The history of ALL-SA and Toy Libraries in South Africa

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How it all started:

As a speech therapist, I was well aware of some of the areas that parents need to pay attention to for their children’s development.

My own 3 children benefitted from this knowledge and it bothered me that other parents did not have this information. In 1981, while recovering from surgery, I had plenty of time to think about how to help parents. My interest changed from remediation to early intervention, through effective stimulation from birth. Many of the children I had treated may have had fewer problems if their parents had been aware of the importance of early stimulation.

Therapists use toys and games as tools to help children to develop. There was a very good toy shop in our area, but the shop assistants were not able to advise parents or teachers properly on toys for different skills or different age groups. I became obsessed with the idea of opening a toy shop close to my home and with a small inheritance from my mother, I was able to take this huge step in 1984.

The name of the shop was “WordPower” – because at that time, with my speech therapy background, the development of vocabulary and language were my highest priority. The first lesson to be learned was that the name of a shop is VERY important – people came in looking for religious books!! The shop had 2 name changes – in 1985 it became “Leerjolyt for Young Learning” (too long!) and in 1990, the name changed to “Stimuplay”.

Over the years at the shop, I developed an extensive knowledge about the toys and games that were available. Each new toy and game shouted out to me about the skills it could develop – and my analytical left brain soon started to place these playthings into separate categories according to the main skill that the toy or game developed.

It seemed very important to find toys that developed all the skill areas and at different levels of difficulty. I soon realised that each skill area was stimulated by different types of play activities. This is the basis of the “Play Actions” approach which is taught by ALL-SA.

It also seemed important to me that parents and teachers made sure that they stimulated all the important skill areas using a variety of play activities. One of the services offered by the shop was to visit pre-schools, analyse all the toys they had onto a developmental grid and write a comprehensive report on the toys they had and those they were lacking. A great deal of stamina was needed for this exercise!

I started to run a one day workshop and was utterly amazed at the lack of knowledge of even some very experienced teachers on how playthings develop skills in children. Over twenty years later, I often meet teachers who are still using my approach to skills development through planned play activities.

The notes developed for the workshops eventually became the manual – “A Guide to Toys, Games and Activities for the Developing Child” which is used as a resource in ALL-SA’s training.
My “Love Affair” with toy libraries

In 1986, some librarians came to buy toys from the shop for a toy library at a public library in Pretoria. It was the first time I had heard of toy libraries and it seemed to be an excellent idea. I decided to open one at the shop, pulled out all the toys that weren't selling very well and, not knowing anything about toy library classification systems, numbered the first toy 1, the second toy 2 and so on! There were lists on the wall so that parents and teachers could see what the toy could be used for and get an idea of the level of difficulty. In 1987, the mayor of Roodepoort came to open the toy library and the local newspaper carried an article about it.

During the next few years, I could see the benefit of the toy library both to families and to schools. Children that were having difficulty at school just borrowed the right sort of toys and their teachers reported that they were improving; occupational therapists agreed that children receiving therapy who also belonged to the toy library made faster progress. Schools were grateful to be able to provide a greater variety of toys for their children.

By 1992, I was utterly convinced that toy libraries could be of tremendous value in Africa. I had made contact with the Toy Library Association in Britain and knew much more about toy libraries by then. I had discovered a few other toy libraries in Gauteng and decided that the only way to encourage their development was to form an association. Ann Barrett, an occupational therapist involved with the SAIDA Toy Library, supported the idea and together, we invited toy libraries and other stakeholders to a meeting. I was lucky enough to get Good Morning South Africa, the breakfast TV programme, interested in the idea and they came to film our Stimuplay Toy Library. We were able to invite people nationally to make contact with us and to attend the meeting if they could.

At that meeting, held in July 1993, the South African Toy & Leisure Libraries Association (SATLLA) was founded with me as the first chairperson – a position I held until 2003! At that time, we knew of 21 toy libraries in South Africa. SATLLA held workshops, worked on notes to help toy libraries with various aspects of setting up and running a toy library and published a simple newsletter, sharing information between toy libraries. We were all volunteers. The only funds we had came from membership fees and workshops. These were used to print and post newsletters. Our “office” was at my house. My husband took me with him to Cape Town every year when he rode in the Argus cycle race and we were able to build up a strong group of toy libraries and other stakeholders there. My first contact was Jean Williams, head librarian at Ocean View Public Library, who saw the interview on TV and contacted me immediately. She had been lending out games and puzzles for years and was delighted to discover that she actually had a toy library!!

Alex also took me with him to Port Elizabeth for another of his cycle rides. There I visited a toy library run by PE Mental Health and was able to offer some advice which helped to strengthen their toy library service.

Cycle rides in KZN also allowed me to support various meetings and events organised by Sharon Shevil of the Children’s Rights Centre, which has been a long time supporter of toy libraries.

When SATLLA was founded in 1993, I decided to sell my share of the shop and toy library to the person that had become my partner a few years earlier – Denise Bornman. I felt that selling toys might be seen as a conflict of interests. Denise eventually sold the shop but...
moved the toy library to her home. It is the only non NPO toy library in South Africa. Denise still has toys in the toy library from when it opened in 1987. She kept the numbering system and now has over 3000 toys!!

