

Introduction

Children and books belong together, have a right to be together; *need* to be together. Reading is a critical part of not only education but of life. A child who can read with enjoyment will read more and read better. Once the cycle has begun, the path to a better education is clear - *if* the child in question has books to read.

That does not always happen. Barely 8% of South African schools have libraries and those are sometimes poorly stocked and staffed. Although there are thousands of beautifully produced South African children's books written on appropriate topics (many written in or translated into indigenous languages), our children and our books are not being introduced to each other and that shortcoming is becoming startlingly obvious.

In communities where there is only one standpipe for water and one toilet between many families, where people are hungry and where jobs are scarce, books are nevertheless not a luxury; they are even more essential. If anything is to change for the current generation of young children in South Africa, they have to be literate. They have to be educated. They have to have access to books. They have to read. One sustained intervention at reading level can make a big difference to children facing the problems of crime, poverty, lack of resources and opportunities, and joblessness in their communities. It is our responsibility as concerned citizens to make whatever efforts we can to help bring books and children together and, critically, foster a *love* of story, books and reading.

Who are our target group?

Children are incredibly courageous. They survive everything that adults have to cope with, and often even more so because their voices are neither heard, not listened to. We want to reach young people under the age of twenty who have missed out on books and story in their lives, to encourage them to read for knowledge, consolation in times of trouble and pleasure. We want to publish their work electronically and share it with other children in other places and situations. We want to create an archive of childhood in South Africa for them and for children everywhere. The Children's Book Network will hold workshops for young people and their adults. That could include teachers, parents and carers, librarians and volunteers who want to bring books to children and children to books.

Who are we?

Writers Gcina Mhlophe, Lesley Beake and Sindiwe Magona dreamed the Children's Book Network into existence. The name says it all - *Children's Book Network*. That's what we are doing, networking to bring books to children. Our network has already extended to include Rotary clubs in South Africa and Sweden, Bookchat (SA's premier source of information on South African books), Biblionef (which concentrates on getting books to children in their own languages), other organizations working in reading internationally and locally and to the Universities of Cape Town, Western Cape and Stellenbosch. We have warm relations with Franschhoek Literary Festival and the Avusa publishing group's literacy publications. Through a programme of presentations and a network of emails and personal contacts, we are growing constantly.



Methods

Three core activities: Workshops, Website, Book donation

1. Workshops

Many years of experience have gone into planning workshops that will be individually tailored to specific community needs. Stage one in any workshop planning is meeting with community leaders and members - and children - and finding out what they need most. Then we aim to work in conjunction with local service organization and volunteers to design exciting, vibrant and effective workshop experiences that will reverberate within the community. Workshops should cover at least three days for maximum impact and be meticulously documented and followed up.

This will almost always include:

With young participants

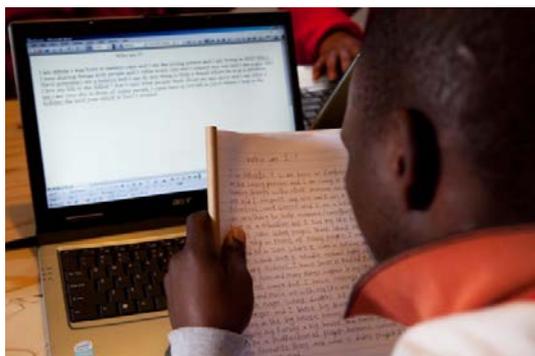
- Entertainment and inspiration around a theme (Home, Friends, Love, My landscape ...)
- A carefully chosen programme of readings around the theme
- Story telling and story sharing
- Discussion and debate and group writing (fiction and non-fiction)
- Presentations and displays
- Photo-journalism
- Computer skills and use of exciting technology
- Communications skills and debate

With core library

- Library upgrade and refurbishment
- Librarian training
- Book donation
- Teacher involvement and training / inspiration
- Parent involvement and encouragement



2. Website



The World Wide Web is not a threat to books and reading, it can add a totally absorbing aspect to the art of story and the science of information. It can never replace a love of books - but a child has to be able to read to make any sense of it at all. Books and the Internet today are both powerful pillars in educational development.

The website is a network without which this project is homeless. It is where we will communicate, publish, translate, encourage, report back and discuss. It will be a forum for the business of children's books and a way of connecting individuals and organizations working for reading.

One of many ways of using the website will be the publication of translations that can be freely downloaded anywhere in the world. Workshop writing and photographs will appear here, as will individual stories, plays and poems. We plan to translate some of these into different indigenous languages. We plan to ask permission to translate texts into indigenous languages and have them available on the website. We hope to develop e-publishing for children *by* children through a combination of workshops and website and put children everywhere in touch with each other and with their own dreams, hopes and fears.

