Sign Language Storytime and Inclusive Public Libraries Serving the Deaf

By Elizaberth Giles

What kinds of services do deaf children and youth access in public libraries in Zambia? Do we have resources, programs, and services designed with the needs of deaf youth? How can we develop libraries that are more inclusive to deaf children and children with disabilities?

At Lubuto Library Partners we began seriously engaging with these questions three years ago, when the number of deaf children and youth visiting the Lubuto Model Library in Garden Compound started to increase. The staff of the Model library were delighted to see that deaf children enjoyed visiting the library, but since we had no staff members who knew Zambian Sign Language, the staff struggled to communicate with the children. We had no specialized resources for these children, no targeted programs, and a limited understanding of how to make our services more accessible to them.

"I brought my elder brother to the library. He does not go to school and it's his first time at the library. He does not speak so we use sign language to communicate. He says he likes the place and enjoyed watching pictures in the books."

But we knew that deaf children in Zambia need public libraries. There are over 16,000 deaf Zambians, and the majority of the deaf children are out-of-school and stigmatized by their communities (World Federation for the Deaf, 2008). Public libraries offer these children a safe, inclusive space where they can learn and grow. They also offer a space in which hearing children can learn about deaf children and Zambian Sign Language, promoting a more inclusive, connected future for all children.

We ultimately established partnerships with two deaf organizations-- The Zambian National Association for the Deaf (ZNAD), and Zambian Deaf Youth and Women (ZDYW). The Zambian National Association for the Deaf conducted an informative training for our library staff members that helped them better understand the situation of deaf children in Zambia and taught them some basic Zambian Sign Language.

We were able to purchase print Zambian Sign Language dictionaries from ZNAD, which immediately became among the most popular local titles in our collections. We also initiated a weekly Zambian Sign Language storytime program during which a volunteer sign language interpreter comes to the library and leads a storytime session. With help from staff she selects popular picture books, interprets them into sign language, and teaches some of the signs from the story to the children in attendance. This program is popular among both deaf and hearing children, and is now facilitated by two deaf adults who also conduct outreach in the surrounding community to make deaf children and families aware of the library and its resources.

However, we have not been able to recruit interpreters and/or deaf adult program facilitators at all of our libraries-- the most notable challenge being the Mumuni Library in Nabukuyu Village, 23 km east of Monze. Because we have no facilitator in the area, we have created Sign Language Storytime films in cooperation with Zambian Deaf Youth and Women, who provided the interpretation that our Media Associate filmed.

Now the Zambian Sign Language storytime program is available as a film series at all of our libraries. We have also acquired DVD Zambian Sign Language dictionaries from ZDYW, which are installed on our library computers and free to access by children and youth.

We have seen a tremendous increase in visits by deaf children and youth since we expanded our programs, resources, and services to actively welcome them. It is common to see deaf children gathered around the entrance to the Lubuto Model Library, where we have a Zambian Sign Language poster, or poring over the sign language dictionary in the Reading Room. There is also a notable enthusiasm for learning Zambian Sign Language among the hearing children who visit the library, who have developed a new eagerness to communicate with

"I can't hear like my friends because I'm deaf but I like to draw."