Learning Together Programme: Working in a South African Township. In *Reading in Africa, Beyond the School*, ed. K Parry, 229–244. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- McCarthy, SJ. 2000. Home-school connections: a review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Research* 93(3): 145.
- Ntuli, D, and EJ Pretorius. 2005. Laying foundations for academic language competence: the effects of storybook reading on Zulu language, literacy and discourse development. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 23(1): 91–109.
- Nutbrown, C, P Hannon, and A Morgan. 2005. *Early literacy work with families: policy, practice and research*. London: Sage.
- Onyewadume, MA. 2009. The Role of Housemaids in Reading in Botswana: Practices, Challenges, and Counselling Implications. In *Reading in Africa, Beyond the School*, ed. K Parry, 97–104. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Openjuru, G. 2009. Literacy practices in a rural Ugandan community. In *Reading in Africa, Beyond the School*, ed. K Parry, 41–65. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Parry, K. 2009a. Languages, Literacies, and Libraries: A View from Africa. In *The Languages of Africa and the Diaspora: Educating for Language Awareness*, ed. JA Kleifgen and GC Bond, 76–88. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Parry, K. 2009b. The story of a library: research and development in an African village. *Teachers College Record* 111(9): 2127–2147.
- Pawlitzy, C. 2009. Understanding the Reader: Reading Preferences of Kikuyu and Luo Speakers in Kenya. In *Reading in Africa, Beyond the School*, ed. K Parry 66–81. Kampala, Uganda: Fountain Publishers.
- Street, BV. 1984. *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Timmons, V. 2008. Challenges in researching family literacy programs. *Canadian Psychology* 49(2): 96–102.
- Uganda Government. 1992. *Education for National Integration and Development: Government White Paper on Implementation of the Recommendation of the Report of the Education Policy Review Commission*. Kampala: Author.

doi:10.1186/s13616-014-0013-2

Cite this article as: Parry et al.: Working with parents to promote children's literacy: a family literacy project in Uganda. *Multilingual Education* 2014 **4**:13.

Submit your manuscript to a SpringerOpen<sup>®</sup> journal and benefit from:

- Convenient online submission
- Rigorous peer review
- Immediate publication on acceptance
- Open access: articles freely available online
- High visibility within the field
- Retaining the copyright to your article

Submit your next manuscript at ► [springeropen.com](http://springeropen.com)