

The Quality of the Rural Library Service in Malaysia: The Views of the Rural Community

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Abstract: The present study aims to identify the quality of the rural library service in Malaysia. The study is qualitative in nature whereby the data were gathered via three focus group discussions. In general, the data reflect that the majority of rural library services are delivered to the rural community to a high quality. Nevertheless, there are some issues such as a lack of updated educational materials, internet connection and signage as well as lack of interests among young users that need to be taken into consideration. A number of discussions have been highlighted which it is hoped will assist those concerned in constructing strategies to further enhance the quality and effectiveness of Malaysia's rural library services.

Key words: Rural development, community development, information development, quality and effectiveness, educational materials

INTRODUCTION

Access to information is vital as it provides a means of effective utilization of resources and infrastructure which in turn can boost the socio-economic aspects of the community. The Malaysian government has made a great effort to ensure that all communities, regardless of their geographical location are able to gain full access to information. One of the most prominent efforts is the introduction of the rural library system. The first rural library in Malaysia was introduced in 2000 at which time a total of 25 rural libraries were established in seven selected states (National Library of Malaysia, 2013). After several years of establishment, Malaysia's rural library system has recorded tremendous growth statistics. In 2012 for example, there were 1,114 rural libraries across Malaysia with Sarawak emerging as the leading state while the number of registered members in Malaysia was 1.34 million, demonstrating a high dependence of rural communities on the rural library system (National Library of Malaysia, 2013).

The rural library system is not a new concept in Malaysia and it has already become part of fabrics of the rural community. In comparison to their counterparts in urban areas, rural libraries have become a common feature among rural communities across the country (Omar *et al.*, 2014). This is probably due to abundance of activities and services offered that caters to the needs, interests and

abilities of those in rural communities (Omar *et al.*, 2012). Among the activities and services offered are general reading resources, education resources, computers and an internet access, information and referral, reference, librarian assistance, book borrowing, group discussions and community activities (Omar *et al.*, 2014, 2012; Takalkar and Devi, 2001; American Library Association, 2008; Costanza, 2008; Scott, 2011).

With a large number of rural libraries and users and a wide range of service offerings, it must be asked are these services delivered to a high quality? Existing studies examine the quality of the library services offered to communities across the globe (Takalkar and Devi, 2001; American Library Association, 2008; Costanza, 2008; Scott, 2011; McDonald and Micikas, 1994). Most of the studies have reached a similar conclusion library services are delivered to the community to a high quality. However while extensive research has been carried out for various regions across the globe such research has not yet focused on Malaysia; apart from a few local studies carried out by Omar *et al.* (2014, 2012) and Shaifuddin *et al.* (2011) not much is known about the quality of Malaysia's rural library service which drives researchers of this study to achieve the following: firstly, contribute new knowledge to the existing literature, secondly, offer findings that can guide those concerned in constructing effective strategies for developing the rural library system and thirdly, provide data that will serve as a basis for future studies on this topic.

The quality of Malaysia’s rural library service:

According to McDonald and Micikas (1994), there are four elements that should be considered in examining the quality of library services, namely resources, services, access and the interaction between library services and their users. The first element resources refers to the overall resources available in the library. The number of activities and resources offered at a rural library must able to cater to community demand. It must be adequate in fitting the needs of and interests and abilities within the community. Furthermore, Omar *et al.* (2012) added that the reading materials offered must always be updated its content. Within the modern context, access to advanced search tools in a conventional information-seeking center such as a rural library is essential and Hill (2009) has examined the positive association between the availability of ICT services at the library and the number of library users. However, the availability of internet ready computers in the library has always spurred debate regarding concerns over the potential for internet to usurp or would make the library incompatible with their conventional mission (D’Elia *et al.*, 2002). Another element of resources for consideration is the library building itself where more space and more attractive buildings can better ensure user satisfaction (Omar *et al.*, 2012; Bertot *et al.*, 2008).

