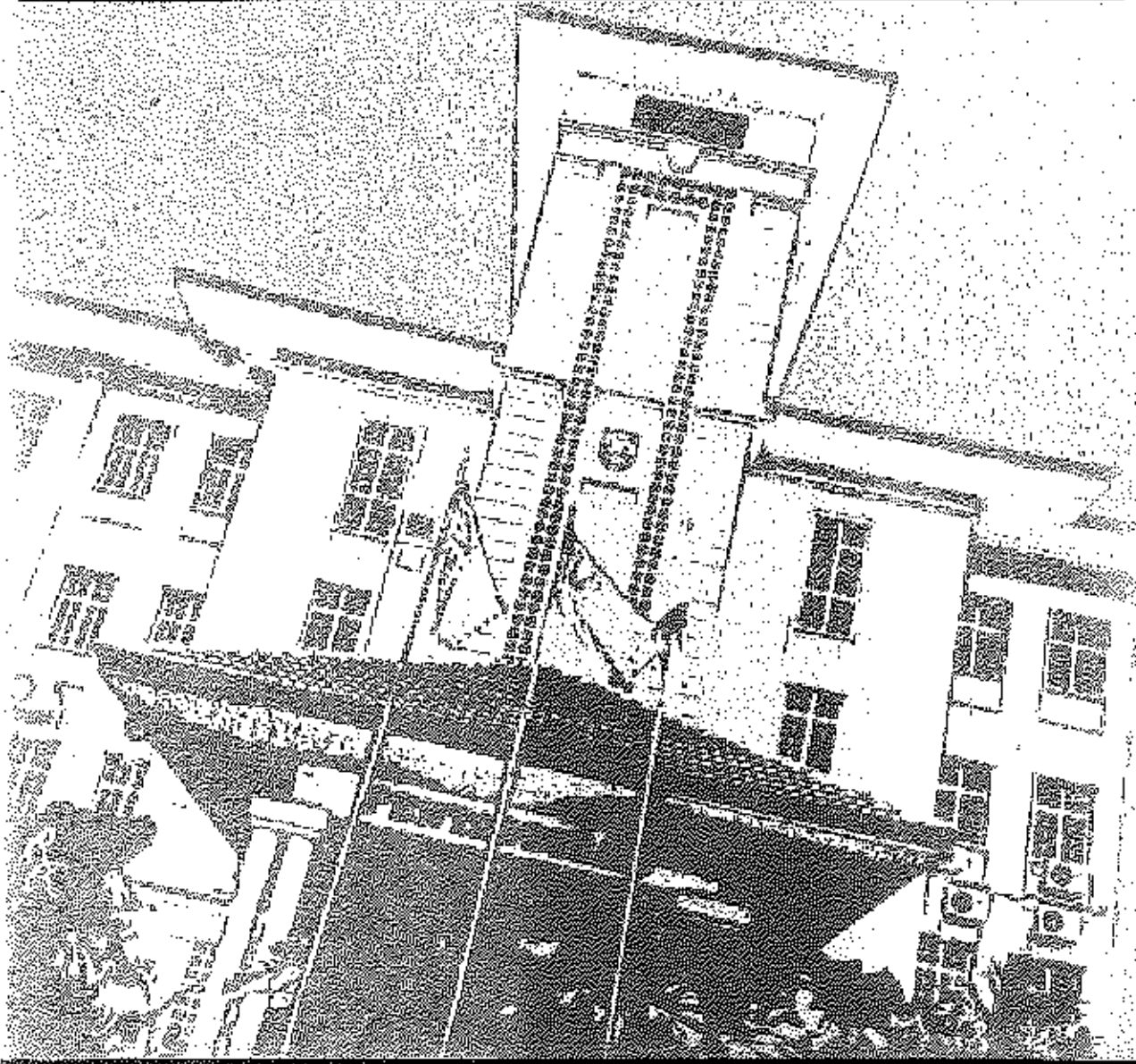


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**INFORMATION MANAGEMENT:
PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**

RURAL COMMUNITY LEARNING NETWORK (RCLN):

RURAL COMMUNITY INFORMATION LITERACY EFFORTS

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Communities that are literate are powerful because they are able to see, to evaluate, to use and to create information and knowledge to achieve their goals. It means that individuals' needs to be able to identify their information needs and the location of the information required, and to know how to use the information effectively in dealing with their daily issues - it is important for the members of the community to be information literate. Meanwhile, public libraries have long been recognized as a center of information and knowledge; it supports individual and community development and information literacy efforts through its on-going services, collections, technology, activities and programs. This social research study adopted a case study methodology, using qualitative methods of personal interview, discussion and observations of group meetings and documents to examine the activities and programs of rural public library in Malaysia and in Australia. It presents the results of cross-case analysis studied through fieldwork.

