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### **Literacy through Child Activities: Community Children's Libraries and the Story - Book Projects**

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#### ***Abstract:***

*The paper presents an inspiring effort by a local child-focused, non-governmental organization in Khon Kaen, an urban center of Northeast Thailand, to improve the quality of life for children, families, and communities by providing early childhood care and development, reading resources, and services to the communities. The goals are fulfilled by establishing a children- and-family library and organizing a story-book project to facilitate the work of childcare centers in rural areas with storytelling and children's activities. The association worked in cooperation with the local communities in promoting literacy, good reading habits, and early childhood development. The children- and-family library and the story-book project have become models for other organizations and communities in establishing a community children's library and associated services in the country.*

#### **Children's Library Services in Thailand**

Reading is an essential activity for developing children's intelligence, emotions and behaviour. It also helps develop a child into a qualified human resource for the a nation. In Thailand, these facts are recognized, but reading materials and reading places for children, especially in rural areas, are still insufficient. Consequently, the problems of illiteracy and inefficient literacy can be seen in many areas.

Compulsory education in Thailand begins at six years. Children between seven and twelve years old are required to enroll in school. They are expected to be able to read, write, and gain the knowledge needed for survival and for self-development. However, the quality of education is not the same all over the country, due to unfavorable circumstances in some areas, mainly poverty and isolation. Consequently, some children have finished the compulsory education but are still unable to read, and some adults have lost their literacy due to a lack of access to reading materials.

In Thailand, library service for people outside the formal educational system has been insufficient. The public library services provided by the government are divided into two systems: one for the capital city and a second for the other provinces. In Bangkok, the capital city, with a population of 6.5 million, the Bangkok Municipality provides 22 public libraries, 23 small reading places, and 8 mobile libraries. In the other 75 provinces, with a population of about 55 million, the Non-Formal Education Department, Ministry of Education, organizes about 1,300 public libraries and about 3,000 tiny reading places in rural districts. In addition a small number of libraries serving the public have been organized by the private sector. Library and reading resources for children are mainly provided in schools. Children out of the school system could have access to reading materials from children's rooms or corners in 97 the public libraries, although without a children's librarian to provide special services for them. Children's programs and activities are occasionally organized to coincide with national events, such as Children's Day, Library Week and New Year's Day.

### **Private-Organization's Participation in Library Services**

Depressed by this unfavorable situation, some private organizations and educational institutions have established libraries and mobile libraries and have organized reading activities for both adults and children in various parts of the country. However, most of the projects were limited in time, scope, personnel, and budget, so they could not continue or did not last long. One of the few private organizations that was successful in its projects for children and their families is the Tai Wisdom Association.

The Tai Wisdom Association (TWA, is a local, child-focused, non-governmental organization which is based in Khon Kaen, in the Northeast of Thailand. Established in 1998, TWA is financed by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation (the Netherlands), Thai Health Promotion Foundation (Thailand), and through its own fundraising initiatives. The association aims to improve the quality of life for children, families, and communities in Northeast Thailand by promoting early-childhood care and development, providing resources and supports, and mobilizing communities. It performs its tasks according to IFLA's idea "Literacy is the key to education and knowledge and to the use of information services," but for TWA, library services are used as the key to literacy, knowledge, and information for the development of young children and their families. The association has established a children-and-family library and organized a story-book project as a means to extend library services and resources and to accomplish its goals in child, family, and community development.

### **The Children and Family Library**

In 1998, the population in Khon Kaen was 1.7 million, with 153,000 children in early childhood among them; but there were no library or recreational facilities for them. Early childhood refers to the period from birth until age eight, during which children require objects to manipulate and opportunities to learn and explore the world around them. In 2000, the Tai

Wisdom Association founded the “Children and Family Library”, the first community children, library in Thailand in the Meung District (the City) of Khon Kaen Province with the cooperation of the community and financial assistance from the Bernard Van Leer Foundation (the Netherlands). The Library provides reading resources and activities for children and their families that stimulate literacy and good reading habit among both children and adults. The library is also the base for TWA’s services, training, and practice for implementation in early childhood development, providing a foundation for the development of intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and social skills for children.

The Children and Family Library performs its tasks to achieve the following objectives:

1. to be a source for materials, media, and services for children under the age of six;
2. to be an educational resource for childcare givers, teachers, and community leaders who work with young children and families;
3. to promote family participation in childhood development and family cooperation in sharing experiences and knowledge;
4. to be a model library in using library resources and services to change traditional beliefs and practices of the people with regard to child development and parenting education;
5. to disseminate ideas and information and provide technical assistance and training to those who work on child development; and
6. to conduct research and promote academic services concerning early-childhood and family development.

### ***Community Cooperation***

The Children and Family Library is a small library runs by two staff members and a group of volunteers under the supervision of the TWA administrative board. The staff consists of professional librarians with special training in children’s activities. The volunteers are students, housewives, and workers who are members of the community and who volunteer to work part time in the library.

