

THE OTTO FOUNDATION

Changing communities book by book



THE DREAM



Improve early literacy by encouraging children to read for enjoyment

The Otto Foundation creates school libraries to provide access to books in safe, child-centred spaces.

We implement reading programmes to enable self-directed reading, and foster healthy self-exploration through creative expression.

We partner with schools to encourage positive engagement around books between children and their families/caregivers to involve the whole school community in early learning.

The thread that binds everything we do is the intention to spark and tend the hopes and dreams of children through the wonder of books and stories

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1. The Otto Foundation

How did it start?

The Otto Foundation is the philanthropic trust of the Otto family. The trust was established by Chris Otto and his children in 2016.

Our strategic focus

The Otto Foundation aims to improve early literacy by fostering a love of reading.

Children are more likely to read for enjoyment when:

- i. they have access to books
- ii. they have choice in their reading materials
- iii. they experience strong reading role models
- iv. they have safe spaces to read
- v. reading is celebrated as an activity of value in their homes and/or educational environments,
- vi. there are opportunities for social engagement around books and stories, and
- vii. they are recognised and celebrated as writers and creators.

Active, well stocked school libraries and innovative reading programmes satisfy these requirements for promoting reading for enjoyment and thus improving literacy outcomes. Longitudinal research across different countries therefore finds that “having adequate library access is one of the major counters against poverty when it comes to levels of reading success”¹.

The rationale behind the focus on reading for enjoyment

Our strategic focus is a response to South Africa’s literacy crisis. ‘Progress in International Reading Literacy’ (PIRLS) studies indicate that 4 out of 5 Grade 4 learners in South Africa are unable to read with comprehension in any language – and thus lack the foundational literacy required for their education journey.

There is strong research evidence linking reading for enjoyment (or “voluntary” or “independent” reading) to improved literacy outcomes. Children who read for pleasure perform better on reading tests, and the amount of time spent on independent reading has been identified as one of the best predictors of the gains made in reading achievement between the ages of 8 and 11².

Reading for enjoyment is also more important for children’s educational success than their family’s socio-economic status³ – a crucial finding for the South African context, where income inequality is high, and education outcomes are so often correlated with household income.

¹ Krashen, S. et al. 2021. ‘Predicting reading ability among ten-year-olds’ in Language Magazine. 20(1). Available. [Online]: <https://blogs.ifla.org/literacy-reading/files/2021/05/Krashenpredictors-of-PIRLS.pdf>

² Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding. 1988. ‘Growth in Reading and How Children Spend Their Time outside of School’, Reading Research Quarterly, volume 23(3).

³ OECD (2002) in UK Department of Education. 2012. ‘Research evidence on reading for pleasure: Education standards research team’.

Our theory of change

Input and Activities

The time, skills and financial resources of the Otto Foundation are used to:



- ① Establish school libraries
- ② Provide support to school library assistants
- ③ Implement school-based programmes to promote reading for enjoyment

Target Audience

Our stakeholders. The people our work serves and supports:



Educators

Learners

Parents and caregivers

Output

Accessible school libraries and actively managed reading programmes providing:



Access to books
+
Safe, comfortable reading spaces
+
Choice in reading material
+
An environment in which reading is valued
+
Reading role models

Outcome

An increase in reading for enjoyment

Impact

Improved reading skills and ability to read with comprehension

2. Planning our library network and programmes

The Otto Foundation library and reading project

The Otto Foundation has established nine school libraries serving ten schools in District Six and the Central Business District in Cape Town. Our tenth library will be opening in October 2025. This network of libraries will serve +-3716 learners.

Focus on quality design

We take great care in the design of our libraries to ensure that they are safe, beautiful, child-centred spaces that celebrate children and their creativity, and send a message to learners regarding the value attached to reading and creative self-expression.

Multi-purposes spaces

The schools where we work generally do not have established gathering spaces – such as school halls or staff rooms. The libraries therefore become multi-purpose spaces for the whole school community and are used for staff meetings, meetings with parents/ caregivers, workshops, extra lessons and a range of other learning activities.

