

Bookbabies, their Parents and the Library: An Evaluation of a Flemish Reading Program in Families with Young Children.

Bruno Vanobbergen¹, Marie Daems², and Sarah Van Tilburg³

Introduction

For years, UK's *Bookstart*, the first, national program in the world in which free books are distributed to families with babies, has been an inspiring example for many other countries. In Hamburg, Germany, there is *Buchstart*, in Malta there is *A Book is a Treasure*, in Ottawa *123 Lis avec Moi* and in the Netherlands there is a project called *Boekenpret* (Fun with Books), aimed at children between 0 and 6 years old. The principle is straightforward: families with young children are regularly given free books so as to stimulate reading to young children. The awareness-raising activities are not limited to just the parents, but also involve the preschool teachers, child nurses and libraries. The results have been impressive (Wade and Moore 1998; Moore and Wade 2003). Both scientific research and findings in the field have indicated that this project has a strong, positive influence, not only on children's development, but also on the cultural participation of young children and their parents (reading books, visiting libraries, participating in literary events...). This paper will focus on the evaluation of the Flemish project, *Bookbabies*, which was launched in the autumn of 2005 by the Stichting Lezen (the Flemish Reading Association) and the Vlaams Centrum voor Openbare Bibliotheken (Flemish Centre for Public Libraries).

¹ *Department of Foundations of Education, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium.* Corresponding author. Email: Bruno.Vanobbergen@UGent.be

² *Department of Foundations of Education, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium*

³ *Flemish Reading Association*

Bookbabies is a pilot project running in ten Flemish cities and municipalities where local public libraries work together with 82 families with young babies (all born in the autumn of 2005) to set up a reading program. At three different times, these parents get a set of (carefully selected) books to read from, as well as a book voucher, a post card and a poster of the project, together with a booklet containing reading tips and a list of other useful books for their children, presented in a linen bag displaying the *Bookbabies* logo. At the same time, the libraries involved developed numerous initiatives related to the program.

Unlike other types of scientific research, the focus here is not on mapping the effects of the program. The objectives of this study are twofold. On the one hand, the study looks into the experiences and perceptions of parents with regard to the implementation of this program to stimulate reading to babies. On the other hand, it wants to inspire ways of developing a reading culture in young families, by presenting a wide range of good examples of practice. Therefore, from the start, the research focused on involving families who were more difficult to reach. This paper focuses on the research results related to the first research objective. On the basis of three different rounds of interviews and surveys that were systematically taken from the 82 families over the last two years, we will provide an overview of the main research topics. These topics mainly relate to how the parents perceive the packets of books provided and the style of reading employed by both parents and the affective interactions during the reading. Section four deals with these issues in depth. However, this section is preceded by a brief explanation of the research process followed (section three) and an explanation of the theoretical framework for the research (section two).

Research into reading to young babies and very young children

The evaluation study of the Birmingham pilot project already demonstrated that *Bookstart* led to (1) babies being read to more often, (2) an increase in reading behaviour in the family, (3) a marked increase in library visits and (4) a clear increase in book sales (Steendijk 2004). Aside from this type of more general research results, it is also interesting to look at research focusing on the effects of reading programs on the behaviour and development of children. It appears that most scientific studies looking into programs aimed at familiarising babies and young children with books show a positive long-term effect on the children's development (Hardman and Jones 1999; Hall 2001; Moore and Wade 2003). The general purport of this research is that not only the reading and social skills of children are greatly improved, but that language development, in all its aspects, undergoes a marked improvement as well. This is shown clearly by Neumann (1999) in his research into the effects of an intervention program on the development of budding literacy among 3 and 4 year olds from economically challenged neighbourhoods. Other studies widen these findings to all groups of children. Wells (1985), for example, extensively proved a clear correlation between the frequency with which young children (pre-schoolers and toddlers) are read to and the development of reading skills in primary school. Wells states, among other things, that when children listen to stories even before they can read, they develop a feel for the way language is organised and structured. "The child is beginning to come to grips with the symbolic potential of language" (Wells 1985, 134). Thus, telling stories becomes a way of getting a handle on the complexity of the outside world. Research by Pickett (1998) shows that children who are in a *letter rich* environment from an early age on, are much quicker to pick up the more formal