Keywords: *Learning Community, Information Literate, Rural Community, Rural Public Library*

Introduction

The establishment of a learning community via information literacy can be facilitated through enhancing community lifelong learning processes (Kilpatrick et al. 2009). Hence for many small rural communities around the world, being information literate community means that the community members will gain a lifelong learning advantage and they will be able to experience life as a learning community. In relation to that, for many years, the function of the public library neither urban nor rural has been seen as the platform for 'the local gateway to knowledge, providing a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of an individual and social group' (IFLA 2000). Currently, in Malaysia there are over 1,089 rural public libraries, namely *perpustakaan desa* operating in rural villages in which have been built with the purpose of serving the information needs of the rural population and to support their self-development, community development, and empowerment requirements.

Research Method

This study took a philosophical approach, which combines interpretivist and critical paradigms of social research. This study adopted a case study methodology (Yin 2009; Sarantakos 2005), using qualitative methods of personal interview, discussion and observations of group meetings and documents to examine the activities and programs of rural public library in Malaysia and Australia. The sample for this research is generated using a purposive sampling technique (Alston & Bowler 2003) and in this framework, in-depth and semi structured interviews were conducted (Creswell, 2009; Yin 2009). This article presents the results of cross-case analysis of the six cases studied through fieldwork conducted in Malaysia and Australia.

Malaysian Rural Public Library: Rural Community Learning Effort

The success of a learning community is very much depends on how it operates through partnership and collaborations; it addresses the learning needs of its locality through affiliation and association between community members and a local institution. It uses the strengths of social and institutional relationships to bring about cultural shifts in perceptions of the value of learning. Within this partnership and collaboration, shared purposes, objectives or goals are achieved through working together and building new knowledge (Abu 2014; Kilpatrick et. al 2003).

In Malaysia, rural community was account for 38% of Malaysia's population (APCD, 2005). Hence, the intention behind rural public libraries establishment was to assist these rural communities to have comprehensive and complete information and recreational facilities and to improve the rural literacy rate. The Malaysian government expects this development to reduce the information acquisition gap between rural and city communities (Muhammad 2004). However, the delivering of services, activities and programs in many rural public libraries are pre-determined rather than responding to the local community needs (Abu 2014).

Furthermore, those rural public libraries' relationships with their communities are consistent with an exogenous or top-down model of community development. Whereas, community development theory suggests that development activities will have greater impact if local communities are involved and have a sense of ownership of the activities in keeping with the endogenous or bottom-up model. This study suggests that a mix of exogenous and endogenous approaches is needed to bring together government commitment to establishing and resourcing rural public libraries and the ideas of community development and information literacy.

Through conducting this research, the researcher has become convinced that Malaysian rural public libraries can assist with shifting the Malaysian over-dependence on traditional and examination oriented forms of learning to a more informal yet on-going effort of learning and gaining knowledge, especially for Malaysian rural residents. Malaysian rural public libraries are equipped with the resources, services, technology, staffing and physi-

cal structures to run small and community focussed learning activities and programs. With changes and improvements, it is argued that rural public libraries in Malaysia could offer an excellent platform for Malaysian lifelong learning efforts and for developing information literacy and learning communities.

Rural Community Learning Network (RCLN)

In relation to these developments and enhancements for rural public libraries in Malaysia, it is proposed that there is a need to develop a special network for these local rural communities to assist and support their lifelong learning practices. Such a network could be called a Rural Community Learning Network (RCLN) and should be based on the information and knowledge needs and wants of each rural community. RCLN associates should include the local rural public library staff members, the local rural public library users, and community members including non-users, local community associations, entrepreneurs and business representatives. RCLN could be established innovatively and creatively in a way that is suited to the unique demographics, environment and lifestyle of each community.

