

The Little English Library

When **Tatia Gruenbaum** moved to the Netherlands with her family in 2012, little did she expect to be founding and running an English-language children's library two years later. **Helen Redding** talks to Tatia about how the project grew from a few donated books into a much-loved part of the community.



Helen Redding (hlvaux@yahoo.co.uk) is a freelance writer and editor and founder of Crumbs Publishing.

IN March 2014, not content to drink coffee and munch Appelkoek on the expat circuit, Tatia Gruenbaum, a lecturer and ELT publisher, single-handedly launched a unique not-for-profit project – The Little English Library. The library provides English language books for children aged 0-14 years who speak English as their first language, or who are learning English. Significantly, it is the first space of its kind in the Netherlands to be devoted to the free provision of such books.

Lack of English language children's books

Tatia had noticed that expat parents were worried about how to provide their children's books. Local suppliers of English-language children's books were scarce and expensive, and whilst local Dutch libraries did have some books, there was rarely a sufficient range. Tatia's initial idea was to set up an exchange system where books for loan would be carried between toddler groups and coffee mornings. But she soon realised how physically cumbersome and inadequate this would be. What was needed was somewhere permanent for the books with open access. With no previous library experience, Tatia had a lot of research to do.

Will I need a donkey?

'In my mind I tried to visualise how it would run, so I simply searched on the computer for "how to set up a library",' says Tatia. 'I found lots of examples – postboxes in Colorado, a guy in South America with a donkey that carried books from village to village. I looked at how classroom libraries in America are set up. I came across a great article on Metis – a child-centred system of themed categorisation that we now use. I was really inspired.' Armed with a plan, Tatia set about finding a location. The focus was on a service for expats, but when she found the perfect home for the library in the Montessori School Breda, it struck her that it had the potential to be a much bigger project.

A community project

'It wasn't just a project for children who could speak English, it would also be for children learning English,' she explains. 'I felt that it had to be a community



project – a small thanks from the expats to the Dutch for welcoming us.' Indeed, 45 per cent of the library's members are now native Dutch speakers – testimony to the project's appeal.

To make it truly community-based, locating the library in a Dutch primary school seemed appropriate. It provided an environment that both Dutch and non-Dutch children and parents would feel comfortable in. It also had the facilities to make it accessible to all: parking, step-free access for buggies, toilets, coffee machines and children's tables. 'So many of the people say it feels like a home from home,' says Tatia. 'They really appreciate it and that's what's great about this project – the amount of love that it has been shown by the community.'

Tatia was lucky enough to get involved with the school at a time when it was redesigning its own library. This meant that the space could be tailored to meet the needs of the project.

'Our zone is right at the start of the library and we have shelving for at least 1,200 books,' explains Tatia. 'We have built-in drawers to keep the audio books and library cards, and there are plenty of tables, plus seating and floor space for activities such as storytelling. We could not have hoped for better!'

'My book has wings'

With a home for the library, Tatia had the mammoth task of finding stock – on a shoestring. Donations were the obvious place to start. Amongst friends and local schools, Tatia launched the 'My Book Has Wings' campaign to involve children and schools in growing the library. They were asked to choose a book they no longer wanted and send it in. In return they received a thank you certificate. 'When I launched the campaign it got a lot of attention via social media and books started coming in,' says Tatia.

All ready for little visitors.

Photographs by Inger Kievit

'It's now become such a habit for people to donate their old books, or family brings them when visiting from the UK. I can actually be picky!'

The book count now stands at over 1,500, mainly due to donations but also thanks to recent funding from Tatia's employer, Avans University of Applied Science. How reliant has the project been on the small pockets of funding it has received? 'Very, very reliant,' Tatia explains. 'There was no money. I've done lots of knocking on doors. The money from Avans helped with some of the books, furnishing, lighting, chalkboards and book bags. A language teaching school sponsored our library cards. We don't need masses of money but we do need money to do things.'

Although the library is a not-for-profit project, Tatia believes that it needs to be run like a business to be a success. 'We have an identity and style of doing things. I market it like a business and run it like a shop. I like to add an element of surprise to keep a bit of excitement around the library, and so far it's working.'

With over 134 members (including 12 local schools – an achievement in itself as Dutch schools rarely allow other schools access to their facilities) and a team of dedicated volunteers, the library is going from strength to strength. The innovative project has already been entered for competitions – the School Library Association's Inspiration Award and the National Competition for Primary and Secondary Education in the Netherlands. But most important to measuring the success of the project has been the level of enthusiasm from the children – under the slogan 'Love Me, Read Me, Return Me' over 600 books have been checked out.

What next?

Tatia is already thinking about next steps. Plans include a drama class to teach English to four to six-year-olds and expanding the library's popular collection of



Exploring the front facing display shelves.

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**Tatia in The Little English Library.**

dyslexia-friendly books. Attracting older children is also a challenge.

'Secondary schools in the Netherlands don't have many English books. But coming to a library in a primary school isn't very cool,' laughs Tatia. 'Next year we'll see if we can get older kids to ignore the fact that they're walking into a primary school and just make the library a cool place to get a book. Hopefully the children moving on from primary school will spread the word too.'

The Little English Library has established itself as a much-loved fixture in the Breda community. 'I truly hope it will be recognised as a way to get English out of the classroom; to bring it alive and let children see a purpose in learning it by adding some fun. It wasn't an expensive thing to do but it's a great thing – a great exchange between the expat and Dutch community. Bit by bit, the library is becoming part of children's lives. I do hope there are other people like me around who will start their own'. [1]

Find out more

- Website: www.littlelibrary.nl
- Facebook: www.facebook.com/thelittleenglishlibrary
- Twitter: @TheGruenbaums