educational literacy curriculum than other children. Raban and Coates (2004), lastly, illustrate that when language elements are integrated into the playing environment of young children, this will have a positive effect on the children's spoken and written language in the first few years of primary school. It leads them to conclude that "Increasing pre-school children's experience of literacy through the provision of resources and supporting interactions with more knowledgeable others, has an impact on later reading achievement during the early years of schooling" (Raban and Coates 2004). Research conducted by those who evaluated the *Bookstart* project itself confirmed these long-term effects. Various studies show that the *Bookstart* children have an advantage at the start of the initial reading and language education, but that they also maintain this advantage throughout their entire school career (Moore and Wade 2003). Moore and Wade (1998, 2003) also confirm a trend that had emerged from previous research. Children from the *Bookstart* cohort do not only score significantly higher for reading and writing, but also for drawing and sciences. Therefore, the message is clear: children who grow up in an environment that focuses on reading together and reading to children have a significant head-start when they begin attending school. For many researchers, this was a sign to start looking for methods to support parents in stimulating the budding literacy of their children (Neuman 1999; Wood 2002).

Hardman and Jones (1999) warn that the gains resulting from reading to children from an early age cannot be defined in purely cognitive terms, but also in emotional terms. For example, they point out that reading also strengthens the emotional bond between parents and their child(ren). Experts in the field of attachment theory have done a great deal of research into shared book reading. Bus et al. (1997) for example, examined the correlation between parent-child interactions during book reading and

the assessment of the child's security of attachment. They also paid attention to the differences between fathers and mothers, and determined that the fathers' style of reading is less often a consequence of their previous relational history and that fathers, as a result, tend to make things up on the spot. This clinical-psychological approach to reading is, however, not the scope of this paper. Research from other perspectives is rather scarce. Hardman and Jones (1999) show how a reading program for mothers and their babies will lead mothers to organise more frequent family book-reading sessions, focusing on the emotional bond between them and their child. They state, for example, that book-readings are scheduled at times when mothers want to soothe their babies. In general, they point out the important role of reading as a social ritual. In relation to this, it is also interesting to note a study conducted by the *Meertens Instituut voor onderzoek en documentatie van de Nederlandse taal en cultuur* (Meertens Institute for research and documentation into the Dutch language and culture) on the practice of telling stories to children (Meder, 1995). Stories are not only told to create moments of peace during they day, it is also discovered that telling a story before going to bed is the main reading ritual.

Research design

Selection of the families

The initial selection process for the *Bookbabies* project was carried out via the public libraries. All Flemish public libraries could take part in the pilot project and some fifty of them agreed to participate. From these candidates, ten cities or municipalities were then selected. Two criteria played an important role for the selection: (1) population size (distinguishing between large cities (more than 50,000 inhabitants),

small cities (between 50,000 and 20,000 inhabitants) and municipalities (fewer than 20,000 inhabitants)) and (2) whether the libraries were familiar with working with babies and young children or not. This resulted in the creation of two core regions. The first core region consisted of Courtrai, Ypres, Waregem, Beernem and Wingene, the second of Sint-Niklaas, Beveren, Lokeren, Stekene and Zele. Families who resided in these cities and municipalities and who had a baby born in October, November or December of 2005, were provided with a leaflet via the library and other channels to invite them to take part in the project. All of the families, who sent the reply card back to the Flemish Reading Association, were included in the first stage of the study. They were all given a questionnaire. A total of 287 families filled in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into five sections:

- General information about the family
- Information about shared book-reading behaviour in the family
- The opinions of parents regarding the meaning of reading to children
- The family and the local public library
- The cultural participation of family members (distinguishing between parents and children)

After an analysis of the questionnaire, 82 families were selected for further research. Two elements were key in this selection. On the one hand: arriving at a heterogeneous group of parents with differences in shared book-reading behaviours, in attitudes regarding shared book-reading and in general cultural participation. On the other hand: diversity in socio-economic parameters, such as the occupation and level of training of the parents. In larger cities, such as Courtrai and Sint-Niklaas, ten families were selected; in the smaller cities and municipalities, eight were selected. In Wingene, the number of 'bookbabies' was limited, so only seven families could be

selected. After a family from Beernem pulled out, a total number of 82 families provided the population for the continued study.