The library has publicized the importance of reading and of its resources and services through various media, brochures, signboards, newsletters, and a radio program. It has been welcomed by all in the community, especially the families with children. The people in the community cooperate by being library members and joining in library activities. The members’ participation varied according to their budgets and intentions. Some members help in the garden, while others donate food for pets and fishes in the aquarium, trees to make the garden shady, sand and materials for artistic activities, and money for books.

### ***Books and Reading Materials***

The Children and Family Library was established with the concept of a Book Park. It serves as a venue for children and their parents to spend their leisure time together reading, playing, and performing creative activities, and for families in the community to discuss and exchange views on child rearing and other topics. There are about 500 library members, consisting of children from infants to pre-school, primary-school-age children, and adults who are parents, childcare givers, teachers, and local community leaders in Khon Kaen and the nearby provinces.

The library's collection of over 4,600 selected books and reading materials is recorded in the library database. Among the books are picture books, books on child rearing and textbooks on library services and activities.

The picture books, which are the main reading materials, are selected by specialists from library schools and private organization to ensure their appropriateness in terms of content, the use of language, illustration and the format for use in storytelling for young readers.

### *Services*

The services offered in the Children and Family Library comprise three groups: library services, park services, and information services.

1. Library Services The services provided in the library are reading service, lending service, and children's services and activities.

Reading service is offered both indoors in a small reading room and outdoors in a pleasant atmosphere surrounded by trees where readers can sit or lie down in a corridor covered with mats or sit on a deck up in a tree.

Lending service is offered to all members of the library, both children and adults, using a computerized lending system.

Children's services and activities are organized during the weekends with the aim of promoting reading among children and adults. They consist of book talk, storytelling, and creative games from books or storytellings, etc.

2. Park Services As the library is built on a large piece of land, there is open space for such park service as a playground, bicycle trails, a sand beach, fish ponds, and vegetable plots for children. These areas are occasionally used for various kinds of creative activities such as story-telling, arts, drawing, and painting camps for children, and music shows and concerts.
3. Information/Educational Services The library provides information and educational services to adult users in many ways:
  - a. supplying reference resources on early childhood development and parenting education materials to organizations and individuals in the Northeast of Thailand;
  - b. developing and distributing early-childhood-development manuals and other teaching and parenting materials in collaboration with relevant government and non-governmental agencies;
  - c. disseminating early-childhood-development information through mass media: newspaper, radio, and television;
  - d. holding periodic seminars, workshops and training sessions for parents, teachers, child minders, and local leaders on various early-childhood-development issues, such as child development, child-rearing practices, storytelling, book power, nutrition, toy making, and techniques for promoting reading.

### *A Model for Community Children Library*

The success of the Children and Family Library and its projects is evident. It can be seen in statistics detailing the member of users and rates of book circulation from the library base in the Meung District and the branch library in Na Thong District. A user survey reveals general satisfaction with library services and their activities. Many rural communities in Khon Kaen and other provinces are showing interest in establishing libraries of the same kind

and the Children and Family Library has provided consultation and technical or financial assistance. The establishment of a children's library at Po/Klang temple in Mahasarakham province in 2002 is evidence of the success of the library in relation to the involvement of the community and the impact of library services and activities on the lives of the people in rural communities. The Children and Family Library has become a model library inspiring the people in the Northeast and in other provinces around the country to establish community children's libraries as in U-Tai Thani, Chiangmai, Surat Thani, and Pattani.

### **The Story Book Project**

The Story Book Project is a three-year early-childhood-development support project running from October 2003 until 30 September 2006. It was initiated by Tai Wisdom Association in cooperation with selected childcare centers and local administrative organizations in Khon Kaen Province, with financial assistance from the Health Promotion Foundation, Thailand. It is an outreach storytelling project covering 40 childcare centers in the Phu Viang and Nhong Ruea; Districts of Khon Kaen Province. The project aims to promote the development of early-childhood education by encouraging reading and storytelling, arranging workshops and training for parents, teachers, and childcare givers, and providing technical assistance to local childcare centers.

#### ***Partnership in the Project***

Forty childcare centers in remote areas of Khon Kaen were selected to join in the Story Book Project. These centers shared two qualifications: a lack of reading resources for children and the readiness of the people in the communities. In these areas, most children under six years of age are taken care of by childcare centers situated on the campuses of Buddhist temples or in public places within the communities.

The selection of childcare centers was performed in coordination with community leaders and local administrative organizations. The Story Book Project's goal was to provide and disseminate reading resources and assist in storytelling and in activities concerning early childhood development and literacy to these 40 childcare centers in the network.

#### ***Materials Needed and Criteria for Selection***

The reading resources which were considered valuable and advantageous for child development were acquired and classified by type and age group of users. These materials were selected by experts in children's literature and early childhood development. One hundred twenty-six titles were selected from 2,000 books reviewed. Among them, 108 were titles that existed in the Children and Family Library in Khon Kaen, which is the base for the project, and 18 titles were nominated by the Tai Wisdom Association board. These reading resources were mainly picture books. A small number of them were books on child rearing and songs for children.