Active libraries

The Otto Foundation maintains active involvement in the management of our school libraries. We fund a full-time librarian in every library, provide training and support to the librarians, and run an on-going programme of initiatives to deepen the culture of reading in our school communities.

Curriculum-aligned library programmes

Our team creates a structured library programme offering weekly, grade-specific library lessons aligned to the themes in the South African language curriculum. Lessons are aimed at nurturing a love of reading and fostering creative expression – developing learners as both readers and writers.

Continued investment in the library catalogues

The Otto Foundation continues to invest in the book collections of our libraries - prioritising local books, books with diverse characters and settings, and books in the home languages of the learners using our libraries.

Our team works with a network of local publishers and booksellers to ensure that the books in our libraries are both representative of the lived experiences of the learners who use them, and are varied enough to expand the knowledge and world view of learners.

3. Current libraries and programmes

The existing library network

The libraries and reading rooms established by the Otto Foundation to date include:

Project	Launch year	School Community
Sunflower Learning Centre	2017	Zonnebloem Boys' and Girls' Primary Schools
Liyabona Library	2019	Holy Cross RC Primary School
Protea Library	2020	Walmer Estate Primary School
NEST Reading Room	2021	Zonnebloem NEST High School
Chapel Street Library	2022	Chapel Street Primary School
Hope Library	2023	Good Hope Seminary High School
Sunshine Library	2024	Seven Steps Academy for the Deaf (junior school)
Rainbow Library	2024	Good Hope Seminary Junior School
Rahmah Library	2025	Rahmaniye Primary School
Blue Sky Library	2025	Seven Steps Academy for the Deaf (high school)
The Happy Library	opening in 10/2025	St Mary's Primary School



Photos: The Sunflower Learning Centre at Zonnebloem Girls' and Zonnebloem Boys' Primary Schools



Photos: The Liyabona Library at Holy Cross RC Primary School



Photos: The Protea Library at Walmer Estate Primary School



Photos: The Sunbird Library at Chapel Street Primary School



Photos: The Hope Library at Good Hope Seminary High School



Photos: The Sunshine Library at Seven Steps Academy for the Deaf



Photos: The Rainbow Library at Good Hope Seminary Junior School



Photos: The Rahmah Library at Rahmaniye Primary School



Photos: The Blue Sky Library at Seven Steps Academy for the Deaf

Initiatives to promote reading for enjoyment

Current programmes to promote reading for enjoyment, implemented across our library network, include the following:

Initiative	Frequency	Description
Library lessons	weekly	weekly curriculum-aligned lessons for every Grade
Author Readings	monthly	readings by local authors to deepen learners' appreciation for books and the process through which books are created
Book Buddy Sessions	quarterly	older learners read with younger ones
Book Reviews	quarterly	book review competitions to encourage deeper reading and engagement with books
Reading Champions	quarterly	prizes for most active library users in each grade
Caregiver Engagement	quarterly	book/ story-based activities and conversation prompts for parents and learners to go through together – thus encouraging reading and conversations about stories in the home
Principals' and Gogos' Readings	annually	principals and gogos host readings in the library to establish reading role models
Pen Pal Project	annually	pen pal project between different schools to encourage learners to write
Writing competitions	annually	writing competitions to encourage learners to voice their own opinions and write their own stories
Reading Relay	annually	book relay to create shared experiences around reading
Library Calendar	annually	library calendar created and distributed to encourage the celebration of book-related event days
Dress-up boxes	ongoing	dress-up boxes to allow for fantasy play and storytelling