Interviewing the families

All parents were interviewed for the first time in the autumn of 2006. A full-time researcher conducted half of the interviews, the other half were conducted by four students who deal with the evaluation of *Bookbabies* in their Master's thesis¹. Prior to the interviews, the interviewers underwent a joint training session. The interviewers used a semi-structured questionnaire. In most cases (61), the interview only involved the mother, in two cases only the father and in 19 cases both the father and the mother. The duration of the interview varied between one hour and more than two hours. The interview wanted to assess:

- The parent(s) personal reading behaviour
- The parent(s) shared book-reading behaviour
- The perception of the books included in the book packet
- Their experience of reading to their bookbaby and possibly also to the other children in the family

In the spring of 2007, no earlier than three months after the first interview, a second round of interviews was organised. At that time, the bookbabies were between 14 and 17 months old. The second interview built on the topics of the first interview. The second round of interviews was also mainly conducted with only the mothers present. After analysing the second round of interviews, certain families were found to be providing little additional information. That is why it was decided to present these families with an extensive, written questionnaire in the third round. At the end of September of 2007, 38 families were sent a questionnaire, of whom 32 sent back a

filled-out copy. In October and November of 2007 a third round of interviews was conducted with the other 44 families. The third round was also a continuation of the topics of the previous rounds. It was decided as well, on the basis of the results from the first two rounds of interviews, to focus on a number of specific topics. These are:

- The parents' attitude towards the library
- Children's books
- Style of reading to the children
- Affective interactions during shared book-reading

The interviews from the three successive rounds were all recorded on tape and then transcribed verbatim. Each round of interviews was analysed separately, with the second and third rounds each time referring back to the previous analyses. The next section presents the major research findings from the entire research project.

Survey of the participating libraries

Not only the parents, but also the pilot libraries were major actors in this project. The expertise built up by the pilot libraries since the start of the project seemed very valuable to us, so it was decided to include it in the study. Focus groups were used to survey the participating libraries, a frequently used method in evaluation research. In all, two focus interviews were organised, to allow all pilot libraries to have their say: one for the region of Courtrai and one for the region of Sint-Niklaas. Two weeks prior to the focus interview, each pilot library was sent a written questionnaire. This questionnaire wanted to obtain a general assessment of the project, their view on reading books to babies and young children, the concrete achievements of the library and their contacts with parents. The responses to the questionnaire were used to draw up some twenty statements that formed the basis for the focus interview. One pilot

library did not take part in this evaluation. The focus interviews were also transcribed verbatim.

Research results

The major results of the *Bookbabies* research can be divided into three parts. The first part deals with the general experience and opinion of the parents. This part describes, among other things, the parents' preference for certain types of support as well their opinions about the various books that were provided to them. When discussing the research results, the intention is not to compare groups of parents. The second part focuses on the style of reading employed by the father and mother, as well as the affective interactions between parents and their children when they are being read to. The results relating to the pilot libraries' evaluation can be found in the third part.

General experience and opinion of the parents

Bookbabies has convinced the parents taking part in the research of the importance of having a positive reading culture in the family starting when the children are still babies. From the start of the study, most parents were already interested in the combination of books and children, but they considered this to be more relevant for older children. Moreover, at the start of the project, many parents feared that *Bookbabies* would be yet another program trying to rush children in their development.

“Babies and books, at first I thought it was a little abstract. Is this yet another trend to start teaching our children from an increasingly early age?”

Nowadays, kids need to be able to read in their second year of preschool. But as we started exploring, we found we had to adjust our opinion.”

Bookbabies made parents introduce their children to books from a much earlier age. Adults who read, children who read and reading books to children are all taken for granted, but ‘babies and books’ and ‘reading to babies’ appeared to be totally new concepts to many participants. Their initial doubts gradually made way for enthusiasm about babies and books. Parents became aware that books can mean more than shared book-reading. In short, ‘books’ and ‘babies’ do go together, albeit in their own special way.

“To me, ‘Books and babies’ is about exploring materials, the feeling, the tactile. The real story and reading the story and describing the pictures, I find very difficult. It’s mostly about turning the page and looking, sometimes he will babble a little.”

