

# **My Book Buddy: A Special Children's Library at School**

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## **Abstract**

*In 2010, the My Book Buddy foundation started the first children's library at a primary school in the slums of Nairobi in Kenya. Not a children's library in the traditional sense of the word, but an evidence based concept which is already embraced by 18 countries, and which has allowed 22,500 children to participate in active reading.*

*This paper gives an insight into the various aspects of the concept, the success factors in the different developing countries, and the necessity to realize more My Book Buddy children's libraries in co-operation with expert librarians who have knowledge of knowledge of children's literature and insight into the reading process of children.*

*A window to the world has been opened for children who are usually deprived of books because they are too expensive or out of reach for them, not only figuratively speaking, but also in the literal meaning of the word.*

**Keywords:** School library, developing countries, teacher-librarian, reading

## **Introduction**

'Every child has the right to read, and the facilities that make this possible', is an accepted statement.

Every parent, teacher, librarian, politician and director will endorse this fundamental right, and accept its consequences, for example by helping to realise and utilise libraries and school libraries in the children's environments.

By creating and maintaining physical spaces where children's books are available and can be read, local and national governments and private initiatives respond to this variation of the Rights of the Child, ratified by 189 countries in 1989.

The Millennium Development Goals of 2015 (United Nations) emphasise further access to education in Objective 2, and this should go beyond creating schools and the right to free education.

My Book Buddy stimulates children's reading and therefore supports the regular language and reading instruction which are compulsory subjects in primary education in all countries. To read texts fluently and to interpret them forms the basis for all other subjects. But there is more.

"Literacy unlocks the door to learning. Throughout life, is essential to development and health, and opens the way for democratic participation and active citizenship."  
(Kofi Annan, former United Nations Secretary-General)

The emergent literacy in the early phase of child development is a three-dimensional process where the children, the teachers, and the parents inspire, inform, and stimulate each other.

My Book Buddy argues in favour of the signing of the My Book Buddy Bali deal by all the present members during the IASL meeting in August 2013. This deal includes the right of reading and the facilities which make it possible, by signing it a statement will be presented to the world.

In the following we will cover in more detail the necessity and how this can be achieved in both an attractive and effective way, for little expense, in places in the world where there is no electricity, which makes a properly equipped school library impossible. Here theory and practice go hand in hand.

### **The 10 Principals for the My Book Buddy system: Back to Basics**

My Book Buddy is a private non-governmental organisation, that focuses on school libraries for children in need by placing bookcases in every existing primary school, made by local carpenters, and that give credit to the name of My Book Buddy. This case is filled with reading books with the educational level of the children in that particular class, and they are written in the language of that particular country. The number of books is calculated so that a child can read one book every week at home for the duration of a whole school year. The My Book Buddy rucksack that every child receives makes sure that the books won't get wet or dirty on the way from and to school. Once a week the My Book Buddy flag will fly so that the children know it is time to choose a new book. The teacher will maintain an easy administrative system, which is made available by My Book Buddy. The children record their reading results on their own bookmark. All elements are an integral part of the My Book Buddy system, and the school agrees to the terms and conditions of My Book Buddy by signing the contract.

#### **1. The My Book Buddy bookcase**

The local carpenters receive instructions with the correct measurements and know how to build the bookcases. Included is a shopping list, so that the carpenter can buy the right materials, for example the right amount of wood and paint, to build a My Book Buddy bookcase for every classroom. The bookcase can be built in one day, the wheels and lock included. After the bookcase has been painted it will look like a book itself. The colourful logo is an eye catcher in every classroom. The back of the bookcase is coated with chalkboard paint, thus giving the opportunity to visualise relative information. In schools where the classrooms can't be locked, the bookcases can easily be moved to a room where the door can be locked, such as the teachers' lounge. The production process is followed by many people, which makes the involvement of children, parents, and teachers in the My Book Buddy programme very present in the community.

#### **2. The books**

The amount of books per class has to be sufficient to provide a choice for every child to read a new book each week for the duration of the school year.

This implies that with a minimum of 50 children per class 60 to 70 titles should be available, with 20 children there should be at least 40 titles.

The selection consists of different categories: fiction and non-fiction, animal stories, poetry collections, fairy tales and folk stories, books on religion, informative and instructive books. For the highest classes a dictionary, an atlas, an encyclopaedia with lots of pictures and a Bible, Koran or book on world religions should be always available for use in class as a source of reference, and not be taken home. Additionally, every teacher will be supplied with a book to read from in class.