The picture books were selected for their value for child development and for the quality of their format, illustrations, colour, and contents:

- Format : Large size, hard covers with curved edge
- Illustrations : Full-page illustrations, clear and pleasant to look at
- Colour : Beautiful and suited to the story

Contents : Short and easy stories for small children to understand and enjoy such as family, animals, friends, toys, etc.

The picture books classified by their appropriateness for the readers were divided into two groups: picture books suitable for children between two and four years old, the target users, and those suitable for children over four years old. Books in the first group are used by teachers and child minders in childcare centers for learning activities, for child's reading, and for reading to children. Books in the second group are used for reading to children and for storytelling.

### ***Services and Activities***

The selected reading materials are grouped into two sets of 63 titles. Each set consists of about 50 picture books. These two sets of books have become model collections to be acquired, put in a box, and distributed to the 40 childcare centers in the network on a rotation basis for use in storytelling and for loaning to people in the communities.

The rotation of books in this story-book project enables the centers to organize activities that enhance literacy and childhood development in the communities. These activities were storytelling, reading to children, training, and workshops. Storytelling is organized for children and parents in childcare centers. Training and workshops are organized on various topics such as storytelling, early childhood development, and other related topics for various groups of people concerned with early childhood development. They are childcare givers, teachers, public health workers, monks, parents, and those working with young children. In addition to activities in childcare centers, the story book project sent out mobile units which brought the combined storytelling and picture-book reading to rural communities that did not have direct access to the library.

The storytelling performed in the story-book projects was of three types: storytelling accompanied by hand puppets, storytelling using large-size picture books and storytelling showcasing the storyteller's own talents with some special materials or crafts that fit the story. These activities were usually followed by creative activities, such as quizzes or games, and easy artistic works, such as drawing, doll making, hand printing, etc. concerning the story just told.

The services and activities organized in this story-book project were designed to make the people in the communities realize the importance of using storytelling and picture-book reading to develop children and to distribute knowledge and information on childhood development.

### **Making the Work Progress**

In order to keep the work going, the TWA has acquired more local and public support. Public relations is used to make the libraries and the projects known to the public; TWA publishes and distributes a bi-monthly newsletter, *Dek Tai*, that offers information and notifies communities of their work. TWA has created a network of early-childhood-development supporters and workers not only at the community level but also with individual families. Additional financial assistance has been gained through direct donations and through the 'Tod Pa Paa Nangsue,' a money-and-book donation activity inspired by a

Buddhist ritual, “Tod Pa Paa,” which is a means to provide money and necessary materials for the monks and temples.

### **Advantages of a Community Children’s Library and the Story Book Projects**

The libraries and the projects brought many advantages to the community and the individuals both children and adults.

#### **Community**

1. The Project enhanced cooperation in the area of childcare for young children within the community. As the storytelling introduced issues for discussion and the people in the community became more interested in the development of early-age children, they joined the child minders in the childcare centers.
2. The people in the community become more knowledgeable and informed by activities in the library and in the story-book project.
3. The community recognized the importance of books and reading and became reading community.

#### **Parents**

1. Parents exchanged ideas and discussed issues concerning their children and child rearing and became acquaint.
2. Reading and story telling allowed parents to spend their time with their early-age children in a more valuable way which provoke a warm relationship
3. Listening to storytelling and reading picture books with their children in the childcare centers gave parents means to review their knowledge on various subjects.
4. Realizing the value of stories and picture books for children, parents prepared themselves for storytelling and for reading to their children by practicing reading and storytelling which are ways to improve their literacy.

#### **Children**

1. A child gains vocabulary and knowledge on various subjects from the story told.
2. A child has the opportunity to practice reading while reading with their parents or childcare givers and thereby becomes literate.
3. After listening to good stories frequently, a child gains a love for reading and tries to read by him-/herself.
4. A child can improve his/her skill at suiting the language he/she uses to people of varying social status and in various situations as they hear and see this being done in the stories and picture books read to them.

It is expected that various children’s libraries will be established and story-book projects will be organized in all rural communities to promote literacy and community development among people in different living circumstances.

#### **Conclusion**

Although community children’s libraries and story-book projects are familiar and widespread in developed countries, they are mostly neglected or ineffective in developing

countries, due to economic and various other problems. The libraries and the projects cited in this paper may not offer services and activities as found in a standard library system; however, they reflect the concept of library services and storytelling that make and difference in society. As these activities are essential for stimulating literacy and for promoting reading habits and information seeking among people, which are essential means for improving the quality of life, they should be organized by the people in the communities or private organizations with the cooperation of all parties concerned. Every possible means and effort should be used, even the application of traditional and religious rituals if they are appropriate.

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