We can also see how a certain group of parents in the research considers *Bookbabies* as a way of opening a door to something they did not really experience as a child.

“I used to hate it that my mother did not read to me. I always had difficulties reading at school. The teacher would write in my school diary that I had to read more, but as a child, you don’t really read on your own, you need a bit of a push.”

Here, *Bookbabies* works as a strong stimulus to overcome uncertainty and to take those first steps in creating an enthusiastic reading culture in the family. The parents take maximum advantage of the possibilities offered by the project, although some parents often give their own interpretation of the materials provided. Sometimes very literally so, as some parents decide to read aloud in their own dialect, because that makes them feel more comfortable.

Parents started reading aloud at a time when they suspected or saw that their baby was ready for it. For most parents, this was when their baby was about six months old. During the first round of interviews, it appeared that very few parents had established a fixed time for reading to their children. They glanced through the books when the parent had some free time, when (they suspected that) their baby was asking to be read to or when their baby needed calming down. The location differed greatly. Some parents went to sit on their baby's play mat or sat down together on the couch, with babies sitting on their parents' laps or sitting next to one of the parents. It is striking that very few of these sessions took place in the baby's bedroom. During the third round of interviews it was interesting to notice how many families had introduced 'bedtime stories'. For most, this had not been a conscious decision, but something that spontaneously grew into a fixed ritual over time. Many bookbabies attach great importance to this ritual and even refuse to go to bed without a story.

"She has her own habits. So first she brushes her teeth. I mean, she's already wearing her pyjamas, then she gets her bottle and then she brushes her teeth. Then I take her up to her room, and we sit for a while, she has one of those beds she cannot get out of, so we'll sit on the floor, with a blanket over us, and a book and then we'll read for a while. She'll be sitting on my lap and we're reading together and then she goes to sleep."

At bedtime, very often the same story is told or one story from the same book, whereas during other sessions, there is a greater degree of variation.

Parents mainly experience a need for implicit support with regard to setting up *reading sessions* with their young children. The introduction of unexpected reading such as *'Ik zie je wel, ik hoor je wel'* (*I can see you, I can hear you*) by Miep Diekmann with illustrations by Thé Tjong-Khing, which leads to greater openness to

less classical genres, is certainly the most striking example. Initially, parents tend to be dismissive of unfamiliar or unusual genres and types of books, but once they get to know them, most of them do become enthusiastic.

“I did not know they made poetry for children. I found it very odd, if I’m honest. I was thinking: does this really meaning anything to her? But she’s sitting there quietly and listening. It’s the only time that she keeps quiet, I think, when you read to her. And I think she particularly likes the sounds, because it sounds so nice. [...]That is something she likes, so I like it as well.”

Parents also appreciate getting a list of possible books to read to children of a certain age. Most parents ignore more explicit forms of support, such as tips on how to read to children. Parents see these as being too pedantic and they do not take into account the specificity of their child. When parents select books for their children (in the library or in the shop), they are guided by two principles. On the one hand, they want their children to learn something from those books, and on the other hand they want their children to have fun. This has parents buying both rather *classical educational* books and more *commercial* children’s books “because children tend to prefer those”.

Almost half of the bookbabies regularly visit the library. The most important aspect of a library is having a wide range of books available. In addition, having an attractive and child-friendly baby corner is an important precondition for taking young children to the library. Many parents greatly appreciate the suggested reading tips to finding additional books. They often struggle with trying to find good children’s books. This is a particularly strong need for parents for whom the bookbaby is their first baby. Parents who fail to make use of the services of the library mention that this is not due to the library, but rather to a lack of time.

Dealing with stories and reading to young children is mainly a task for mothers.

“No, unless I have a meeting at night or need to go somewhere, then I’ll ask him to do it. Well, yesterday I had a meeting and I asked him afterwards how it went, and he said he’d almost fallen asleep during the reading session. So I guess he was just sitting down with her among the books.”

One of the main reasons is ‘lack of time’. Fathers are not at home that often and when they are, they prefer to do something more ‘wild’, such as romping or playing with toy cars. Some mothers do insist that the fathers read to their children and will stimulate them. When fathers do hazard reading to their offspring, they will experience greater uncertainty about their abilities. Fathers and mothers also indicate that they have a very different approach. Mothers have a more scholarly approach towards reading stories, whereas fathers usually focus more on the entertaining side.