The second element is services which can be broken down into four areas: first, the adequacy of the search tool (database); second, the number of staff and the adequacy of their training which ensures efficient and helpful assistance whenever it is required (Ugwoke and Omekwu, 2014); third, the process of borrowing and returning library resources a complicated borrowing process demotivates users to return to use rural library services (Omar *et al.*, 2012) and fourth is the environment. The final element is access which focuses on access to library resources. Basic infrastructure relating to a rural library such as a tar road and electricity are also important to rural library users (Ugwoke and Omekwu, 2014). Omar *et al.* (2012) also emphasize the availability of signage to rural libraries to attract more users.

Furthermore, McDonald and Micikas (1994) also emphasize the importance of the interaction between rural library services and users where they evaluated the quality of the interaction between users and libraries based on how they ‘interact’ with the library services provided. In order to attract more users to the rural library, the services and activities offered must effectively ‘communicate’ with the users (Hill, 2009). Omar *et al.* (2012) add that the services and activities offered at rural libraries must be in line with a community’s needs, interests and ability and failure to achieve this will cause

a disconnection between the rural library and its surrounding community. In the current setting, the rural library seems to offer services that appeal to a broad segment of the community. For students, a rural library is the best place to study. A study conducted by Omar *et al.* (2012) stresses that rural libraries are a suitable place to study due to the calmness of their environments while Willingham (2008) examines the role of libraries in creating good citizens through education and literacy programs. In addition, Scott (2011) has investigated the role of the rural library in offering a safe, neutral place where young people can go to study and learn. Another study carried out by Omar *et al.* (2014) deduces that the majority of the rural community visits their local rural library to read and borrow books in their leisure time. Moreover, Shaifuddin *et al.* (2011) add that the majority of the rural community visit the rural library to seek information and use the internet and computer services offered. Omar *et al.* (2012) also confirm that the rural library is a suitable place for strengthening social and familial relationships within the community. Given and Leckie (2004) on the other hand, state that the rural library continues to be an extremely important public space, it is a place that people come to in order participate in activities and socialize.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is qualitative in nature whereby the data were collected through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). A total of three FGDs were conducted: one with a group of adults (aged between 30 and 45 years); one with group of young people (aged between 16 and 17 years old) and another with rural library staff. The details of the informants are displayed in Table 1. All the FGDs were conducted at Kuala Terengganu, a district in the state of Terengganu and all the FGDs were conducted on the same date.

Table 1: Demographic data for youth and adult groups

Youth	Gender	Age	Education level	Occupation	Frequency of visits (in a week)
Y-R1	Female	18	SPM	Part-timer worker	Three times a week
Y-R2	Female	18	SPM	Unemployed	Three times a week
Y-R3	Male	16	PMR	Student	14 times (twice a day)
Y-R4	Male	16	PMR	Student	14 times (twice a day)
Y-R5	Male	16	PMR	Student	Three times a week
Y-R6	Male	16	PMR	Student	Three times a week
Y-R7	Male	16	PMR	Student	Three times a week
Y-R8	Female	17	SPM	Student	Three times a week
Adult					
A-R1	Male	30	SPM	Reporter	Once a week
A-R2	Male	23	SPM	Housewife	Twice a week
A-R3	Male	32	SPM	Housewife	Once a week
A-R4	Male	29	SPM	Housewife	Once a week
A-R5	Male	42	SPM	Housewife	Once a week

Based on the phenomenology approach, the qualitative method employed by this study enables researchers to understand the experience of the respondents with regards to the use of their local rural library service, its impacts and their understanding based on the meaning of these experiences. Additionally, the method chosen offers a rich phenomenological description of the phenomenon being studied in a specific context. The number of informants was determined according to the quality of the data collected. Researchers continued to conduct the FGDs until they believed that it had reached a point of saturation (i.e., they had reached a full understanding of the respondents' experience and does not need to proceed any further with the discussion) (Laverty, 2008).