The level of the books should be matched with the age and development of the children. The pre-schoolers and kindergarten children should be supplied with books with simple and limited text and lots of pictures for the teacher to read from and books for beginning readers. The increasing difficulty of the books is visible in the use of language: from books with one sentence per line for the 4 to 5 year-olds to novels with sentences of more than 14 words per sentence and 3 or more polysyllabic words for the advanced readers.

The books should be selected in the language which is used in school, and the amount of books in the mother tongue, if available, should be a maximum of ten percent. In a number of countries bilingual books are available for children to practice bilingual reading. The purchasing of books should take place in close coordination with a librarian, a professional bookseller, and a teacher or director at the school in question. Guidelines on language, categories, publishers etc. for buyers for My Book Buddy are available.

### **3. *The rucksack***

A waterproof rucksack in the colours light blue and dark blue with the logo of My Book Buddy protects the book during transport from and to school. The rucksacks are produced in sewing workshops in the country in which they are sold. Using this method we try to support the local economies. At the launch, every child receives one rucksack.

### **4. *The flag***

The My Book Buddy flag, made from firm polythene, with the full colour logo, flies once a week on the school playground. The ceremony consists of the children raising the flag, a short introduction by the school principal about the importance of reading, and the announcement that on that day a new book can be chosen. A self-composed My Book Buddy reading song will be heard regularly at the time of the ceremony.

### **5. *The lending system***

Because of a lack of electricity there are no computers, and therefore the teachers will receive a folder with the student registration system in it and a list to write down the books in alphabetical order. Every book will be marked with the My Book Buddy stamp to prevent theft and to mark the books as part of the My Book Buddy collection. On the supplied labels a number is written down that will also be noted in the folder behind the title in the book. Once a week every child returns the borrowed book and chooses a new one, that will also be recorded in the lending system.

Library passes with personal data are therefore unnecessary and irrelevant because the huts and the houses where the children live aren't built in streets and don't have numbers. The teachers who are responsible for the My Book Buddy library at their schools, progress gradually to teacher-librarians. The developed profile meets the following abilities:

Knowledge

- knowledge of the environment and perceptions that children have
- knowledge of the books in the My Book Buddy Bookcase

Skills

- can advise children in their selection of the books
- can assist children in which level of book to choose
- can give challenging and inspiring library classes
- organises reading-related activities in the classroom and at school
- implements the classes in the schedule and in other subjects
- carefully keeps the registration system in order
- actively participates in staff meetings and places My Book Buddy on the agenda
- hosts parent meetings
- creates and encourages a reading culture

Attitude

- is interested in children's literature
- is alert and critical to the supply and content of the books
- visits bookstores
- seeks cooperation with the librarian

### **6. The bookmark**

On the reverse side of the My Book Buddy bookmark the children record and can see the number of books they have read. This encourages the reading habits of children, and after primary school they are in possession of their own reading history, which often amounts up to 240 books. For children who in the past had no book resources it is a true revolution, and a huge boost for their individual development.

### **7. The contract**

At the official opening of the My Book Buddy library, usually accompanied by speeches, singing and dancing, the parties sign the contract. In this contract they promise, for instance, that they will actually lend the books out at least once a week. A huge cultural shift will thus take place, because in the past people thought books were too expensive to be lent, especially to children who could not be trusted in bringing them back. The contract is signed by the head of the school, individual teachers, representatives of parents and representatives of the students, both boys and girls, so that the responsibilities of all concerned are assured.

### **8. Suggestions for library classes**

Easy-to-do and reading-related activities are described for teachers who have never had any children's books at their disposal, and paid no attention to children's literature during their teacher training. They are often not familiar with reading as a leisure activity or reading just for fun. Suggestions from My Book Buddy include dialogic reading, reading contests,



making a written summary, delivering a classroom lecture, etc. It turns out that children master the characteristics of the various genres surprisingly quickly. The scheduling of a weekly library lesson as part of the curriculum is usually achieved after one year.

### **9. Activities for community involvement and parent participation**

A reading culture at school and at home requires a number of cross-curricular activities which are innovative for existing schools with disadvantaged children and their teams. It will take time to bring about that change, because the frame of reference is completely missing. Reading aloud at home for family members and siblings, and looking at pictures together adds a new dimension to the oral culture that is widespread in many regions.

### **10. Annual evaluation**

The evaluation form, which must be completed by the school management each year, gives My Book Buddy an insight in the quality of the processes, the progress, the needs and problems, so that the system can be constantly improved.