“Daddy has a more vivid imagination, I will stick to the text and sometimes imitate a chicken or something, but not too often. But if you have a book where you need to point at things, then you need to tell something more of a story, but I will usually limit myself to what is shown.”

As children grow older, parents enjoy reading to them more. The fact that there is much more interaction between parents and children plays an important role. We will return to that in the next section.

Reading style of the father and mother and the affective interactions during shared bookreading

Both fathers and mothers use an interactive style of telling a story. Both parents tend to imitate sounds during reading sessions. These are usually animal sounds. Parents

find it self-evident to do this, as it leads to funny reactions from their bookbabies, such as imitation, and laughing.

“To teach them something... you could just say: ‘a cat’, but it makes sense to also say: cats go like this... just to be able to say something more, more than just say ‘right, let’s enumerate, you can score ten points and how many pictures can you guess?’ Otherwise it just gets boring if I have to say: ‘it’s this, it’s this’.”

Mothers tend to ask their babies to put names on the pictures. That way, the bookbaby is able to better follow what their parent is telling and this leads to greater involvement because he/she has to start thinking and needs to say something. This is a fun way for parents to find out what their bookbaby is able to do. Other reasons for doing this, are: wanting to teach the child something new and stimulating language development. A minority of parents ask their bookbaby about what he/she thinks will happen in a story. Parents, who do this, want to inspire greater involvement in the story and want to make the story more interesting for their child. It also allows them to check whether their child has understood the story. Some bookbabies also spontaneously ask what is about to happen. Parents consider the interaction with their child to be an important part of the book-reading sessions. They therefore do not mind if their baby interrupts them or asks questions. None of the parents thinks the bookbaby should sit still and listen, without interrupting.

Almost all parents think the book-reading sessions have a positive influence on the bond with their bookbaby. This session is a quiet time where the bookbaby is nice and comfortable, close to its parents, so parents and children can talk to each other and do something together. The physical proximity between the bookbaby and parents is greatly appreciated by all. Most parents explicitly mention that they think it

is important for their bookbaby to be close to them during a book-reading session, both for practical reasons and because it is cosy. This makes that the book-reading sessions is an enjoyable and pleasant time together. Sometimes it also involves cuddling or kissing. Parents mention that being close together leads to more contact with their bookbaby. That way, there is more interaction and communication, as parents involve their bookbaby in what is going on. The bookbaby is also better able to look at pictures and point out certain things.

“Sometimes he will sit on my lap, like this... I usually try to put him down, next to me and.[...] ‘No’, he’ll say, and he will get onto my lap... Yeah, he really wants to be close. Or sometimes he’s standing up next to the coffee table, where his book is, and he’ll be standing between my legs, like this, he’ll be leaning between my legs and he’ll sit there leafing through the pages.”

Parents find it important to react positively if a child names or points at something correctly. Popular ways of praising are ‘well done’, ‘that’s the way’, ‘bravo’, ... That way, parents want to express their surprise, motivate and stimulate their child. Babies tend to copy these praises.

The role of the pilot libraries

In general, all pilot libraries are very enthusiastic about the *Bookbabies* project. They were all hoping “to attract new, young parents and children to the library” and say this expectation has been met. A new target group, children between 0 and 3, has found its way to the library.

“Since we have these crackling books and bath books on offer, we notice that people lend out items for younger children, whereas in the past they would wait until they were toddlers.”

Before the start of *Bookbabies*, the pilot libraries did not carry baby books in their collection, however most did have cardboard books for the smaller children. Since the project, they have all bought books that crackle, can be used in the bathtub or are made from fabrics and this collection is expanded regularly. Starting a collection of baby books required a little more searching from the library workers than for regular books. Two years ago, the offer of baby books was very limited and they were difficult to come by via the classical channels. Since then, most publishers have also started offering baby books. Apparently, *Bookbabies* has woken up publishers, leading to an increasingly wide range of baby books.