The present study employs data from a total of three FGDs. A total of 19 informants from various backgrounds, ages, profession, experience as librarian, gender and occupation were selected (Table 1 and 2). The participants are experienced staff members and loyal users. The FGD comprising the youth group was conducted for 48 min, the FGD comprising the adult group was conducted for 40 min and the FGD comprising the librarian group was conducted for 63 min. The FGDs began slowly with a small discussion in order to enable researchers to understand the background of the informants and it proceeded later into deeper discussion of the issue at hand. The structure of the FGDs were based on the interview protocol which was developed to help keep the discussion to a standard interview procedure and maintain the flow of conversation. The key questions were initially prepared based on findings from McDonald and Micikas (1994) who as mentioned earlier, highlight four main dimensions to measuring library quality, namely resources, services, access and interaction between users and library services. Questions included in the interview protocol were developed in line with the study objective which is to identify the quality of rural library services. The questions served as a guide, allowing the respondents freedom and flexibility in their answers. Answers to the questions related to resources consumed the longest time across all three FGDs. Data from the FGDs were later transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Table 2: Demographic data for staff

Youth	Gender	Age (years)	Education levels	Occupation	Experience as a librarian (years)
P-R1	Male	33	SPM	Assistant librarian	2
P-R2	Female	32	Diploma	Librarian	6
P-R3	Female	29	SPM	Assistant librarian	9
P-R4	Female	36	Skill certificate	Assistant librarian	3
P-R5	Female	29	STPM.	Assistant librarian	6
P-R6	Female	33	Degree	Librarian	7

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion are guided by McDonald and Micikas' (1994) suggestion that the four important elements for study when it comes to the quality of rural library services are resources, services, access and the interaction between libraries services and the users.

Resources: Here, we focus on the criteria for evaluating the overall resources available in the library. Specifically, the FGD have resulted in a number of related themes, namely adequacy of the resources, updated resources, quality of the reading materials, computer and internet services available, spaces provided and attractiveness of the library interior/exterior.

Adequacy of the resources: Omar *et al.* (2012) stress the importance of adequate resources to ensure maintenance of service quality. The informants have considered the adequacy of the resources and conclude that in general most of the recent books they search for are available to them. For example:

The books are always there the books are new (P-R6)

However with regards to educational materials, some of the respondents raised their concerns for example:

There are only two books (relating to education) and those books can only be read at the library the users are not allowed to take the books home (P-R2)

Recent reading sources in the rural library: Stocking updated materials will attract more people to use a rural library service while at the same time maintaining the quality of the services offered by it (Takalkar and Devi, 2001; American Library Association, 2008). A number of respondents in this study have raised their concerns with regards to a lack of updated education-related resources:

Yes, the resources are all the same, they is not in line with the current syllabus (P-R6)

Yes, the book is unfit for the current syllabus (P-R2)

General reading resources: Although, updated education materials are lacking in the rural library studied, the 'freshness' of the general reading resources is a different matter:

Yes, it is updated, every month (P-R4)

For the reading materials, it is updated gradually and it includes the reading materials for the children (P-R6)

Quality of the reading materials: Referring to Omar *et al.* (2014), print material is the main reason for people visiting their local rural library, therefore focus must be placed on maintaining the quality of these materials. Most of the informants have agreed that most of the resources in the rural library are good quality:

I have seen my children read the books; they are in good condition (A-R5)

They are in good condition (A-R3s)

On the other hand, some of the informants also raised their concerns about the quality of older resources:

Some of the older books are not in good condition (A-R4)

Number of computers: Hill (2009) and Omar *et al.* (2014) stressed that in order for rural libraries to deliver good services to their users, they must be equipped with an adequate number of ICT-related materials. One of the informants in this study clarified that the number of computers allocated for the users at the moment is enough and although there are only eight computers (laptops) in the rural library studied, the rotation system ensures that all every users will have the opportunity to use a computer:

It (the number of computers) is enough, they (the rural library users) can take turns in using the computers (P-R6)