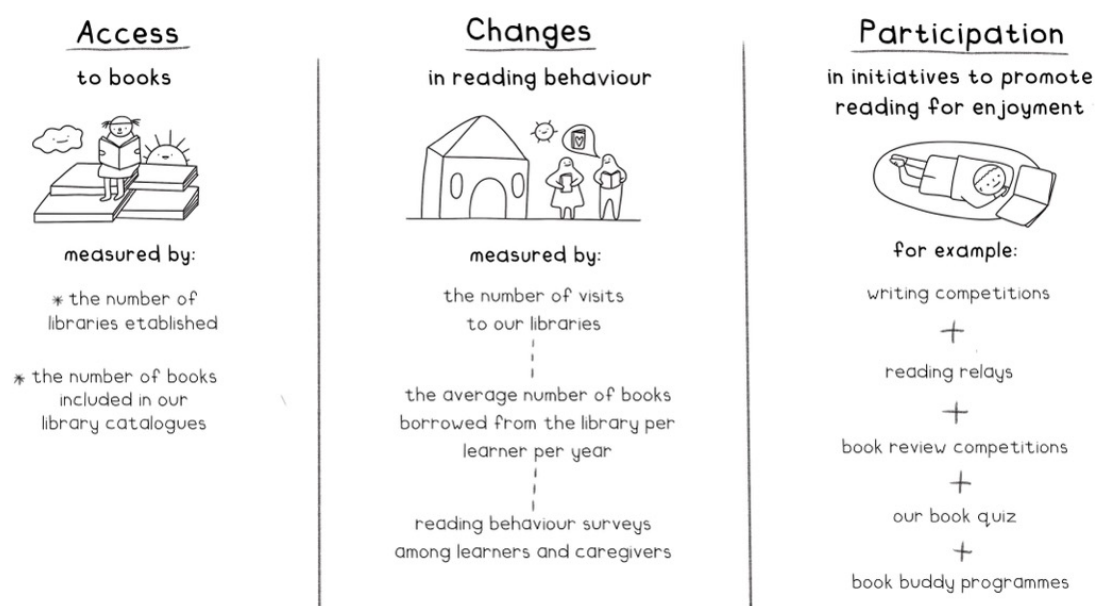
4. Measuring success and scaling impact

Monitoring and learning

By the end of 2025 our libraries will reach +- 3716 learners, and our librarians will host around 140 curriculum-aligned library lessons every week.

The research regarding the correlation between increases in reading for enjoyment and improved education outcomes is unequivocal.

We focus our monitoring and evaluation on the measurable elements associated with creating an environment in which a culture of reading can be nurtured, including:



There were 22 785 books in the catalogues of Otto Foundation libraries by December 2024.

- 48 167 books were checked out of Otto Foundation libraries in 2024. The majority of our libraries can maintain lending rates well above our targeted rate of one book for every learner every two weeks.
- In 2024 we have hosted 45 sessions in which local authors visited Otto Foundation libraries and hosted readings for learners.
- In February 2025, we hosted five sessions on the children's programme of the Open Book Festival in Otto Foundation libraries.
- 542 learners from five schools participated in our drawing and writing competitions in 2024
- 521 learners from five schools participated in our 2024 Pen Pal project
- 5399 book reviews were completed in our quarterly book review competitions.
- We now have a full year of curriculum-aligned primary school library lessons (256 lessons in total) available for free download on website.

We monitor improvements in literacy outcomes through the language scores of participating schools in the standardised tests of the Western Cape Education Department for Grade 3 and Grade 6 learners. There are, however, a variety of variables that impact on these test scores. We therefore consider our impact on these results to be contribute rather than attributive.

Our team also conducts bi-annual surveys in our school communities which help us to gauge both the reading culture in our schools and the impact of the libraries and library programmes.

Key findings from the survey conducted in 2024 include the following:

Positive perceptions of the reading culture in our schools and of our school library programmes	
% of parents	statements
95% agree/ strongly agree	reading-related achievements are celebrated in my child's school
92% agree/ strongly agree	learners at my child's school are encouraged to read for enjoyment
95% agree/ strongly agree	learners at my child's school have access to a variety of interesting books
80% agree/ strongly agree	my child regularly checks books out of the school library
88% agree/ strongly agree	the library plays an important role in developing the reading culture at my child's school
% of teachers	statements
90% agree/ strongly agree	reading-related achievements are celebrated in our school
98% agree/ strongly agree	learners at our school are encouraged to read for enjoyment
94% agree/ strongly agree	learners at our school have access to a variety of interesting books
98% agree/ strongly agree	the library plays an important role in developing the school's reading culture
94% agree/ strongly agree	there has been an improvement in the school's reading culture since the opening of the library
93% agree/ strongly agree	the librarian hosts interesting and engaging lessons

Scaling impact

The multiplier effect of our library and reading projects is activated through both (i) the sharing of resources developed for and tested in our libraries with external partners, and (ii) the impact of our programmes on learners and school communities.