#### **Application**

My Book Buddy offers existing organisations focusing on supporting disadvantaged children the opportunity to apply for a My Book Buddy Library.

Criteria for awarding the My Book Buddy programme in schools:

1. My Book Buddy is realised at an existing school for primary education.
2. The school building must have at least one lockable classroom for storage of the book cases.
3. A continuous reading pathway is guaranteed for at least four classes at school.
4. There are at least 15 students per class.
5. The school team supports the application, and is willing to participate in the programme with all classes.
6. A school team who encourage the students to take their books home to promote a reading culture.
7. Annual progress reports are submitted.

### **How can the success of My Book Buddy be explained?**

The basic principles and brand values that are applicable to the concept, and form the main ideas for the vision, mission, strategy and operation of My Book Buddy can be summarised in the following terms

1. expertise
2. pro-children, child friendly
3. simplicity
4. impact

(Strategic plan and Long-term policy plan My Book Buddy, 2012)

#### **1. Expertise**

The expertise must be visible and recognisable in the following areas where theoretical and practical knowledge and experience play a role in the approach, products and services.

##### **1.1. Knowledge of the development and needs of children**

The motor development, social and emotional development, speech and language development, cognitive development, and the development of childrens' imagination all

evolve in certain steps, and are strongly influenced by environmental factors that may vary by social background or country (Notten, 2012). An understanding of the characteristics of the infant, toddler, preschool, and school phases are essential for choosing the right games, books and media (Mediasmarties, 2010), (Murphy,2008).

However, not every child has access to materials supporting the development stages and stimulating the senses. For the majority of children a self-made football of waste paper is a very precious toy. This contrasts sharply with the toy cabinets their peers in other parts of the world can choose from. But children around the world have one thing in common: they are curious, inquisitive and eager to read. (My Book Buddy Strategic plan, 2012).

“A growing body of research recognises that ECEC brings a wide range of benefits, including social and economic benefits; better child well-being and learning outcomes; more equitable outcomes and reduction of poverty; increased intergenerational social mobility; higher female labour market participation and gender equality; increased fertility rates; and better social and economic development for society at large.”  
(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD, 2012).

But all these benefits are conditional on quality. Expanding access to services without attention to quality will not deliver beneficial outcomes for children or the long-term productivity benefits for society. Furthermore, research has shown that if quality is low, it can have long-lasting detrimental effects on child development, instead of delivering positive effects.

### **Statement**

My Book Buddy provides a system that meets the needs of children, suits the development and is geared to their natural curiosity and inquisitiveness.

#### **1.2 Knowledge of the importance of reading and development in children**

The basis for teaching good reading skills is the same for all children regardless of their background, gender or specific learning needs (Allington, 2008). Reading is a basic skill that will largely determine the quality of life and success that adults will enjoy later in society. The school curriculum requires good reading skills and as children have an improved vocabulary, they read easily and have fun whilst doing so.

The reading development of children begins by putting the child in contact with the right books, at an early stage of development, starting with the colourful laminated picture books and ending with voluminous novels and reference books in print, e-readers or tablets. Garbe (2009) distinguishes between different reading goals:

- Required reading (for work, study or school)
- Instrumental reading (for work, study or school, but of free will)
- Conceptual reading (not for work, study or school, but for an intrinsic development goal)
- Social Reading (to participate in the community)
- Discursive reading (comprehend and analyse a text for personal satisfaction)
- Aesthetic Reading (experience the beauty of a text for personal satisfaction)
- Intimate reading (own subjective reading, reading pleasure, and happiness)

(Stichting Lezen, 2012).

The lack of books and texts or other media are the reason why a large proportion of the children throughout the world do not read, and remain illiterate with all its consequences. They lack the information and knowledge, but also the ability to dream in a wonderful world without worrying whether the story has a happy ending or not! Or identify with their hero who overcomes the difficulties, which they themselves continue to face in daily life with lack of water, food, and appropriate shelter. Children and adults in developing countries often call conceptual reading as their main objective.

#### Continuous reading pathway

Children who are being read to at an early age turn out to be more interested in reading by themselves at the age of four or five than children who are being read to occasionally or not at all from the age of three.

Reading to children has a number of positive effects on their development. It encourages reading and language skills. It is an important activity that brings them into contact with books, and prepares them to read by themselves when they are older. Their literary literacy develops when children focus their attention on the story while being read to. They develop an understanding of the structure of stories, the building of tension, the difference between fiction and non-fiction, and they are able to enjoy the style of storytelling and dialogue.

