

First draw them in – How innovative library competitions in local languages introduce libraries – and reading for pleasure - to children in a rural African environment

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Abstract

*Books and libraries should be friendly and accessible, and visited for more than just school/academic information. Fun children's books, in the local languages, and relevant in terms of subject matter, should be readily available in libraries.*

*To promote libraries and reading, the Greater Tzaneen Library Services in the Limpopo Province, South Africa, host annual competitions for school children with a different book/reading theme every year. The focus is on creativity and fun and the competitions may be entered in any of the four main languages spoken in the Greater Tzaneen area: Sepedi; English; Afrikaans and Xitsonga.*

*The competitions are often the first encounter children have with libraries and the light hearted nature of the competitions encourages them to take the next big step – visiting a library. Once the ice is broken and a child visits one of the libraries, librarians make sure that the experience is so much fun that the child becomes a regular visitor and eventually, a reader.*

Most children in rural South Africa have little or no experience of children's books, and view libraries as formal institutions only to be visited for school/academic information. It is crucial that libraries are seen to be friendly and accessible, and have fun children's books, in the local languages, and relevant in terms of subject matter, readily available.

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The traditional western-style reading competition - in which school children who read the most pages during a specified time are awarded, is not practical in a rural African environment. The competition was altered from a "Reading competition" to a "Library competition" since 2004. This makes it possible for all school children to enter, even those without easy access to libraries and books. The focus is on creativity and fun and the

competitions may be entered in any of the four main languages spoken in the Greater Tzaneen area: Sepedi; English; Afrikaans and Xitsonga.

The format of the competition is different every year. Increasingly, a sense of excitement builds up annually to see what form the competition will take and schools take pride in entering.

In 2004 children made a booklet titled “Me and my book” or “I wish I had my own book.” The next year the competition took the form of a booklet with the theme “I love reading.”



*2004 Competition - A page from Emily Machete's booklet "Me and my book."*

Both these competitions were popular, but most entries were from schools participating in the municipality's Paired Reading programme, and already familiar with the local libraries.

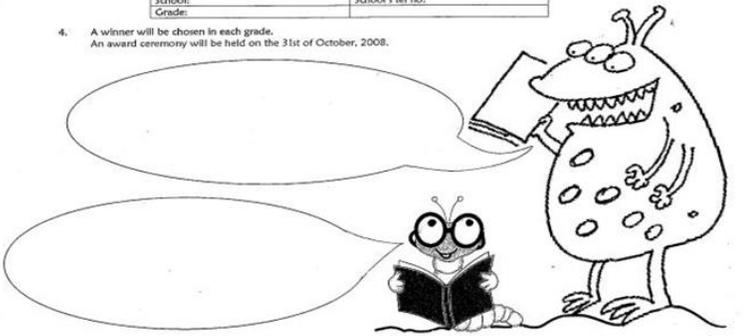
In 2006 the theme was “Create a poster with the theme books” and the 2007 theme was “Create a bookmark in any language of your choice”. The competition rules made it clear that entries could be made on any kind of paper, using any media, to ensure that children without access to expensive art materials could enter. Interesting posters and bookmarks were received, some on cardboard cut from boxes, and entries came from all corners of the municipal area.

One of the most successful competitions was held in 2008. A picture of a space creature and a bookworm, both holding books, with empty speech bubbles, was included on the competition form. Instructions read: The bookworm and the creature from outer space are talking about books/reading. What are they saying to each other? Fill in the speech bubbles in English; Sepedi, Xitsonga or Afrikaans.”

**Enter the G T M Library Competition 2008**

1. The bookworm and the creature from outer space are talking about books/reading. What are they saying to each other? Fill in the speech bubbles, in English; Northern Sotho; Afrikaans or Xitsonga.
2. Hand in your entry at one of the following libraries by the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 2008: Tzaneen; Haenertsburg or Letlilele.
3. Complete the following:
 

Name:	Tel no:
School:	School's tel no:
Grade:	
4. A winner will be chosen in each grade.  
An award ceremony will be held on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October, 2008.



The illustration shows a small bookworm with glasses reading a book, and a larger, spotted space creature with antennae also reading a book. Two large, empty speech bubbles are positioned between them, one pointing towards the bookworm and one pointing towards the space creature.