Internet connection: Hill (2009) explains the importance of internet access when it comes to spurring more people to use their local libraries. However in the case of the rural library studied, it seems that no internet service is available yet to the users and that only the staffs, via their desktop computers, currently have internet access:

Staff over here have access to the internet but not the users (P-R3)

There is a problem with the internet connection for the staff, however, the internet connection is available to the staff via the Streamyx service (P-R2)

Reading spaces: According to Omar *et al.* (2012) and Bertot *et al.* (2008) in order to ensure the quality and effectiveness of a library services, a library building must have enough space to accommodate a large number of workstations in line with this, even though the rural library service in this study is used by a large number of people, especially during weekend, the respondents claimed that the space available at their rural library caters well to the community:

It is not usually too full, it (the space) seems ok to us (A-R5)

Rural library building: The building itself can be one of the reasons why more users come and avail of the services offered (Omar *et al.*, 2012; Given and Leckie, 2004) as confirmed by one of the respondents:

The library is decorated attractively (Y-R8)

However, another informant has highlighted the need for the library to be relocated to a more suitable area as well as the need to renovate the building:

There should more suitable areas for the rural library and the rural library building should be renovated (A-R1)

Services: As mentioned before, one of the keys to attracting more users to a rural library is to provide services that assist users and cater well to their needs, interests and abilities (Takalkar and Devi, 2001; American Library Association, 2008; Constanza, 2008; Scott, 2011). Within the services aspect, a total of six themes have emerged from the analysis.

Number of staff: With regards to the number of librarians in the rural library, most of the informants have expressed their satisfaction which is expected to enhance the quality of the rural library service offering as a whole. Drawing on Ugwoke and Omekwu (2014) an adequate number of experienced and trained library staff will ensure that library services delivered effectively as they understand the needs of the library users. One of the informants has confirmed this:

The current number of staff is more than enough (P-R5)

It (the number of staff) is adequate for us previously we had three assistants but now we have only two (Y-R1)

Computer and internet services: The findings of this study are in line with Hill (2009) and Shaifuddin *et al.* (2011) who examine the importance of ICT-related materials at the rural library. While most of the informants were satisfied with the computer services provided by the rural library most were on the other hand not satisfied with the internet service available:

Only our rural library has a problem with the internet connection (P-R6)

However, some of the informants still expressed their satisfaction with the internet service as they claimed that the WiFi service from the nearest telecenter could still be gained at the rural library:

Our rural library is near to the Bes Comm, we can get the free internet from there (P-R5)

Supporting P-R5, informant A-R1 stressed that there is no need for computer or internet services to be provided at the rural library as there is a telecenter near to the rural library which is available to the users:

We do not need any internet connection over here as there is telecenter nearby (A-R1)

Moreover, A-R2 added that it is a good thing for a rural library not to have either computers or an internet service because they will only result in users coming to the rural library solely for these facilities and not for the reading resources. This finding is in line with a study conducted by D'Elia *et al.* (2002) who expressed concern about the potential for the internet to usurp libraries and result in people forgetting the conventional mission of the library:

They will only focus on the computers and the internet (A-R2)

They will only use the computers (A-R1)

The opening hours: Although from the FGDs, it can be seen that the users are satisfied on the opening hours, especially on Saturdays and Sundays, the opening hours seem to pose a problems for the staff those with children find it difficult to work on Saturdays because most of the area's kindergartens are closed:

On Saturday we have problems as the kindergartens are closed and there is no one available to take care of our children (P-R6)

Some of the staff complain those with children, especially babies have problem to bring their baby together to the library (P-R2)

The borrowing process: A complicated borrowing process will always hinder people to interact with a library. The participants claimed that this process is simple to use:

It is easy (A-R1)

The users are given ample time each time they borrow any reading materials:

Typically, they give us 2 weeks (A-R4)

The young users: A rural library is some where people can go regardless of their age group. While the majority of the older group see the rural library as a place to read and spend their leisure time, children on the other hand, see the rural library as their 'playground'. Omar *et al.* (2012) notes that it is a common problem for users of rural libraries to be distracted by noisy children, especially during the weekend and on school holidays something that the findings of this study concur with:

On Saturday, it will usually be noisy here (P-R2)

It is common for young users (children) to make noise (A-R5)

Free from noisy environment: While the rural library is located near the main road, the respondents claimed that there is no noise pollution from the vehicles on the main road:

It is not too noisy (the noise of the vehicles from the road) (A-R4)

Access: Ugwoke and Omekwu (2014) confirm that poor infrastructure leads to lower quality and an ineffective library service. However, with regards to access to the library examined by this current study, one of the common issues raised by the respondents is the lack of signage to the rural library which according to them will cause difficulties for first-time users.

Signage to the rural library: Omar *et al.* (2014, 2012) have highlighted the importance of signage to help users particularly first-time visitors find rural libraries. The rural library studied does not have adequate signage as clarified by A-R4:

People have difficulties getting here there is no signage to direct people (A-R4)

Users from neighboring villages: While the library studied does have its own loyal local user base, it also manages to attract outsiders:

The users also come from neighboring villages (P-R5)

People are not only coming from this village to use the services but also from the neighboring villages (P-R6)

Interaction between rural library services and the users:

Hill (2009), highlights that many libraries are facing problems resulting from their loss of communication with their community this indicates the importance of the ability of the services offered to cater effectively to and interact with the needs and interests of the community (Omar *et al.*, 2014). The findings of this study confirm that the rural library in question has interacted effectively with its users particularly in terms of its reading and borrowing reading resources as a studying place as a socializing place and as a place for community activity.

Purposes of coming to the rural library: The informants were also asked about their main reason for coming to their local rural library. Based on the analysis performed, it can be concluded that most of the informants visit the rural library to read and borrow the available reading materials which is in line with findings by Omar *et al.* (2012) and Shaifuddin *et al.* (2011). Informant Y-R3 has confirmed this by stating that the main cause of coming to the rural library is to borrow novels:

I borrow novels (Y-R3)

Each time I visit the rural library, I read a novel I will look for a novel first (Y-R2)

Usually, I read novels and other types of book but not books on sport (A-R1)

The findings of this study seem to be in line with findings by Willingham (2008) and Scott (2011) who emphasize the importance of the suitability of a rural library as a place for students to study:

When I study, I study with my friends at the rural library (Y-R8)

I come here twice in a day I come here to study (Y-R3)

In line with a study conducted by Omar *et al.* (2014) the present study has confirmed the ability of the rural

library studied to offer more than just reading resources. The library service's ability to conduct community activities, especially during weekends has attracted the local community to it:

Usually, every Saturday, they organize an activity and I like to get involved (Y-R2)

Usually after finished our Malaysia Education Certificate (SPM), we will gather over here, I always met my friend at the rural library (Y-R1)

CONCLUSION

In general, the participants have expressed that their rural library provides a good-quality service. Generally, the users have expressed their satisfaction with the quality of the service with regards to its resources, services, access and the interaction between the rural library service and its users. Despite this satisfaction, however, there is still room to further improve the services offered some recommendations are highlighted as follows:

Firstly, the rural library is to be provided with an adequate internet connection this is an important aspect of a library service's offering as it can be a major attraction the users especially the young (Hill, 2009). Although, the library studied is located near to a telecenter, it benefits only those their own laptops as it only provides a WiFi connection. Secondly, relevant and current educational materials are to be provided advice from schools teachers would probably be needed in order to ensure that the materials provided cater to the curriculum requirements. Thirdly, adequate signage is to be erected to help new and non-local users find the building more easily.

The main limitation of the study is that it employs data from only three FGDs one FGD with six library staff and the other two with a total of thirteen library users across both. However that said, the findings of this qualitative study have served as a good basis from which to conduct a more in-depth study on a bigger sample. To this end, information from the qualitative findings have been included in the instrument development process for the quantitative study which is expected to be pre-tested before the actual data collection on a total of 400 rural library users takes place.

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