In my days as a shopkeeper, I became involved with the South African Association for Early Childhood Development. They started an organisation called the Grow Early Learning Trust, which trained practitioners (“informal” teachers) working with children in disadvantaged areas. In 1994, I was offered a position at the Grow Early Learning Trust as the Resource Centre Manager. This is where I gained experience in making toys out of scrap materials. We supported the trainers in gathering scrap materials for their training sessions as well as assisting in the training on the use of toys. GROW had a huge container in which we sorted the donated scrap materials. Preschool teachers came to fetch these materials to make more toys.

My next position at GROW was as a Toy Library Developer. Harold Coetzee, the new director, believed in the value of toy libraries and we started several toy libraries with the support of the Jim Joel Education and Training Fund. I put together a Manual – Toy Library Administration – which was used when running training courses. GROW was also involved in training on the effective use of toys in child development. Both of these one-week courses were held in the Western and Eastern Cape as well as in Gauteng.

In 1999, I suggested to the SATLLA committee that we hold a national conference. They thought I was crazy! We had less than R1000.00 in our bank account. However, they gave me their full support. At this time, I resigned from GROW to devote all my time to coordinating the 1st National Toy Library Conference which was held in 2001. Six toy library friends from the UK came to speak at the Conference – they funded their travel costs and did not expect a fee for their presentations. We paid for their accommodation and conference costs. They included the director of the British Toy Library Association, Glenys Carter; Cath Armstrong, training manager of the British Association; Dr. Roy McConkey, a highly respected expert on children with special needs; and Roma Lear, a renowned toymaker of toys for children with special needs. Mr Giorgio Bartolucci, a member of the board of the International Toy Library Association attended the Conference to show his support. There were 254 delegates; we ran a very successful competition on making toys that reflect African Life & Culture; there were many interesting presentations by South Africans and there were several exhibitors, both of toys made from scrap as well as toy retailers. By the way, financially, we broke even!!

The Conference was a chance to tell decision makers about toy libraries. We sent out hundreds of notices to relevant organisations and government departments and were rewarded for our efforts by the high attendance at our first ever conference. The Jim Joel Fund provided some sponsorship for toy librarians to attend and we also managed to obtain assistance through Unicef for toy librarians from Limpopo province to attend. I had tried so hard to enable them to come, and at the official opening, was almost unable to speak due to the emotion of having managed to pull everything together.

It’s quite funny to think of it now, but for a presentation we were giving, two of our British friends quickly helped me to change it from a boring Word presentation to an interesting PowerPoint presentation – which I had never used before. Conferences present unique learning opportunities!
At that Conference, the members voted to change the name of the organisation to Active Learning & Leisure Libraries – South Africa (ALL-SA) and to register as an NPO.

The second Conference was held in Stellenbosch while the 3rd National Conference was combined with the 10th International Toy Library Conference and was held in Tshwane. There were delegates from 25 countries world wide. The 4th and 5th National Toy Library Conferences were held in Randburg in 2007 and 2010 respectively. After each conference, more toy libraries have started. From 21 toy libraries in 1993, we now have 220 toy libraries that we know of, in every province. Some government departments who sent delegates to our conferences have started their own toy libraries. Among these are the Free State and KZN Departments of Education.

Moving Ahead!

When we started to plan the 1st National Conference, we felt the need for a central office and were lucky enough to rent a very inexpensive room at TMI, the old Johannesburg Children’s Hospital which offered very reasonable space for NPOs offering services for children. Coincidentally, the SAIDA Toy Library had been situated in this building.

After the excitement of the 1st Conference, I was feeling very frustrated at not being able to help ALL-SA to move forward. For 9 years, we had managed on donated time by committee members. Many expenses came out of our own pockets and I had no idea of how to start writing proposals or finding donors. On a day when I was feeling particularly downhearted, I got a phone call from Bridget Shelton of the Jim Joel Fund who had funded all of the toy libraries started by GROW. She said – “Cynthia, when are you going to ask us for some money?”!!! We received our first funding in 2003 – an amount of R200,000 – to start our Toy Library Resource Centre at TMI. The official opening of the toy library was held in June 2004.

We were able to employ a toy librarian (now our training manager) – Noloyiso Novukela. We could pay a small stipend to volunteers who helped us with the marking and protecting of the toys. Elizabeth Mvala, one of the volunteers, is now a trainer. I took on the role of Director and Avrille Gork was elected as National Chairperson. In those days, the director received no salary, but was compensated for travel expenses. In 2005, the committee decided that if another director took over, that person would expect a salary. From then on, ALL-SA moved from being a toddler towards the successful young adult that it is today.

The organisation has so much potential and the time is absolutely right now for a new, younger director with the energy needed to help ALL-SA to reach its potential. Perhaps one of the most important issues that ALL-SA has to deal with is developing a proper career path for toy librarians and ensuring that the training is accredited. The worth of the toy librarian must be recognised and there must be a suitable salary structure.