*2008 Competition entry form*

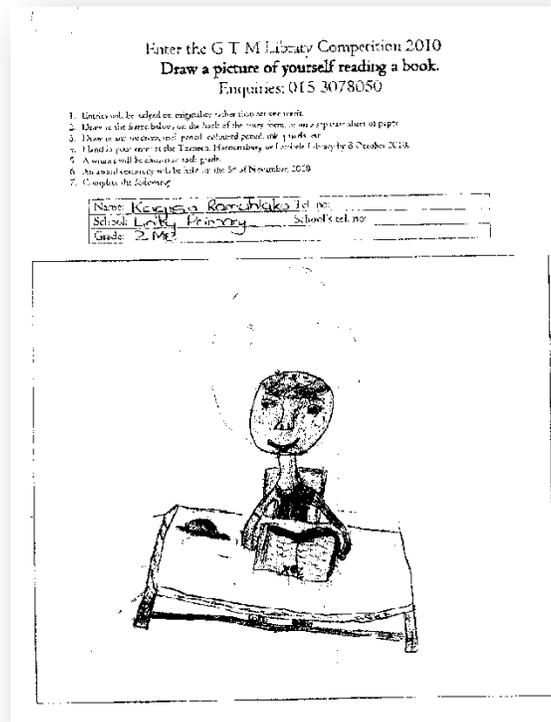
In one of the winning entries the space creature asks: “Where can I get more cool books like the, Ed?” The bookworm answers: “Simple. You don’t have to go outa space. Just at the local library.”

In another the space creature asks: “Will this feed me?” The bookworm answers: “Yes, but only if you read it.”

Following the success of the 2008 competition, a similar format was tried in 2009. A picture of dogs selecting books in a library, with empty spaces on some of the spines, was included on the competition form. Instructions read: What are the dogs reading? Make up your own titles and write them on the blank “books” in English; Sepedi, Afrikaans or Xitsonga.” The competition did not receive the enthusiastic response as the one in 2008. The idea that dogs could read was perhaps too far-fetched, whereas children had probably become used to the idea of creatures from outer space, due to exposure to children’s programmes on television. Many of the entries received were repetitive and unimaginative, with most of the dogs reading books called “Woof”, “Bone”, or “Cat”.

In the 2010 competition children were requested to draw a picture of themselves reading. They could do this on any piece of paper but to make it easier and affordable, the picture

could be drawn on the entry form itself. Once more the emphasis was on creativity and the use of imagination rather than artistic merit. The large number of varied entries made the adjudication of the competition very enjoyable. Children really took up the challenge to draw pictures of themselves in their own milieu. Sadly, it was clear that the environment where reading takes place is mostly the school.



*2010 Competition – Winning grade 2 entry by Kagiso Ramahlako*

Some wonderfully imaginative entries were received in 2011. Children were asked to illustrate the slogan “Reading takes you everywhere.” Entries could be made on any piece of paper or on the back of the entry form. It was clear from the entries that children understood the slogan and viewed reading as an enjoyable activity. In the entries, children mostly depicted themselves reading and thinking of a fairy tale, foreign or space milieu.

The 2011 competition had an ulterior motive – to capture local indigenous stories. The competition was titled: “A story Grandfather / Grandmother told me.” This was repeated in Sepedi, Afrikaans and Xitsonga, to emphasize that the competition could be entered in one of the four languages mostly spoken in the Greater Tzaneen municipal area. The competition rules allowed for a story told by any senior citizen.

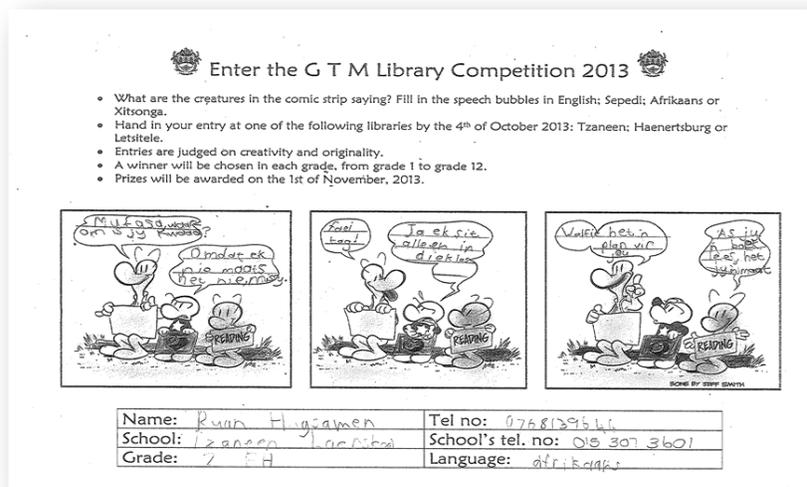
Although with this competition a great many entries in the indigenous languages were received, the stories were disappointing. Very few were actually indigenous and most

repeated western fairy tales, mostly “The three little pigs.” An attempt will definitely be made to collect indigenous stories through the competition again, but the wording of the competition theme will have to be made carefully.