As the teacher of the nursery class (Kindergarten, ECD) has access to books, she can start interactive reading (dialogic reading). Asking questions about the pictures, characters and events in the story ensures that the children's vocabulary is expanded and diversified. Establishing connections between the text and their own experiences is essential (Mol, S, 2010). Children refine and automatize their reading technique and they can recognise words increasingly fast during regularly reading education. After a period of three years they read fast and more fluently (Huizinga, 2010). Readability indices can determine the difficulty of texts (Staphorsius, 2008).

In Western society, many educators are concerned about the decline in children's reading, and reading skills (Senechal, 2006). A variety of expensive programmes for reading promotion for children have been launched. Bookstart is a reading promotion programme based in the UK and in the Netherlands, which brings parents and care-givers, at home and at the nursery, in contact with books sending children book packages, and promotes visiting the library.

In developing countries, there is a chronic lack of good books to learn to read from and a shortage of well-qualified teachers.

#### **Statement**

My Book Buddy offers a variety of books to read and to be read from, which encourages the continuous reading pathway from early childhood education onwards, after which each class of the school has access to books at the relevant reading level of the children.

My Book Buddy stimulates reading promotion by selecting the appropriate books.

#### 1.3 Knowledge of the book sector

Renowned educational publishers have provided a separate fund for storybooks for children matching their reading development in primary schools. In the former British- and French-

speaking colonies one encounters publishers who have settled there and have provided an opportunity for the writers and illustrators to publish their books locally. This creates an availability of well-translated and beautiful children's books that appeals to the imagination and add to the culture of a country which makes it easier for children to identify.

While in the Western countries and the US publishers are eagerly looking for a multimedia approach to reading instruction and children's books, traditional children's books in print are found predominantly in developing countries. Digitised picture books, book apps, and filmed books are also very popular in some countries.

In many countries, the traditional blackboards make way for digital whiteboards, and publishers respond to this by adapting their reading materials to the specific requirements of changing didactics. Reading is no longer reserved for the printed book, but other carriers make reading attractive and publishers also need programmers in addition to writers and illustrators.

"The development of Internet sites with appealing stories for young children, must be a top priority in education in the coming years. These web sites provide new opportunities for meaningful use of ICT in the lower classes of primary school".  
(Bus & De Jong, 2007).

However, due to lack of electricity and hardware these developments remain as yet unattainable for underprivileged children in developing countries.

### **Statement**

My Book Buddy facilitates the reading process in a traditional but effective way.

#### **1.4 Knowledge of the library sector**

The World Guide to Library, Archive and Information Science Education (K.G.Saur Verlag, Munchen, 2007) offers a clear overview of the organisations that present themselves professionally and work towards a social goal.

In many countries, however, it is hard to find high-quality training for children's librarians or multimedia librarians. Working in the library of a university requires other interests and qualities than assisting children at the children's books department or a public or school library. However, these are the places where the foundations are laid.

The changing reading habits and digital innovations bring libraries in a transition phase where purchasing, cataloguing and lending books are no longer the sole core business. Cultural entrepreneurship with well-founded business models makes way for government-subsidised institutions. The prioritisation of activities and programmes, and optimizing the processes require careful consideration in which librarians are trained to become media coaches and information specialists, who guide the media literacy of society. The children who have access to all media are often ahead of the librarians.

This paradigm shift does not yet take place in a number of locations around the world, where digital media are not available, and where children live who have never even set eyes on a book.

Professional educators discover more and more the importance of a well-equipped, modern school library, the content, nature and size of which can vary considerably.

“• The school library programme supports learning and teaching for the entire school community

- This service provides expertise in two different disciplines: Education and Library Information Science (LIS)
- School librarians offer advice, professional development and knowledge of appropriate learning and teaching materials, digital and non-digital (Phillips, 2011)
- School libraries throughout the world are run / managed by school librarians / teacher librarians who have been educated to carry out this work and have received an applicable accreditation.
- The most important resource services are the human resources. Teacher librarians contribute to quality teaching and authentic learning (Phillips, 2011)
- One of the functions of the school library is to teach learners media and information skills.
- The promotion of literacy and the love of reading is perhaps the school library's most important function”.

( Boelens, 2012)

Attractive, coloured, open spaces with floor cushions, tables and chairs, bookshelves with an abundance of children's books by renowned children's authors, richly illustrated, and an accessible catalogue are reserved in particular for the richer countries.

At many schools in underprivileged areas, the concept of the (school) library is reserved for a wooden or iron storage box with exercise books and dusty textbooks.