RCLN: Organizations Partnership Efforts

One of many important roles of a public library is to 'provide a focus for local community cultural and economic development and this can be achieved by working in partnership with suitable and appropriate local and regional organizations' (Koontz & Gubbin 2010, p. 8). Koontz and Gubbin (2010) affirmation come hand in hand with the RCLN proposition - support the local rural community information and knowledge needs using local resources such as local rural government, associations and local rural expertise.

In Malaysia, local government and local institutions appear to be very involved in promoting rural development services and programs through their administration and policies. Some of the services and programs include education, health and communication, as well as the rural public library service. In this situation, it is fair to state that the Malaysian government, NLM, state libraries, librarians and library assistants are community development practitioners. They are involved directly in providing rural public library services, programs and activities to the local rural communities. The same situation appears in Australia. Nonetheless, in the Australian rural public libraries, participation and involvement among community members is widespread in compares to rural public libraries in Malaysia. The Australian rural public libraries that participated in this research engaged almost all parties of the community. There is no doubt that, like their Malaysian counterparts, Australian rural public libraries also focus on babies, toddlers and school children in developing and delivering their services, activities and programs. However, in addition they offer many formalised and non-formalised services, activities and programs for adults.

Partnership with Community Organizations

Partnership, cooperation and sharing resources with these associations and organizations are essential in promoting the rural public library as a hub for community information and as a knowledge centre. Existing rural public libraries have the ability to provide these associations and organizations with the information, location and space to develop programs and activities. Furthermore, the rural public libraries could also affiliate with those local associations and organizations to develop programs or activities. The librarians could support these affiliations further by providing, for example, monthly workshops, practical programs or any activities that are relevant to the needs of both the association members and other members of the rural community. For example, introducing a base for a volunteer program and collaborating with individuals from these local associations could become a way of promoting integration and partnership between the community members and their rural public library (Kretzmann et al. 2005, Rans, Allman & Erlander 2002).

In case studies in Australia, all rural public libraries have at least one effective collaboration program involving a local community association; for example, works closely with the local U3A group and local council in running programs and activities in their library; the local community association voluntarily helps to maintain the area surrounding the library including doing the gardening and planting fruit trees; and having a long-standing and positive relationship and runs many collaborative activities with the local historical association in organizing local exhibitions on local history and inviting local authors to speak.

Although Malaysian rural public libraries are not as vigorous as Australian rural public libraries in developing collaboration and partnership program, Malaysia has a reputation for having too many associations in a village (from socially to politically based associations): there is the Village Association (*Persatuan Penduduk*), the Village Progress and Safety Committee (*Jawatan Kuasa Kemajuan Dan Keselamatan Kampung* – JKKK), the neighbourhood association (*Rukun Tetangga* - RT), the public security association (*Ikatan Relawan Rakyat* - RELA), the community progress centre (*Pusat Kemajuan Masyarakat* - KEMAS), the medium and small enterprises (*Perusahaan Kecil dan Sederhana* - PKS), the Islamic group (*Kariah*), and the small settlement centre (*Pusat Petempatan Kecil* - PPK), to name a few. Hence there are always opportunity and prospect for further alliance that can be built for the benefit of the local rural community economic and social development.

Summary

It's proven by many rural Australian public libraries that having a successfully collaborations and partnership does help to enhance information literacy among the communities through participation, decision-making and involvement in the rural public library, thus promoting community development and empowerment (Abu 2014, Kenny 2006). This will also support lifelong learning among rural communities and will assist in promoting a learning culture among rural residents, especially rural adults. For Malaysian rural public libraries, this would hopefully be an effective method as local people are more likely to trust and respond positively when approached by a member of their own community.

In relation to these developments and enhancements for rural public libraries in Malaysia, the researcher proposes that there is a need to develop a special network for these local rural communities to assist and support their lifelong learning practices. Such a network that based on the information and knowledge needs and wants of each rural community would include the local rural public library staff members, the local rural public library users, and community members including non-users, local community associations, entrepreneurs and business representatives. RCLN could be established innovatively and creatively in a way that is suited to the unique demographics, environment and lifestyle of each community.

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