Pilot libraries use different ways of informing parents about the existence of the *bookbabies* program in the library. Some libraries reach out to new bookbabies by writing to them personally and inviting them to the library to collect a welcome package. In other municipalities, parents immediately get a packet of books and information about the library via other institutions. Whereas some libraries inform parents when their bookbaby is 3 months old, other pilot libraries wait until the babies are 6 months old. One library will write another letter to one-year-old bookbabies who have not yet visited the library.

Discussion and conclusion

What does an initiative like *Bookbabies* bring about in Flemish families? That was and is the main question linked to the research into the *Bookbabies* project. The question is not really related to the effects of the program, as these have already been extensively demonstrated abroad. It was more interesting and important to focus on the experiences and opinions of the parents and young children who were willing to

take part in the *experiment*. In general, we can say that most parents were very enthusiastic about the pilot project. The project fulfilled a double need. On the one hand, for a group of parents it acted as a trigger. Encouraged by the books and materials made available to them, many parents started exploring an area that, before, had been largely unknown to them. Parents went to the library, looked for ways to read to their baby and eagerly made use of the books and often also of the suggested reading tips they were given in the various book packets. It is remarkable to notice how the mothers played a particularly important role in this. On the other hand, the project acted as an eye-opener in two ways. Even though certain parents indicated that they grew up in a positive reading environment, it was surprising to notice how little attention parents initially paid to shared book-reading and instilling the joy of reading in very young children. Adults who read, children who read and reading books to children are all taken for granted, but ‘babies and books’ and ‘reading to babies’ appeared to be totally new concepts to many participants. In addition, the first surveys of parents indicated a rather more classical and conservative view of what a children’s book should and could be. By introducing lesser known genres and types of children’s books, a new world opened up to both the children and the parents. The following remark may be considered distinctive of one of the important realisations of *Bookbabies*:

“Yes, my husband said ‘I’d put it away immediately’, he’d glanced at it once, but I thought ‘first I’m going to read what it is about’ and then I really did see it, because first I thought they were just stories and that it would be too difficult, but then I saw they were rhymes and she likes rhymes, so I tried it and she loved it.”

Obviously, the pilot project also has its limitations. One of the most pressing is, undoubtedly, the fact that all the parents who took part in this project did so

voluntarily. This may cast doubt on the meaning *Bookbabies* could have when it is applied on a much broader scale, when it will depend more on the *de goodwill* of participants. However, examples abroad show a mainly positive reception among most parents, even though they are offered less *support* than was the case in this project. The study itself also has its limitations. As with the previous remark, the voluntary participation of parents plays an important role. It goes without saying that the fact that a clear majority of parents came from a book-minded background will have a marked influence on the results. However, we have tried to compensate this by including the diversity parameter in the selection of parents. It would also have been interesting to involve the babies and young children more explicitly in this qualitative evaluation of *Bookbabies*. The children's individual book sessions and their interaction with the direct reading environment are very interesting sources of information, which could be recorded via observations and video recordings.

Lastly, the local actors also merit our attention. Even though the parents did not immediately recognise this, the role of the pilot libraries in both the project and the study was essential. The libraries are the local expression of the project. They take care of the communication with the parents and the outside world and they determine the quantity and quality of the offer. The public library staffs were the point of contact for the parents if they had any questions relating to the project. It goes without saying that if this type of programme to stimulate reading is adopted on a larger scale, the role of the libraries should be an important area of focus. Unlike similar projects abroad, *Bookbabies* has not (yet) made use of the services of Kind & Gezin (Child and Family), the Flemish governmental agency with responsibility for young children and families. The main reason is to avoid a sense of concern about the question "Am I doing it right" when dealing with reading to children. The activities of Child and

Family are strongly imbedded in a narrative of averages and abnormalities. As was already indicated in the introduction, *Bookbabies* is based on the principle that there is no such thing as an ideal reading culture. From the start, the idea was not to give parents the impression that they had to meet certain expectations. The interviews have shown that parents greatly appreciated that they did not put such a burden on their shoulders and those of their children. However, if *Bookbabies* is to be organised on a larger scale, it would be a good idea, just like in other countries, to make use of the broad network of Child and Family. This will probably be the single largest challenge in the project for both *Bookbabies* and Kind & Gezin in the future.

Footnotes

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