Drawing up a list of requirements, and the building and furnishing of a library in developing countries is time and labour intensive, and requires a high budget and the ability of dealing with corrupt contractors and landowners. After the construction, the space often turns out to be too small for the large number of children who want to read a book. A table with ten chairs is not enough for a primary school with 2000 pupils. Children who spend more than an hour walking to school every day often don't have the time or energy to visit a separate library building, where the lending of books is an unusual thing. The lack of electricity is also a major problem in the slums and rural areas of many developing countries.

### **Statement**

The My Book Buddy concept utilises the existing infrastructure of the school and classroom, and because of the small-scale class lending system, the monitoring of the reading progress is easier to record and realise.

My Book Buddy redefines the concept of children's libraries for underprivileged children in certain disadvantaged areas in the world.

### **1.5 Knowledge of the education system**

The education system, didactics and pedagogical insights differ from country to country. The number of children per class varies, and the principles for this number are applied in a free way.

The difference between public, private and informal schools also show major differences in quality. Children sitting on the floor instead of benches, or with too many children on crowded school benches, is a situation to which people resign themselves. The overcrowded classrooms are often dusty, poorly maintained, too hot with no or poor ventilation, toilets and water. The public schools in developing countries are characterised by a chronic lack of teaching materials (Lohani ,2010). One notebook and pencil per child for a whole year is more the rule than the exception.

The training of teachers leaves much to be desired. The status of this poorly paid occupational group is low, and as a result the children are confronted with de-motivated teachers. The quantity is insufficient for the ever increasing demand. The handwritten records on posters in the principal's room give a transparent insight into this permanent shortage.

### **Statement**

My Book Buddy focuses on early childhood and primary education, because that is where the basis is laid for later reading development, and the learning process for this can evolve in a natural way.

My Book Buddy is not limited to providing a collection of books, but stimulates the different teaching methods and the school management in a practical and inspiring way.

### **1.6 Knowledge of the country**

History, religion, politics, size, location and composition of the population, and the proportion between urban and rural areas strongly determine the state of prosperity in a country. The contrast between rich and poor is still very large in many countries. A fast-growing young population in developing countries calls for large-scale facilities and education, which the elderly can hardly produce ( Boelens, 2012). Co-investment of the community where My Book Buddy is realised encourages independence, and enhances the commitment, responsibility, and education of the population.

### **Statement**

My Book Buddy combats illiteracy and promotes literacy in several developing countries.

The simplicity of the concept and the direct connection to the children's lives and environment in the various developing countries show that the impact of the My Book Buddy programme is huge. This investment in children contributes to the future of a nation.

Table 1: Results June 2013 (My Book Buddy 2013)

Number of children actively reading	25.000
Number of involved teachers	560
Number of countries	18 countries: Colombia, Peru, Panama, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Vietnam, Zanzibar, China, Cambodia, Indonesia, Ghana, Gambia,

	India, Thailand, Nepal, Senegal
Number of schools	114
Number of classes/book cases	560

“My Book Buddy is a goldmine,” said a school inspector in Kenya, and he is right.

### **Funding My Book Buddy**

The organisation and financing of the non-governmental organisation is completely dependent on donations. The fundraising takes place in the Netherlands, through individuals, as well as the service industry, companies, and schools.

Although everyone recognises MBB’s objective, and is sympathetic towards it, there is no sense of urgency like there is in fundraising in the event of a natural disaster or serious illness, and the effort to raise money should be greater. Partnerships at home and abroad, such as the Children’s Book Week in 2012 in collaboration with the CPNB and Vara, one of the many broadcasting companies, generated a lot of free publicity. Participation and accountability are crucial to charity organisations.

Students of teacher training courses, and students in other relevant undergraduate programmes, can use their international internship to the further implementation of the My Book Buddy programme on a cluster of schools in one of the developing countries.

Reading marathons and sponsored reading in schools, or organising a children’s book fair can be planned throughout the world, and provide not only considerable sums of money, but also necessary awareness. This form of development aid is geared to the level of children, and is easily transferable because of the positive approach. It is supported by professional educators, who know the importance of reading.

My Book Buddy lets children read!



Figure 1: Reading in Kenya

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## Biographical note



**Cathy Spierenburg** (1946) was a formal teacher at primary schools and at a Training College for teachers. She managed the Dutch School television for more than 9 years and in 2000 she started the children television channel of the Public Broadcasting Zapp/Zappelin who is very successful. During that nine years period as a channel manager she was involved with different projects in developing countries. She is active in the field of children media and member of the board of Stichting Lezen in the Netherlands.