Resource platform

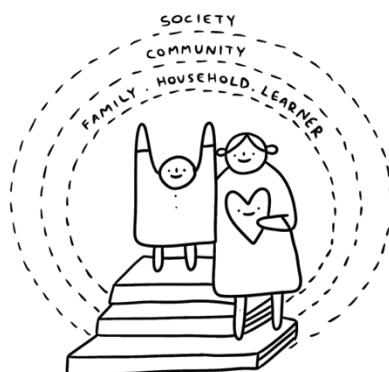


In 2023, the Otto Foundation launched a free online resource platform for school libraries which serves a growing community of school librarians and literacy champions – thus expanding the reach of the designs, programmes and library lesson frameworks developed for, and tested in, our library network.

The platform currently has 224 members. It is the only platform of its kind in South Africa, and the only freely available library lessons prioritising local and African literature and aligned to the South African language curriculum.

Building school communities

In the language of Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model we believe that the micro-level interactions that occur in our libraries and through our reading initiatives can bring about positive changes in reading culture in families and communities – with associated ripple effects for society at large. Our library lessons also provide opportunities for important conversations around socio-emotional intelligence, human rights, diversity, tolerance, social justice, environmental responsibility, and other significant topics, which we encourage learners to continue in their families and social circles.



5. Partnership opportunities

All new funding directly benefits children

We are currently seeking partners to support the expansion of the library network to ten libraries, and to fund the ongoing operational costs of the libraries and reading programmes.

Operational costs associated with the Otto Foundation itself (including Otto Foundation staff costs) are covered by the Otto Family.

All new funding goes towards projects on the ground that directly benefit children, either creating libraries or running the reading programmes that build the culture of reading in the school communities where we work.

The partnerships we are looking for

We value partnerships, and are continuously seeking collaboration with other organisations interested in funding and implementing programmes aimed at promoting reading for enjoyment.

 **Get in touch if you...** 

Want to contribute to:

- * Improving access to books
- * Behavioural change that supports reading
- * The sharing of high quality library resources

Are interested in:

- * Raising a generation of readers
- * Getting local stories told
- * A holistic approach to literacy development



Have ideas for:

- * Literacy support for schools
- * Empowering children to author their own stories
- * Nurturing empathy and mindfulness through reading

Would like to invest in:

- * Creating beautiful libraries
- * Curriculum aligned library programmes
- * Training opportunities for librarians
- * Promoting local literature



Many drops of water

“Many drops of water does a mighty river make” – African Proverb

In the table below we illustrate how various levels of financial contributions can support our libraries and library programmes.

Contribution size	What this contribution could cover*
R10 000	sponsor a shelf of +-60 books
R12 000	cover a library's internet connection for a year
R20 000	fund two classroom-based reading corners
R25 000	cover the costs of our annual book quiz
R50 000	fill a whole bookcase with new books
R62 500	+sponsor the operational costs of a library for one term
R125 000	+sponsor the operational costs of a library for six months
R250 000	+sponsor the operational costs of a library for one year
R200 000 – R400 000	be a donor partner for setting up a new library
R500 000 – R700 000	be the key/ sole donor for setting up a new library (for renovation of existing spaces)
R1 000 000 – R1 500 000	be a key/sole donor for setting up two new libraries (for renovation of existing spaces)
R1 950 000	+cover the cost of the reading for enjoyment initiatives in our libraries for five years
R6 000 000	be the key/ sole donor for a new library building (construction)

*note: these numbers are illustrative – based on current budget estimates

6. Contact us

We invite you to visit our libraries and explore the ways in which we can partner to reach even more children.

Keep an eye on our website for news about the Otto Foundation and its projects – www.ottofoundation.org

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