In 2013, speech bubbles were reverted to again, as they take up little school time, only need the entry form and a pen or pencil, are fun and allow children to use their imagination freely. A record number of 2,409 entries, in all four local languages, were received from 26 schools in the area, as well as from individual library users.

Three insect-like creatures have a conversation across a three-box comic strip. The second holds a card with a picture of a heart and the last a card with the word “reading”. “What are the creatures in the comic strip saying? Fill in the speech bubbles in English; Sepedi, Xitsonga or Afrikaans.”

Children interpreted the comic strip well and understood the conversation to be about reading. They also understood that the middle creature is angry or irritated and in most entries the other two creatures placate it by convincing it that reading is good or enjoyable.



2013 Competition – Winning Afrikaans grade 2 entry by Ruan Huysamen

In the entry above, the conversation, loosely translated from Afrikaans, flows as follows:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Creature: Mufasa, why are you angry?
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Creature: Because I don't have any friends.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Creature: Poor you!
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Creature: Yes, I sit all alone in class.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Creature: I have a plan for you.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Creature: If you read a book, you have a friend.

The 2014 competition read: “Draw a picture of someone reading”. The entry form made a number of suggestions, designed to make children aware of the importance of reading and literacy. Suggestions included drawing pictures of people reading books; computer screens; street signs; medical prescriptions; newspapers; recipes; food labels; notice boards etc.

Interestingly, where the majority of 2010 entries (“Draw a picture of yourself reading”) depicted reading in a school environment, the focus now shifted to reading in a library. This could be because of library awareness programmes, such as the annual competition, as well as excitement building up ahead of the opening of the new Greater Tzaneen library, which opened in the rural area of Shiluvane in September 2014.

Entries reflected plausible situations where people read. Many showed elderly gentlemen reading newspapers, and some of the more original entries depicted a doctor reading a patient’s file, a girl reading a Valentine’s card, and a politician reading a speech!



*2014 Competition – Winning grade 10 entry by Newton Mhungana*

The speech bubble competition of 2015, was popular but most entries were very similar to one another. The entry form depicted a boy and girl talking about books, with empty speech bubbles and the following instructions: “What are the children in the picture saying? Fill in the speech bubbles in English; Sepedi; Afrikaans or Xitsonga.” One of the book covers in the picture had the title “Moringa” and most entries were variations on the following: “What are you reading?” asked the boy. “A book about the Moringa tree.” answered the girl. The book covers should have been blank to attract more imaginative entries.

The 2016 competition drew varied and imaginative entries. The theme was: Illustrate the slogan - Dream big: Read.



*2016 Competition – Winning grade 12 entry by Mhlongo Vuthari*

In 2017, the competition has, besides promoting books and libraries – an additional motive - gathering indigenous knowledge. The theme is: “Write down or illustrate traditional idioms or sayings about African animals (ask an old person!)”.

Certificates and prizes are awarded to the best entries in all school grades, in all four of the languages. The task of adjudication falls to library staff members and members of the Tzaneen ‘Friends of the Library’. Adjudicators are requested to look for creative entries. Library staff members design, print, cut and laminate the award certificates. Prizes are bags filled with items of stationary and snacks donated by local businesses.

Schools with winning entries are visited during November each year to hand out certificates and prizes and for promotional talks on reading and libraries. Librarians visiting the schools take along interesting, fun books in the home language of the school children, read from some of them and make sure the children know that there are plenty more waiting to be read at the nearest library.

Because entries are not judged on academic merit, but on creativity, originality and the use of imagination, it is often children who do not regularly win prizes at school that win the library

competitions. Teachers say that the library competition certificates mean a lot to the winners and their families and inspire visits to the library.

The competitions are popular and draw more than a thousand entries annually.

Once the ice is broken and a child visits one of the libraries, librarians make sure that the experience is so much fun that the child becomes a regular visitor and eventually, a reader. Beautifully illustrated books in the local languages are on prominent display and readily available and stories are read to groups of children, in their home languages.