Looking back

As a director, you have to be involved in fundraising and administration. One of my regrets is that I didn’t apply for funding for a programme co-ordinator, but felt that I had to try and do it all myself. This meant that I didn’t have time to play with children, help to develop the staff more or to follow up on the many ideas I had, including teaching unemployed people to make toys for income generation.

Many things have been rewarding – seeing what our Come & Play Toy Library means to the local children; helping toy librarians to attend our Conferences and especially to helping 6 of
them to attend the conference in Paris; knowing that ALL-SA is a respected organisation and that our training is considered to be excellent; the continued growth of World Play Day celebrations around the country and the success of the Celebrity Scrabble Challenge as a fundraising event. Thanks to Penny Bryce and Nicki Wiggett who championed our cause and to HHP Pantsula who accepted us as the beneficiary of this event. His presence at our annual Christmas Party just makes the day for the children.

I have had the support of several people over the years – firstly, Alex, my husband, who helped me to network with toy librarians around the country by taking me along to his cycle rides and by putting up with the endless hours spent on the computer; Avrille Gork who supported the idea of the 1st National Conference even though she thought I was mad and who served as National Chairperson for many years; Maria Kambule and Thandi Hlongwane who have served on the National Committee for a long time and always attend meetings, no matter how difficult it may be; Desiree Mtshweni who is so committed to toy libraries and who singlehandedly made sure that any new library in Northwest Province will have space for a toy library – she is now the National Chairperson and has a big vision for ALL-SA; Mrs Mudzunga Farisani from the Education Department in Limpopo who always supports our Conferences by sending a large delegation from the province; Mrs Mimi Kunene (KZN DoE) and Mrs Doris Mabaso (Free State DoE) who started toy libraries after organising training by ALL-SA – the people in government positions that support ALL-SA have helped to build our credibility; Gayle, my daughter, who helped us to organise our very successful international conference and the conference in 2007 – so many people, local and international, ask about her. Our major donors have been the Jim Joel Education and Training Fund, the National Lottery, the DG Murray Trust and terre des hommes.

For me, the major highlights have been our 1st National Conference and the International Conference; the opening of our Toy Library Resource & Training Centre and seeing how successful our Come & Play Toy Library is; the growth in skills and confidence of our staff members; the development of the “Play Today” pamphlet in 4 languages which targets parents and promotes stimulation from birth. The lowest points have come with the passing of 3 of our staff members – all hardworking, enthusiastic young women with so much potential. I also feel downhearted with every toy library that closes – the reasons are often lack of support by management or lack of support by the community. Our Quality Assurance mentorship programme, supported by the Jim Joel Fund, is helping to address this quite successfully.

After 18 years, I can definitely say that toy libraries are much more widely recognised as a valuable support service in early childhood development. However, the family of every baby born at risk should be referred to a toy library as soon as possible and every child who is unable to attend a preschool programme due to poverty should have the benefit of a toy library. A stronger message has to be sent to the Department of Social Development and Health and more toy libraries have to be started – for this, ALL-SA has to develop a strong regional network. Heleen, ALL-SA’s new director, is already making plans for this to happen.

Toy librarians need much more input about the value of their work – about what play and stimulation means to the development of the nation. A comprehensive, carefully constructed, set of accredited training courses is essential to building the skills, knowledge, confidence and self esteem of toy librarians.
Involvement in the International Toy Library Association

In 1993, the year SATLLA was founded, I attended my first international toy library conference – in Melbourne, Australia. Here my eyes were opened to the value of child directed free play, the psychosocial benefits of play and the need for good quality playgrounds for children. One other South African attended the conference.

Most people can’t believe this, but I was incredibly shy in those days, and didn’t make the most of the opportunity of meeting toy librarians.

At the next Conference which took place in Zurich, Switzerland in 1996, I presented a paper on analysing toys and got to know a lot more people. There were no other South Africans at the conference.

In 1999, at the Conference in Tokyo, I was asked to join the International Board. When you are asked if you are prepared to stand for election, you are told that you must be able to pay your own expenses to attend board meetings, which mainly take place in Europe!! I was elected and given the portfolio of treasurer. One other South African attended the Conference.

In 2002, at the Conference in Lisbon, Portugal, I was re-elected to the Board. The Board then elected me as President. Two other South Africans attended the Conference. They looked fantastic in their cultural outfits and sang with joy when the announcement was made that South Africa would host the next international conference and that a South African was the new president.

In 2005, at the Conference in Tshwane, I was re-elected as President. Many of the international delegates feel that the South African Conference was the best ever attended. Through sponsorship from OMO, Jim Joel Trust and UNICEF we were able to assist over 80 delegates, both local and international, to attend.

In 2008, in Paris, the Constitution of the Association was changed to allow me to serve as President for a 3rd term. This is an achievement for South Africa. Thirteen South Africans attended the Conference. Noloyiso Novukela presented a paper on Toy Libraries in South Africa.