3. Book Donation

Working with our partners in Swedish Rotary and with South African and other book experts, we are developing core lists of best-loved books (books best-loved by *children*) that will be individually tailored to each community and its needs. Multiple copies of some of these will be donated as well as suitable books in local languages sourced through Biblionef.

We hope to also allocate funding for the job of publishing translations - or translations of extracts from longer books in indigenous languages. This has to be carefully approached with writers, illustrators and publishers but the ideal situation would be to have books in the community library in English and translations on the website.



CBN Goals

We have refined and distilled our ideas until we have reached the point where we believe we can achieve our missions. Our strategy comes from being writers, storytellers and educators (all of the three founders - Gcina Mhlophe, Lesley Beake and Sindiwe Magona) and from many years of experience giving workshops to writers, teachers, librarians and, above all, children.

We will begin with six workshops a year as a target - and grow from there. We will begin in W Cape and KZN - and expand from there. We will begin with modest expectations - and raise the bar as we work.

We have a three-year plan. It is (in reality) a ten-year plan because we don't think it will be time to stop in 2015. It won't be time to stop ten years after that either ...

Impact

We view our workshops as long-term investment in communities - and we are looking to work in areas that have not received much sustained attention from NGO initiatives. Our pilot project was in an informal settlement near Simon's Town and resulted in a knock-on effect with library refurbishment, sorting and cataloguing of donated books, librarian training and improved use of the library by the workshop participants.

As soon as the website is operational, we will be using that to stay in contact with our participants, publish their work and mentor future writing. Part of each workshop will consist of the teaching of computer and technical skills to complement this.



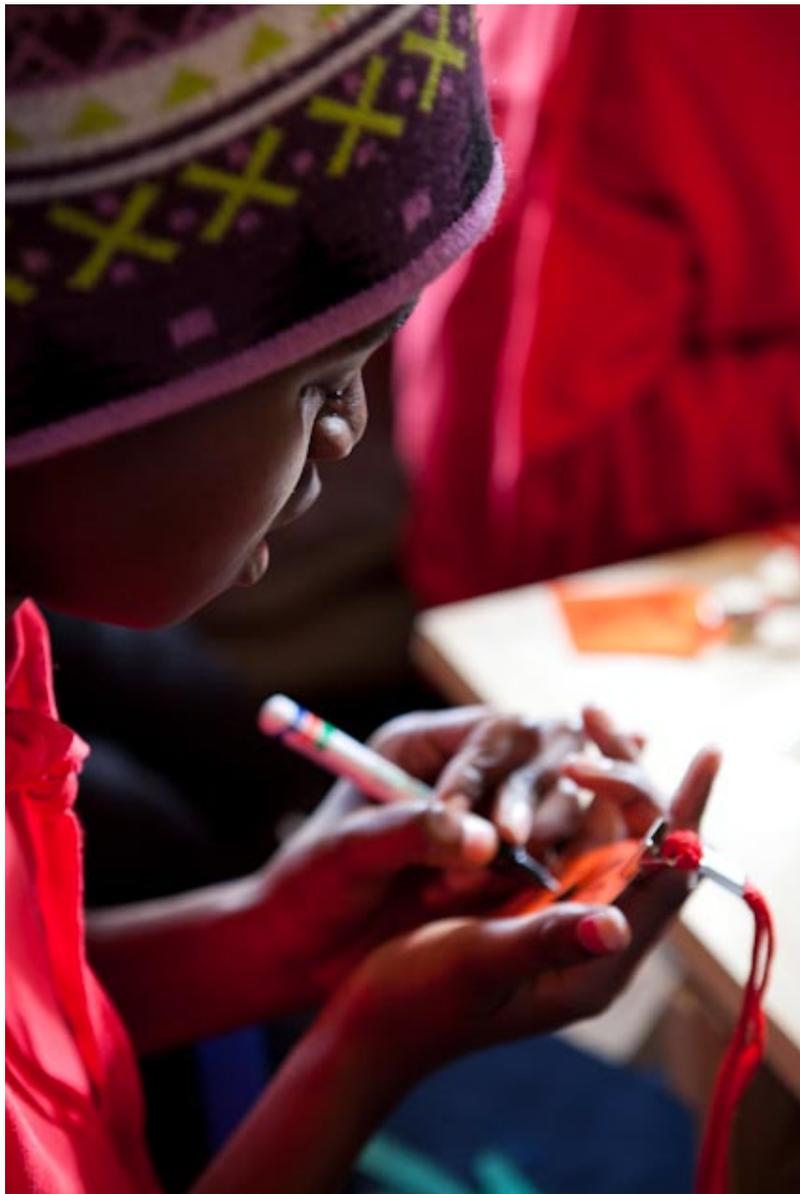
Activities:

