



ECCD teacher reading aloud to children.

# Rwanda: Telling Stories Opens Children's Minds

## Celebrating literacy with preschoolers

September 18, 2014

In Ruhango, a district in Rwanda, around 40 preschoolers and their parents enjoyed a literacy celebration through singing, playing, and of course, reading. As the session facilitator read aloud from a big book in Kinyarwanda (the local language), children listened and frequently commented on the story, often amusing their parents. The story was about a man who loses his hat. When the facilitator read how the hat was finally returned to the man by a dog, one child wisely said: "Dogs do not wear hats."

The joy of this reading session at the Rugasari Early Child Care and Development Centre was only possible thanks to the support of Save the Children through the UK Aid Innovation for Education Fund, a partnership between the Governments of the United Kingdom and Rwanda.

## **The benefits of storytelling**

After the session, Emmeline, a 5 year-old girl, said she was happy to hear the story about the man whose hat had blown away, but her favourite story is the one her mother usually tells her. With a smile, Emmeline's mother said: "Telling stories opens children's minds."

Emmeline's mother highlighted an important truth – the fact that the ability to understand a story has intrinsic worth, not only because literacy promotes development, but also because reading opens children's minds to experiences other than their own. Reading enforces children's ability to feel compassion for other people, to imagine, to dream and to hope – abilities that give our life meaning.

## **Focusing on the quality of education**

The importance of reading is recognized internationally, and Rwanda has made strong efforts to improve children's literacy.

In recent years, the Rwandan Government has worked hard to improve its education system. Increased investments in education have resulted in greater school enrolments. The country will also meet the Millennium Development Goal of gender parity in primary school.

The government is now focused on improving the quality of primary education in the country. Many children who complete primary school lack the ability to read and write proficiently. Researchers from Stanford University, in partnership with Save the Children and the Rwanda Education Board, conducted an assessment of current reading levels among children in first grade in Gicumbi district in 2013. The study revealed that many children had a poor grasp of basic skills such as letter identification. On average, students at the end of first grade could only identify 8 out of 24 letters of their alphabet, with a mere 4% being able to identify all the letters.

## **Rwanda Reads Initiative**

One of the ways that Rwanda's Ministry of Education is championing the issue of improving children's literacy skills is through the Rwanda Reads Initiative. The *Rwanda Reads Initiative* aims to nurture a culture of reading in Rwanda, and is implemented by the Rwanda Education Board and several international and national organizations.

To emphasize the importance of literacy, the Ministry of Education extended International Literacy Day to a whole week and declared September 8-12, 2014 as *Rwanda Literacy Week*.

During this week, many activities took place throughout the country, targeting children of all ages, parents, communities and schools. A range of international and local organizations hosted reading contests, storytelling events, book fairs and visits to mobile libraries. Additionally, the Rwanda Education Board dedicated a two-hour TV and radio live call-in conference to discuss the importance of literacy and how anyone and everyone can actively engage in literacy promotion.

*Rwanda Literacy Week* is a good example of how joint efforts of governments and development partners can raise awareness of the importance of literacy. The hope is that a

culture of reading will spread across the whole nation, enlightening children and adults in the process.



Children at the Rugasari ECCD centre listening intently to a story in Kinyarwanda about a man who loses his hat.