- CBN will try to bring the best books - the books best *loved* by children - to communities where there are few books of any kind. Core libraries will be backed up by translations of texts into local languages on our website.
- We aim to promote reading through an interactive web network and also by using social media, reading tablets and popular ways of connecting people, children and ideas.
- We will hold workshops to raise reading and writing awareness and increase confidence. These workshops will include discussion, storytelling, drama, meeting role models from the community and elsewhere, art, photography and other media that lead to better involvement with books.
- Through the website we will remain in contact with communities where we have given workshops, encouraging further reading activities and library promotion.
- The website will provide a network where concerned people and organizations can be in touch with each other, publicize what they are doing and communicate.
- CBN will be in contact with reading initiatives worldwide, but especially in Africa.
- We will publicize and promote the reading resources South Africa already has.
- We will nourish and support new writers and illustrators, editors and translators and provide a skills register.
- Through the workshops, we will create an archive of childhood in South Africa both historically and currently.
- We will do this in a transparent and honest manner in terms of accountability and the responsibilities of good governance.



APPENDICES

- 1 Brief outline of CBN (One page)
- 2 Who we are - details of founders



Appendix 1

In brief ... Children's Book Network

Our Goal is to promote reading, books and writing for children in South Africa at every level.

We will do this through workshops in communities. First we will listen to what each community really wants and needs, then we will put together a combination of activities and a sharing of skills that excites creation of new texts and illustrations on important themes and encourages writing by young people as well as storytelling and reading.

The work produced will form a core of texts and illustrations that get to the heart of what young South Africa is thinking, fearing, hoping ... dreaming. This work will be published on our website and available freely to anyone in the world but particularly for parents, teachers and other young people to enjoy and think about.

In addition the website will be a discussion and idea exchange for anyone interested in children and reading, a way of publicising new ideas and opportunities - a home for reading and for writing for children in South Africa.

Book donations of core books on carefully chosen themes will form the backbone of library enrichment and encouragement.

Children's Book Network already has a network of passionate book and story people. They include people involved in community drama, traditional storytelling, poetry, film-making, youth novels, photography, early reading, illustration, book evaluation, new writers (and old writers), IT experts and, above all readers. We hope to bring them, and others, together in an even bigger and stronger network of *people who will make a difference*.

14 April 2012

Gcina Mhlophe
Lesley Beake
Sindiwe Magona

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Appendix 2

Who are we?

Three of South Africa's longest-serving writer's for children and young people - we have all been in the business of books for decades - felt compelled to do something positive about children and reading. We want to share our own skills as writers, teachers and storytellers. The result is the Children's Book Network, still in its early stages in April 2012, but moving swiftly along.

Gcina Mhlophe

Has been writing and performing on stage and screen for the past 24 years. She has written many children's books as well as adult audience poetry and short stories and plays. Her writings are published all over the world and translated into German, French, Italian, Swahili and Japanese. Her work is used extensively in schools and universities. Currently, Gcina focuses on making books available to poor South African rural communities by making sure that libraries are built and are stocked with locally and culturally relevant books. Gcina Mhlophe received Honorary Doctorates from the London Open University as well as the University of Natal.

Lesley Beake

Has written over eighty books and edited hundreds more while working as a commissioning editor with several major educational publishers. Many of her books are for the challenging age group 12-16 although she has written books for children of all ages from pre-school onwards. Some have been translated into languages as diverse as Swedish and Korean. Her books have won many awards, including the Sir Percy Fitzpatrick Award (twice) and the M-Net Prize for Literature and she was South Africa's nominee for both the Astrid Lindgren and the Hans Christian Anderson Awards. She also manages a website for the Kalahari Peoples Network. www.kalaharipeoples.net

Sindiwe Magona

Award-winning storyteller, motivational speaker, actor, Xhosa teacher and translator, Sindiwe Magona received the Molteno Medal (Gold) for her contribution to isiXhosa language and culture; the Premio Grinzane Terre D'Ontranto for writing books that reflect social concerns; the Literary Lifetime Award for her contribution to South African Arts; the White Ribbon Award for her latest novel, *Beauty's Gift*, in recognition of her championing of the rights of women and children. She is currently Writer-in Residence at the University of Western Cape. She has written over a hundred books for children of all ages.

~ Contact person: Lesley Beake ~ lesley@lesleybeake.co.za 082 6464 420 ~



Self portraits by children at Red Hill pilot project



Versions of CBN logo as seen by children

All photographs throughout by Melinda Borbély: www.mb.photography.com